Fig. 1. Noel Paton. *Warrior Advising a Boy*. Circa 1860, pencil on blue-toned paper, 7¼ x 5¼ in. Private collection.

"FEARLESS CONNECTIONS": NOEL PATON AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITE PARADIGM

David Latham

Musings from the Editor's Desk

The author of the first survey of Noel Paton's art surprises us when he cautions that Paton was not wholly a Pre-Raphaelite: "There is one respect in which the Scottish artist is almost as wide as the poles asunder from the Pre-Raphaelites. Their doctrine – 'select nothing, reject nothing,' is totally at variance with Sir Noel's conviction that selection and rejection lies at the very root of all worthy design in Art" (102). The year was 1895, and Alfred T. Story is quoting John Ruskin from more than forty years earlier, when Ruskin had mounted the first spirited defence of the Pre-Raphaelites in 1851. Ruskin believed the young artists were following his advice to "go to nature in all singleness of heart..., rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing," but practising a "loving fidelity to the thing studied" without "fanciful or ornamental modifications" (*Works* 12:339). Though Ruskin considered himself a Pre-Raphaelite (labelling himself as "We P.R.B.s"),[1] his "select nothing, reject nothing" doctrine was utterly misleading in relation to all the works of art by Dante Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, as well as Noel Paton, because "fanciful" and "ornamental modifications" are exactly what the Pre-Raphaelites practised.

Indeed, the best artists, Oscar Wilde insisted, are the least "trammelled by the shackles of verisimilitude" ("Critic" 68). Still, despite the anti-mimetic perspectives of the long-reigning post-isms of our own era, the relationship between art and life continues to be a contentious issue. The stage and film director Robert Lepage recently felt the need to raise this warning: "When we try to show what is normal we are following the wrong path" (qtd in Littler E

6). And yet, each year manuscripts steadily arrive at the office of *The Journal* that start with the premise that Ruskin's fidelity to nature is the defining doctrine of the Pre-Raphaelites. Wilde knew better, observing with approval in a letter to Paton that his friend was a visionary artist who dwelt in the golden realm of "Fairy Land" (qtd in Noel-Paton 48). Wilde enjoyed visiting Paton at his home at 33 George Square in Edinburgh, especially admiring his "exquisite" collection of armour, including the silver suits of four knights standing as diningroom sentinels. Paton had created in his home the realm of a distant era comparable to the realm of literary fairies and mythological figures he created in his studio. When Paton would sing Henry Fielding's "A Hunting Song" to his granddaughter, she long presumed the opening lines depicted a horseback knight – "The dusky [k]night rides down the sky / And ushers in the morn" (Noel-Paton 69-70). In Paton's home, a knight was a less exotic metaphor than the literal image of the night.

Another turn-of-the century critic, Joanna Scott Moncrieff, identified "a state of feeling" the young Paton had held since his childhood: that "the past is the reality that we grasp and handle, and the consciousness of today but the fading shadow of a dream" (805). She describes with a consistent imagery the artifice of Paton's "vision of the unseen": "The weighty and airy threads of fact and fiction might well unite together and weave in the young poet's mind a material substantial enough almost to conceal the common stuff of daily life" (805). Walter Pater would articulate this "state of feeling" as characterizing the new Pre-Raphaelite paradigm for art which Pater discerned as first evident in the poetry of William Morris but anticipated in the aesthetics of Plato (1893). First, in 1868, Pater trumpeted Morris's Pre-Raphaelite poetry as a bold new style for a revolutionary art[2]:

> This poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval life or poetry, nor a disguised reflex of modern sentiment. The atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no actual form of life or simple poetry. Greek poetry, medieval or modern poetry, projects above the realities of its time a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or "earthly paradise." It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. ("Poems of William Morris" 300)

As Pater observes in his description of this self-reflexive poetry, dream and vision create the "still fainter and more spectral" realm of a new paradigm for art: the decorative and mythological world of an art based on art. The poems created within this new frame of reference appear to write themselves in

relation with other poems. In the classical aesthetics of Plato and in the new art and poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites, "the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before" (Pater, *Plato and Platonism* 3). T.S. Eliot believed Yeats was the first to practise this "mythical method" which Joyce would perfect, wherein the poet or novelist is "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot 483). But in contrast to Eliot's effort to re-cast a new troupe for Modernism, Pater reaches back to enlist Plato as the originator of the reflexive paradigm of the new Pre-Raphaelite poetics Pater was championing: "The earliest critic of the fine arts," Plato "anticipates the modern notion that art as such has no end but its own perfection, – 'art for art's sake'" (244-45).

