

The Pre-Raphaelites  
in the Dickens-Ruskin controversy:  
Resistance and Defense in the Victorian Era

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REVISIONES

Revista de crítica cultural

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**Abstract:** On the occasion of the London Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy, in 1850, the author Charles Dickens rebelled, through a newspaper article against the artistic purposes that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood presented. In 1851 the art critic John Ruskin published an article in *The Times*, expressing, instead, support for the Brotherhood's principles. This paper presents the reactions of resistance and defense of both authors. It also reflects on the newspaper as a platform to feed an artistic and individual expression during the Victorian era.

**Keywords:** Pre-Raphaelite, Ruskin, Dickens, Royal Academy, Millais, Victorian era, art criticism.

**Los Pre-Rafaelistas en la controversia Dickens-Ruskin:  
Resistencia y defensa en la era victoriana**

**Resumen:** Durante la Exposición Anual de la Real Academia de Londres, en 1850, el escritor Charles Dickens se rebeló, a través de un artículo de prensa, contra los propósitos artísticos que presentaba la Hermandad Prerrafaelista. En 1851, el crítico de arte John Ruskin publicó un artículo en *The Times*, en el que por su parte expresaba el apoyo a los principios de la Hermandad. Este artículo presenta las reacciones de resistencia y defensa de los dos autores. También reflexiona sobre la prensa durante la época victoriana, como una plataforma para alimentar a una expresión individual y artística.

**Palabras clave:** Pre-Rafaelistas, Ruskin, Dickens, Royal Academy, Millais, era Victoriana, crítica de arte.

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Lourença Baldaque,  
«The Pre-Raphaelites in the Dickens-Ruskin controversy:  
Resistance and Defense in the Victorian Era»,  
*Revisões*, n.º 7 (Invierno de 2011 / Primavera de 2012), pp. 175-184.

In 1848, a group of young British artists came to defend the return to a more pure and realistic artistic sensibility. According to them, the formation in painting offered by British academies was too classical, lacking spontaneity and creative freedom. In the same year, and under this principle, these artists joined together to create the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Embedded with a romantic and revivalist spirit, the medieval period seemed to serve the goal of these young artists. By forming the Brotherhood, they claimed a return to the aesthetics of the Proto-Renaissance,<sup>1</sup> which, to them, had ended with the artists ulterior to Raphael (1483-1520).<sup>2</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites also sought for influences in literature, including biblical episodes, the Arthurian legends, or historical or contemporary subjects. The Brotherhood suggested the interpretation of authors, such as William Shakespeare (1564-1616) or John Keats (1795-1821), among others, with a revivalist overtone. They also proposed to explore a palette of strong colors, the detail, the complex composition and the representation of the female figure as an entity with supernatural inspiration and a dissatisfied or fatalistic personality. The Brotherhood advocated artistic autonomy and saw the artist as recipient of a particular artistic message. The Brotherhood was eventually dissolved in the mid-1850s, each artist exploring his own creative vision, but prior to their separation, it was according to the principles mentioned above that the Brotherhood's work was first shown in the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy in London, in 1849. They were destined to create and promote hostilities in an artistic world that did not appear to be in harmony with their vision. In the first exhibition, they were unnoticed by critics, but they returned again the following year, at a time when Britain was joining efforts to affirm the nation's progress in the field of industry. The exhibition was attended by two representatives of the Brotherhood: William Holden Hunt (1827-1910), with

*The Druids*, and John Everett Millais (1829-1896), with *Christ in the House of his Parents*.