In describing the need for art to observe its own autonomous order, Pater refers to the technique of juxtaposition: "Nothing but the life-giving principle of cohesion is new: the new perspective, the resultant complexion, the expressiveness which familiar thoughts attain by juxtaposition" (*Plato and Platonism* 3-4). When Ruskin introduced the term "grotesque" as the "fearless connection" of such jarring juxtapositions, he considered the grotesque as an *un*-conscious technique revealed in the best art and literature. Pater and William Michael Rossetti would recognize the grotesque as the concerted *self*-conscious focus of the Pre-Raphaelites, a defining principle of their art and poetry: the treatment of imagery as a convergence of incongruities. Ruskin may not have recognized the reflexive paradigm of the new art, but he is brilliantly insightful on the function of what he calls "noble groteques" and "grotesque idealism":

> In all ages and among all ages, grotesque idealism has been the element through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed, from the most sublime words of true Revelation, to the ... [words] of the oracles, and the more or less doubtful teaching of dreams; and so down to ordinary poetry. No element of imagination has a wider range, a more magnificent use, or so colossal a grasp of sacred truth. (*Works* 5:134)

We often think we know what we want to say but cannot find the right words to say it, but in truth we rarely know what we want to say until we have said it well. I say "rarely" because Ruskin's "noble grotesques" is an apt term for those occasions when we settle for the oracular expression that reaches towards mysterious truths not yet entirely grasped:

> A series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps,

> left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming a grotesque character.... All noble grotesques are concentrations of this kind, and of the noblest convey truths which nothing else could convey; and not only so, but convey them, in minor cases with delightfulness, – in the higher instances with an awfulness, – which no mere utterance of the symbolized truth would have possessed, but which belongs to the effort of the mind to unweave the riddle. (5:132-33).

"Symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection[s]..., gaps ... overleaped..., concentrations" that mark the "effort of the mind to unweave the riddle": William Michael Rossetti would pinpoint this principle of the grotesque as a signature essence that "guided [the Pre-Raphaelite] movement": "the intimate intertexture of a spiritual sense with a material form" (18).

Understanding the importance of Ruskin's notion of "fearless connections" to the new paradigm of "aesthetic poetry," Pater repeats over and over in *The Renaissance* his theoretical references to this technique of the Pre-Raphaelite grotesque, preparing us for its centrality to the new style of his contemporaries: "Everywhere there is an unbroken system of correspondences" (29), with "grotesque emblems" (38) that overcome the boundaries of "rigidly defined opposites" (17) through the "picturesque union of contrasts" (31), the "strange interfusion of sweetness and strength" (62), the "interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror" (67). To visualize this Pre-Raphaelite convergence of incongruities, I often draw on the metaphor of the attics, cellars, and closets of Camelot: concrete images of the real in unexpected juxtapositions with the ideal.

Paton is a typical Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter, but his poetry is generally weaker than his paintings because those "fearless connections" are not grotesque enough in their incongruities. But the incongruities certainly are there. His 60-page "Perdita" is a tale about two young lovers from different classes, the wealthy parents insisting that their daughter marry another man. When her young lover hears of her husband's cruelty, he travels across Europe in search for her. At one point, hoping to escape the glare, the din, the turmoil, the throng, the dark nightmare of the underside of Paris (*Spindrift*, pp. 48-49), he staggers down a hellish alley, "curtained from the light / By odorous shrub and trellised flower" (49); these are the first calming images since the lovers suffered their separation. Here, the scented hedge of nature and the visual pattern of art in the form of a trellis of woven flowers prepare us for a return to the walled garden of paradise. And indeed, along this dark, curtained alleyway, he comes upon the lost figure of his beloved. But the mixture of imagery remains troubling. In the midst of such hellish frenzy, the

curtain, the scent, the trellis, and the flowers paradoxically enforce the darkness. The hellish night – passing "like a troubled ghost / To his grave" – gives way to a "morn in maiden loveliness ... as though the earth / Knew not a care" (54, 53). His lost beloved flees in shame; he pursues her, but sees only the "melancholy stream, / Dark-winding on its doomful way" (53). When the morn brightens from the hellish night, he identifies the drowned body pulled from the Seine.

"Perdita" is told by a narrator who is listening to a friend tell his tale, and after opening with an epigraph from Wordsworth, the tale ends aptly with a quotation from Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner": "For he hath 'made and loveth all'" (60). Redirecting the literary tradition by turning away from the elitist genres of epic and tragedy, the Pre-Raphaelites revived the populist genres: ballads, tales, songs, romances. They similarly revived local folklore and the Arthurian mythology of their national heritage, giving it equal footing with the biblical and classical mythology that was the focus of the school curriculum. This shift in poetry to the folk genres corresponds with their interest in the decorative forms of the Arts and Crafts movement, an interest that resists the hierarchical position of oil paintings and marble sculptures.

Like other Pre-Raphaelites, Paton excelled as a book illustrator, with drawings that complement his poems told by tale-tellers, demonstrating again his interest in an art based on art. *Warrior Advising a Boy* (*c.*1860; fig. 1), a "cancelled" pencil drawing intended for a book illustration, reminds us of Millais's finished oil *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. Millais painted his powerful scene in 1870, the same year that Ruskin wrote his Slade *Lectures on Art*: "The England who is to be mistress of half the earth ... must yet again become the England she was once." "You, youths of England..., must found colonies as fast and as far as ... able..., advanc[ing] the power of England by land and sea.... These colonies must be fastened fleets" (*Works* 20:43, 42). Millais stirs the same imperialist sentiments, as we are invited to imagine that Raleigh will mature from playing with his toy ship (illustrated in the lower left corner) to exploring the seas and "fasten[ing]" colonies to his future naval fleets.

Paton's drawing shares formal and narrative similarities with Millais's painting but not the imperialist agenda, not with the subject of Raleigh as sowing the seeds of empire, nor with Ford Madox Brown's canonizing portrait of Chaucer as sowing and reaping in *The Seeds and Fruits of English Poetry* (1851). Paton evokes a more general heritage of memories passed down by an elder, as his portrait conjures up the communal heritage of a folk ballad about an elderly knight telling a child tales of remembered tournaments and battles from his youth. The focus is less on the boy and his prospects of chivalry than on the knight, the tale-teller of the past. In contrast to the stirring

passage from Ruskin's Slade Lecture that seems so appropriate to *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, Paton invites us to attach a verse from Psalm 90 as a suggested inscription for his drawing: "We spend our years as a tale that is told" (90.9).

Though Paton's poetry provides weak examples of the convergence of incongruities, it consistently follows the reflexive artifice of an art based on art. "Pan and Syrinx" is a disturbing poem whose sentiments sound as relevant to the #MeToo movement as they are to a Victorian readership steeped in the hedonism and the violence of a pagan mythology memorized from their schoolbooks. "Long, long ago, as poets sing," when the world was young and knew no better, "passion scarce was crime constructed" (1, 3). Hence, the "grisly old" Pan feels licensed to pursue a young river-maid, who flees like a "sun-gleam" threatened by a "thunder-cloud" "lowering" down upon her (8, 13, 13). As he rushes in pursuit like a river "mad with mountain rains" (15), her panic is made all the more terrifying when the narrative digresses from the chase with a heartless question, daring the reader to deny the allegations of deceit practised by many a coy maiden presumed to invite these seductions in the beds of "a dewy valley":

> Thou hadst won thy wish ere long –
> And who will dare avow 'twas wrong? –
> Maiden lips have fooled, I trow,
> Sterner moralists than thou,
>   In many a dewy valley! (31-35)

But the heartless question ignites our cry for justice and the relief of an intervention: just as Pan grasps Syrinx by the hair, Artemis – the "huntress of the silver bow" – saves her from rape by turning her into a reed. She is thus transfigured into a song for old Pan to sing, which we hear as a "moralist[']s" song of the need to heed "the virgin's shriek of woe" (36, 41-42). Paton's narrator repeatedly underlines the grotesque contrast between youth and age, the virgin maiden and the "Old Pan," who is "grisly old," and marked with "grisly oldness" (4, 26, 28).

The imagery of the "grisly old" is repeated verbatim in another poem. "Dirge" appears to be a straightforward two-stanza scene, a dirge for a medieval knight whose "golden youth is fled," leaving him with a "faithless Future" that transforms our dreams of a "bright-robed, beauteous phantom" into a "night-hag grisly old," a "crumbling corpse obscene" (7, 9, 11, 14, 14):

> In mine ear a death-bell ringeth,
> And a sad voice ever singeth:

> Time is speeding on his way;
> Night treads on the skirts of day;
> All things hasten to decay;
> Old years revive not; glory cannot shed
> Sunshine around the heart when golden youth is fled.
>
> The Past is dead. The Present dies
> In birth. The faithless Future flies
> Us ever: as in dreams we see
> Some bright-robed, beauteous phantom flee,
> Yet court pursuit – till suddenly
> In some lone spot she turns, and we unfold
> A crumbling corpse obscene, or night-hag grisly old. (1-14)