In 1850, Prince Albert (1819-1861), along with Henry Cole<sup>3</sup> (1808-1882) and other leading figures of the time, started to organize the Great Exhibition of All Nations, the aim being precisely to show the industrial advances of the UK, as well as of other nations. Through this initiative, the government intended to achieve progress through ally-ing art and industry, which seemed precisely to go against what the young Pre-Raphaelites defended.<sup>4</sup> Within this context, the proposals of the Pre-Raphaelites were indeed a contradiction, for they sought a return to the past. This was exactly one of the points that led the author and critic Charles Dickens<sup>5</sup> to rise up against the motivations of the group in his article «Old Lamps for New Ones», published in the weekly magazine *Household Words* (1850-1859). This literary and art criticism magazine was created by Dickens in 1850 and was intended to be a publication with accessible contents, as the title *Household Words* indicates. The term was borrowed from William Shakespeare's play *Henry V* (1598), meaning «words used inside the house». Dickens resorted to everyday's language, easy to understand, though with an educational purpose. In entitling the article mentioned above, the writer appropriated himself of a line of the Arabian tale *Aladdin*, when the magician disguises himself as a seller to reclaim the magic lamp that Aladdin had taken from him. The magician preached «Old lamps for new ones», and was thus given the magic lamp of Aladdin in exchange. Charles Dickens made use of this as a metaphor to criticize the young artists. Thus, the tone of Dickens' article and criticism implied that the purposes of the group were also a fallacy. It proceeded with a brief characterization of the Italian painter Raphael, placing the reader in the Italian fifteenth century and recognizing this period as an inspiration to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. For Dickens, the ideal of beauty

in art was the opposite of realism; in this sense, he began by mocking the principle of the Brotherhood that valued truth and realism in artistic forms. Adopting a sarcastic tone, Dickens attacked the main tenet of the Brotherhood by saying: «Raphael was fed with the preposterous idea of Beauty».

It addressed the concept of beauty as if the author was rationalizing from a pre-Raphaelite point of view. According to Dickens, the group had actually abandoned the idea of beauty, as the search for beauty should relate to an ideal, not to reality. The author alerted the reader to the fact that, when appreciating the works on display at the Royal Academy, one had to forget all the works after Raphael. In this context, he exemplified with the works of authors who exhibited there, enumerating some of them such as David Wilkie (1785-1841), William Turner (1755-1851) and Edwin Landseer (1802-1873), who had provided a valuable contribution to the evolution of an English language in art field. This happened when Dickens reinforced the idea of exchange from the old to the new, claiming that the Brotherhood had preferred to ignore the contribution these painters had given to the evolution of British painting. In order to elucidate the reader on this point, he stated:

You will have the goodness to discharge from your minds all Post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts, all tender, awful, sorrowful, ennobling, sacred, graceful, or beautiful associations, and to prepare yourselves, as befits such a subject Pre-Raphaelly considered for the lowest depths of what it mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Charles Dickens set out a series of ideals –related with the notion of beauty, or the human uprising through painting–, of which the visitors should release in order to enjoy the Pre-Raphaelites.

The fiercest criticism was addressed in particular to the painting by John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of his Parents*. The scene depicts Christ as a child, in His father's workshop. His mother is kneeling in the foreground, whereas Christ has a wound in His left hand, suggesting the theme of Crucifixion. In the background, St. Joseph is portrayed with three helpers round a wooden table. Dickens describes the child as «hideous, wry-necked, blubbering», His mother «so horrible in her ugliness, that [...] she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest ginshop in England». On the other hand, he welcomed the fact that Millais presented the objects in a realistic style, which he considered to be an artistic endeavor. Clearly, this statement is filled with irony, because Dickens followed a line of thought contrary to his own, as if he was once again rationalizing positions of one of the artists he criticizes. But afterwards he stated:

[...] it is good to know that the National Academy thoroughly feels and comprehends the high range and exalted purposes of Art; distinctly perceives that Art includes something more than the faithful portraiture of shavings, or the skillful coloring of drapery imperatively requires, in short, that it shall be informed with mind and sentiment; will on no account reduce it to a narrow question of trade-juggling with a palette, palette-knife, and paint-box.<sup>7</sup>

In this excerpt, he reinforced the idea that art must go beyond realism and appeal to higher feelings, helping to interpret the sentiments of human nature. There is, however, a contradiction regarding Dickens' writings. His work stood out in particular because he denounced the poor living conditions of the industrial workers, not only in the cities, but also in the manufacturing companies as they existed in London. It is interesting to highlight, then, through the exploration of detail and social criticism, the

intertextuality between the Brotherhood and the work of Dickens himself.

Nevertheless, for Dickens, the group meets precisely some characteristics that shouldn't be put aside in art. He recalled that these achievements were possible at the expense of authors who had preceded them and built a path for English painting. Essentially, he criticized the fact that the group lacked historical sense and respect for the art of the country and for those who had helped to strengthen it.

Charles Dickens would again criticize the group in 1851, within the context of the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy in the same year, when some group members returned to display their works. It was then that the art critic John Ruskin<sup>8</sup> (1819-1900) published an article in their defense in *The Times*. On this occasion, he responded to an anonymous criticism of the Brotherhood, taking the opportunity to express and support admiration for the young artists.

Ruskin became an important art critic and an enthusiast of the aesthetics and thought of medieval times. He wrote several essays on medievalism, regarding its civic and artistic dimension. In this society, he recognized a sense of justice in how work was organized in its hierarchy, unlike the individualism created in Victorian society through industrialization. In the chapter «The Nature of Gothic», from *The Stones of Venice* (1851), Ruskin used the example of sacrifice put into labor through Gothic architecture, which was done by masons who carved meticulously the stones that made up the buildings. To him, this work implied a freedom of thought which contributed to personal fulfillment and the act of creation itself, unlike mechanization, which led imagination and individual production to stagnation. Ruskin was also known for supporting William Turner, in *Modern Painters I* (1843), published under the authorship of «the graduate of Oxford».<sup>9</sup> In this book, he defended the supremacy of these artists

over Post-Renaissance masters. To Ruskin, contemporary painters showed an improved understanding of nature because they worked outdoors, unlike previous artists. Ruskin advocated a return to a purer and truer art, defending the importance of the expression of nature. Following the idea of pureness, between 1849 and 1852, John Ruskin spent long periods of time in Venice, between 1849 and 1852, dedicating himself to writing *The Stones of Venice*, whose first volume came out in 1851. The purpose of doing so was to catalogue the gothic remains still visible in Venice, before they were exposed to restoration and reconstruction. In this sense, he traced the history of the monuments in the city before the Renaissance. Ruskin established a Gothic period, which, according to the author, reflected the craftsmanship and the civility of a civilization that he valued and had disappeared.

These notions constituting Ruskin's main theories influenced the creation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They all agreed too that art should reflect, in a realistic way, the nature and value of humanity and its sensitivity. The Brotherhood saw in Ruskin's work an inspiration to outline the artistic assumptions they wanted to explore. Ruskin's defense and interest in the group emerges after the publication of two anonymous letters in *The Times*, respectively in May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 1881, which rejected the aesthetic sensibility and the proposed ideas of these artists.<sup>10</sup> Ruskin published his defense article in the same newspaper in May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1851, at the time of the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy in the same year. In the occasion, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was represented by the painters William Holden Hunt, exhibiting *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*; John Everett Millais' *The Woodman's Daughter*, *Mariana* and *Dove to the Ark*, and Charles Allston Collins' *Convent Thoughts*.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that the newspaper *The Times* was created in 1785 by the London publisher John Wal-

ter (1738-1812), with the purpose of addressing a wide range of topics from politics to science and art. In order to achieve this, the newspaper engaged personalities that paid an important contribution on the subjects it undertook to cover. By signing the article as «The Author of Modern Painters», Ruskin gave his words an artistic authority. Throughout his article, Ruskin adopted a moralistic and instructive tone, since its role was also to educate the public.<sup>12</sup> The author's first argument concerned the youth of these artists, and the fact that they should be given an opportunity without being ruined at a starting point. He also supported the principles that led them, including the ideals of truth and realism that they sought to embody through their work. He defended precisely the truth patent in the paintings on display, and exemplified with the work of Millais –harshly criticized by Dickens– and Hunt, as we can read in the following quote:

[...] there is not a single study of drapery in the whole Academy, be it in large works or small, which for perfect truth, power and finish could be compared for an instant with the black sleeve of the Julia, or with the velvet on the breast and the chain mail, of the Valentine, of Mr. Hunt's picture; or with the white draperies on the table of Mr. Millais' "Mariana", and of the right-hand figure in the painter's "Dove returning to the Ark."