Its ghoulish imagery and personifications of the brevity of time are conventional until we recognize the deliberate complexity of its genre. Its fourteen lines suggest a sonnet, but it denies the conventional role of celebrating the power of art to immortalize its subject. The title labels it as a funeral song, but Paton's poem is less a lyric song than a dramatic monologue, with Orpheus as its speaker, though there is no clear auditor. The Orpheus who sings this mournful monologue is a particular Orpheus, the Orpheus depicted by Plato in *The Symposium*. Paton is not drawing on Ovid, whose Orpheus is the sympathetic victim of the gods, a figure who plays a sad song that moves the world. Plato's distrust of artists renders a very different version. The gods reveal to Plato's Orpheus nothing more than a shade, a phantom of Eurydice, not her true physical form but an apparition that serves to reflect the untrue love Orpheus holds for her:

> Love will make men dare to die for their beloved – love alone.... But Orpheus ... [the gods] sent empty away, and presented to him an apparition only of her whom he sought..., showing him the phantom merely..., and not restoring her real self, because he showed no spirit ... and he did not dare ... to die for love. (1.549)

Plato depicts Orpheus' descent to Hell as an act of cowardice because Orpheus lacked the courage to die for love, "but was contriving how he might enter Hades alive"; hence, he could envision not the real Eurydice but only a phantom, a mere ghost of her image which the gods deemed an appropriate symbol for his insubstantial love.

In the genre of the dramatic monologue, the speaker's rhetoric is not a revelation but a rationalization we see gradually subverted. This new Victorian genre shifts our reading from a universal complaint against the

brevity of life to a cynical rationalization that denies the character's own responsibility for his failure in love, blaming his loss of Eurydice on the nature of fate. As we listen carefully to Orpheus, we hear not the tolling of an external bell; rather the speaker complains that "a death-bell ringeth / And a sad voice ever singeth" within his own ear (1-2). Orpheus projects onto time the attributes of his own fickle nature, as he courts his young mistress until "night treads on the skirts of day" (4). As it was within his own ears, it is now his own eyes that transform his dream of a "beauteous phantom" into the horror of a nightmare. In pursuit, he courts her "till suddenly" she turns towards him, and his desire turns to disdain, the ugly imagery revealing the ugliness of his own shallow soul.

Paton would maintain his interest in Orpheus and Eurydice as a "striking subject" for more than a decade, drawing it first in charcoal "while considering whether to paint it" (11, 15, 18 February 1876; Noel-Paton 99). But his interest in this particular incident is telling: the intricate complexity of Plato's narrative structure exemplifies the reflexive principle of an art based on art, exhibiting that process of transfiguration of which Pater speaks: Plato presents the story of Orpheus in a speech by Phaedrus, according to Aristodemus in the Dialogue adapted by Apollodorus. These re-tellings may justify our losing sight of an auditor, lost in the distancing procession of one speaker repeating what another says he heard said by still another; but, moreover, as this poem exemplifies, Paton does not write conventional dramatic monologues with clearly positioned auditors. Rather, Paton presents the kind of dramatic narrator that Algernon Swinburne speaks of as typifying his own collection, *Poems and Ballads* (1866): "I desire that one thing should be remembered: the book is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious" (*Notes* 326). Swinburne's *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866) is among the earliest articulations of the new Pre-Raphaelite paradigm for poetry. Rejecting the tenets of realism, Swinburne explains that poems like "Dolores" and "Faustine" are too "distinctly symbolic and fanciful" to be judged as anything but works of art (331). Three of his poems – "Dolores," "The Garden of Proserpine," and "Hesperia" – must be read together as scenes of three acts in a "lyrical monodrama of passion" (332). Thus, Hesperia, he reminds us, is not a character for "study in the school of realism," but a "type of woman or of dream, born in the western 'islands of the blest,' where the shadows ... live beyond the sunset..., between moonrise and sunset" (332).

What disturbed the reviewers of *Poems and Ballads* was the grotesque similes, like the image of love wounding us "as the cross that a wild nun clasps till the edge of it bruises her bosom" ("Hesperia" 45). But Swinburne keeps the focus of his defence on the archetypal metaphors. "This is the myth

or fable of my poem," he explains, referring to the three-act monodrama of the trio of poems by summarizing the structure of its imagery as the "lifelong flight" of "the huntress follow[ing] her flying prey" whose "feet are drawn back towards the ancient ways" (332). Maintaining that the poet's "first aim [is] to rehandle the old story in a new fashion" (335), Swinburne looks for "the kernel and nucleus of a myth" in adherence to the reflexive paradigm of the autonomous realm of art: "When England has again such a school of poetry..., no one will then need to assert, in defence of work done for the work's sake, the simple laws of his art which no one will then be permitted to impugn" (341). With Ruskin's old "school of realism" dismissed, Swinburne clarifies the need to follow the "simple laws of [the poet's] art" to create a poem which must thus be judged solely as a work of art.