[...] there has been nothing in art so earnest or so complete as these pictures since the days of Albert Dürer. This I assert generally and fearlessly.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, the author reported aspects of the works on display, to prove a realistic component present in those pieces, whilst on the other, he reaffirmed his own principle that art should reflect reality. This underlines the honesty that should be visible in the works of art, as well as the vision of the artist. In order to defend their ideas, Ruskin mentions the painter Albrecht Dürer and his ar-

tistic legacy, which demonstrates the truth to nature. To Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites followed the same tendency. Throughout his work, particularly in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), Ruskin would develop the importance of Dürer in the history of art and drawing. He considered his prints an example of precision that students should pursue in painting and drawing, as we can conclude from the following quote:

[...] you must also provide yourself, if possible, with an engraving of Albert Dürer's. This you will not be able to copy; but you must keep it beside you, and refer to it as a standard of precision in line.<sup>14</sup>

In Ruskin's article, his support of the Brotherhood (which the author did not fail to encourage and endorse) and its aesthetic choices is visible. Ruskin took the opportunity to defend these artists, based on the principles that the author himself was developing and theorizing in his own work. He found in the Pre-Raphaelites an expression of his thoughts, recognizing their value and artistic boldness. In these circumstances, he became a protector, as well as a mentor, of the group.

We can then conclude that the newspaper represented a privileged form to take a position of resistance and defense by Charles Dickens and John Ruskin, respectively. The development of art criticism in the Victorian era propitiated a public discussion on the subject, but there were also several other factors that contributed to the evolution of an individualistic and critical spirit during this period. The prosperous English economy and industrial conditions allowed for a greater dissemination of daily or weekly newspapers, which served as an educational and informative supplement, accessible to the general population. The aim was to 'democratize' information, namely on art issues, through a medium that promoted the discussion of this matter, opening it to all levels of society (Lan-

dow). The development and improvement of the printing process of periodicals had enabled a daily output of thousands of copies. This was enhanced by the investment that the newspapers did in advertising, helping to reduce the price per copy.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the progress visible in the press, it is important to note that the creation of public museums and art schools associated began to proliferate, particularly in London, after the achievement of the Great Exhibition. This measure was intended to train and educate a broad audience and create tools for artistic skills that could be developed and 'democratized'. Then again, there was the intention to form critical opinions able to observe and reflect on the subjects that concerned English society. Another important factor for the development of art criticism was the fact that the commissions for purchases of works of art were no longer a matter concerning merely the State, religious institutions, the wealthy and intellectual elites. The bourgeoisie that had enriched thanks to the Industrial Revolution was also attracted by art and artists of its own time. This allowed for a wider dissemination of the work of contemporary artists and their artistic views, which, in turn, helped to shape public taste. In this context, Charles Dickens and John Ruskin staged a passionate discussion in order to instruct people on how to form critical thought, through the support of theories and the confrontation of different concepts and meanings of beauty and realism, leading to a resistance or a defense of the Pre-Raphaelite principles.

Both authors took advantage of the means available to gain access to public opinion, allowing people to form their own individual judgment. Charles Dickens adopted a more theoretical stance, through which he revealed disdain for these young artists and their revivalist ideas. He did so in a twisted and ironic tone, showing a true respect and admiration for the canonical veterans of English painting. John Ruskin argues that, through a

medieval-like aesthetic language, the young artists intended to draw attention to the problems of their time. He also encouraged their intention not only to return to nature, but also to represent reality as a criticism of industrial society. As such, the aesthetics proposed by the Brotherhood were not completely anachronistic; they consisted on thematic and aesthetic reminiscences envisaging to recover what they considered to be a more humanized view of the conception of the work of art. John Ruskin used the occasion not only to reaffirm his art theory, but also to welcome the young artists at a time when his word as an art critic was highly valuable and respected. The Brotherhood, in turn, would influence the English artist, social critic and essayist William Morris (1834-1896), who, around 1860, founded the Arts and Crafts movement,<sup>16</sup> based on these same standards.