An acknowledged authority on Elizabethan drama, Swinburne could recite such passages as this one from George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale* (1595), wherein Madge Mumblecrust, the blacksmith's wife, is invited to tell a tale to her guests, Frolic and Fantastic:

> *Madge*: Once upon a time, there was a king, or a lord, or a duke that had a fair daughter, the fairest that ever was; as white as snow and as red as blood; and once upon a time his daughter was stolen away, and he sent all his men to seek out his daughter, and he sent so long that he sent all of his men out of his land.
> *Frolic*: Who dressed his dinner, then?
> *Madge*: Nay, either hear my tale, or kiss my tail. (I.i.113-20)

This *just-listen or-else* threat from Peele's tale not only foregrounds the Pre-Raphaelite interest in tale-tellers; it epitomizes the art for art's sake principle, asserting the autonomy of art, and the defence of artifice that fortifies the reflexive realm of an art based on art. Paton's "Perdita" is a tale told by a narrator who is listening to a friend who concludes the tale with a quotation by another tale-teller, the ancient mariner. "Dirge" is a song heard within one's ear as "a sad voice [that] ever singeth" of what Orpheus envisioned in a dream. And the "fearless connection" between the tale and the tail returns us to the centrality of the literary grotesque – for Peele, the juxtaposition between the golden tale of art and the brazen tail of life, for Paton, the ethereal dream of a "beauteous phantom" and the earthly awakening to a "crumbling corpse" – as a defining technique of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry.

Paton's tale-tellers bear out the Pre-Raphaelite doctrine as fundamentally different from the fidelity-to-nature doctrine advocated by Ruskin. Paton's and Pater's difference from Ruskin is the difference between artists who

observe and artists who envision. Pater derived his understanding of the new Pre-Raphaelite style from his reading of Morris's early poetry. But it took the analytical eye of the later socialist Morris in 1891 to simplify the essence of Pre-Raphaelite art to the interdependence of three opposing principles: the narrative, the naturalistic, and the decorative ("Address ... on the Pre-Raphaelite School " 1:300-02) – a literary subject in a naturalistic setting with a decorative style. The excitement of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry arises from the friction generated by the three paradoxical principles in juxtaposition with one another. To envision the lunar glow of an armoured knight descending from the nightscape on a steed cloaked in an embroidered caparison, Paton is as inspired by the romance of Fielding's century-old narrative song as he is by the accuracy of the catalogue of his collection of medieval armour. Paton's *Catalogue of Armour, Weapons, and Other Objects of Antiquity in the Collection of Sir Noël Paton* (1879) is a careful study that conveys his respect for practising Dante Rossetti's principle that art requires the facts derived from "Fundamental Brainwork."[3]

Pater's two descriptions of the new doctrine are worth repeating in contrast with Ruskin. This new art, Pater explains, is a "palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before" (*Plato and Platonism* 3); and it is a reflexive art that "projects above the realities of its time ... a world ... transfigured. Of that world the new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it a still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or 'earthly paradise'" ("Poems" 300). W.H. Auden would echo Pater when he speaks of an Arielist poetry as "a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play" (338). The Pre-Raphaelite focus was not to verbalize what we visualize, not to express the world we experience but the realm we envision: how we see what we say.

Paton provides a clear example. The narrative surface of "Dirge" is a conventional complaint against the brevity of life. But within the context of the transfigured realm of the new reflexive paradigm of Pre-Raphaelite poetry – the decorative and mythological realm of an art based on art – we read a dramatic monologue featuring Orpheus speaking within the discourses of three literary genres: the Socratic dialogue from Plato's *Symposium*, and two patriarchal genres – the courtly love rhetoric and the cruel mistress lyric. The result is a non-mimetic poem, with no "relation to any actual world"; rather, its reflexive relations with the three literary discourses produce instead the "more spectral" realm of artifice, providing what both Paton and Pater consider to be the "finer ideal" of Pre-Raphaelite art.

Notes

1. As late as 1857 Ruskin was identifying with the P.R.B. movement when he wrote to Tennyson about the Moxon illustrations of Tennyson's poetry: "We P.R.B.s must do better for you" (24 July 1857; qtd in Tennyson 1:420).
2. Pater revised his review of Morris's poetry, first as part of the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, and then as an essay titled "Aesthetic Poetry" for his essay collection *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (1889).
3. In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater is quoting Rossetti roughly from Hall Caine's *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (249): "Conception, Fundamental Brainwork, – that is what makes the difference, in all art" (*Plato and Platonism* 106).

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