Morris found a group capable of combining the ideals of realism with an aesthetic revivalism that constituted a change in the artistic language of his time. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood became a practical sequence to Ruskin's work and vision consubstantiated in his *Modern Painters*, combining ideas that led Ruskin to defend and mentor them. There was, in the Brotherhood's work, a recognition and a combination of their members' social and artistic notions, which regarded the production of the artistic object as inspired by nature. We can affirm that, despite opposite opinions regarding the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Charles Dickens and John Ruskin embodied two approaches deeply involved and fully imbedded in contemporary society, both contributing to shape artistic individuality and critical reflection in an era of industrial revolutions and social transformation.

## Notes

1. K.E. Sullivan, *The Life, Times and Work of the World's Greatest Artists*, London, Brockhampton Press, 1996, p. 18.
2. The Italian painter Raphael Sanzio was born in the Italian city of Urbino, in 1483. His mother died when Raphael was only eight years old, and his father three years later. He was the son of the court painter, Giovanni Santi, which allowed him to grow up in an environment of art and literature. With his father's death, Raphael was placed under the care of his uncle Bartolomeo, and later of his stepmother. Raphael also became also a court painter, like his father, and apprenticed to the painter Perugino. He went to Florence in 1504, where he became a perfectionist with his technique and developed his own personal style. In 1508, he left to Rome at the request of Pope Julius II, to decorate his private chambers. From this point onwards, he became a Church and aristocracy painter, particularly known by his Madonna. He passed away in Rome in 1520, when he was only 37 years old, without having married or left descendants.
3. Henry Cole (1808-1882) was an artist and an inventor who belonged to the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, founded in 1754. The Society became self-governed in 1847 under Prince Albert, who was appointed Chairman. The mission of this society contemplated several areas, including: «embolden enterprise, enlarge science, refine art, improve our manufactures and extend our commerce». In 1848, Henry Cole was one of the first enthusiasts in the organization of the Great Exhibition and became involved in the museums and schools that developed after the exhibition. (Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica Online.)
4. J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite body: fear and desire in painting, poetry, and criticism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 12-15.
5. Charles Dickens (1812-1870), the son of a British Army officer, was born in Portsmouth. He spent his childhood under financial difficulties in Kent and London, but it was in London he would develop his talent. When he was 12 years old, his father was imprisoned for debt, and Charles was forced to work in a warehouse. This gave him the opportunity to be aware of the problems of the workers of his time. He eventually became a defender of dignity at work, and denounced the poor living conditions of those who had not profited from the Industrial Revolution. It was through writing serials, novels and critical articles in newspapers and magazines that he became an influential figure and voice of the Victorian era.
6. Charles Dickens, «Old Lamps for New Ones», *Household Words*, London, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1850, p. 13.
7. Idem, p. 14.
8. The only child of an importer of wines, John Ruskin was born in London, in 1819. He began his education at home and continued his studies at King's College and Christ Church, Oxford. During the years of college, he developed an interest in art theory, defending closeness to nature. His first successful book was *Modern Painters* (1842), in which he claimed that art relates to realism and truth, exemplifying with contemporary artistic trends. His ideas influenced many artists of his time, notably the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was considered an influential theorist and art critic, known for advocating social reforms, influenced by his conceptions of medieval society. He died at home in Brantwood, Cumbria, in 1900.
9. James S. Dearded, *John Ruskin: an illustrated life of John Ruskin, 1819-1900*, Malta, Shire Publications, 2004, p. 21.
10. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood & Jason Gaiger, *Art in theory, 1815-1900: an anthology of changing ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 441.
11. Charles Allston Collins (1828-1873) never joined the group officially, but followed his artistic principles. He later married the daughter of Charles Dickens, Kate, in 1860.
12. K.E. Sullivan, *The Life, Times and Work of the World's Greatest Artists*, London, Brockhampton Press, 1996, 13-14.
13. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood & Jason Gaiger, *Art in theory, 1815-1900: an anthology of changing ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 443.
14. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing – In three letters to beginners*, London, Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857, p. 99.
15. *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, vol. xiv, 2000, 11.
16. The Arts and Crafts consisted of an artistic movement created by William Morris in the 1860s. The aim was the recovery of craft production techniques over industrial and mass production. William Morris considered that there would be given prominence to the craftsman, who envisioned and executed the piece. The movement eventually gave rise to the specialization of industrial and graphic design.

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