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A 'Damned Prœraphaelite'? George du Maurier's Ekphrastic Drawings for *Good Words, Once a Week* and *The Cornhill* (1860-65).

Françoise Baillet

In a letter to his mother in January 1861, the young George du Maurier writes : '[...] to-day I sent *Once a Week* a little bedside scene, which will make an effect. [...] When it comes out I will send it to Millais and you shall compare. George Cruikshank has been abusing me at the *Once a Week* office, saying I am a damned prœrapahelite. This can only do me good and him harm.'[1]

By calling du Maurier 'a damned prœrapahelite', George Cruikshank (1792-1878), was not only expressing annoyance at what he considered a mannered style. He was also taking stock of a recent evolution of the Victorian artistic and publishing environment. With the charismatic figure of Dante Gabriel Rossetti at its head, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had been, over the previous decade, largely responsible for a major artistic shift. The designs the Brothers produced for books and fine-art illustrated magazines, whose success they ensured, had rapidly gained a new status in relation to the texts they meant to embellish.

When George du Maurier sent this letter, he had only recently settled in London after several years spent in Paris, where he had been trained as an art student under Charles Gleyre. The 'little bedscene' he mentions had been sent to *Once a Week*, a Bradbury and Evans publication specifically created to rival Dickens's *All the Year Round*. Launched in 1859, it was edited by Samuel Lucas (1818-68), and sold at three pence. Other major illustrated magazines of the period included *The Cornhill Magazine* (1860-1944), a Smith and Elder publication sold for a shilling and Alexander Strahan's *Good Words* (1860-1906), a magazine set up in direct challenge to *The Cornhill*. Together with such other titles as *The Leisure Hour*

[1] *The Young George du Maurier. A Selection of his Letters (1860-1867),* ed. by Daphné du Maurier (London : Peter Davies, 1951), p. 29.

(1852-1905) or *The Argosy* (1865-1901), these publications catered for the literary as well as artistic demands of a widening middle-class audience. This is maybe what prompted Forrest Reid to agree with Cruikshank and remark that '[The illustrator's] natural mode of expression was akin to that of the Pre-Raphaelites he satirised so amusingly [...].'[2] But to what extent was du Maurier's visual mode of expression 'natural' ? At a time when artistic London existed within the scope of a few streets and when painters and illustrators worked for the same periodicals, how can du Maurier's Pre-Raphaelite style be assessed ?

This paper will attempt to examine a selection of du Maurier's early 1860s drawings for *Good Words, Once a Week* and *The Cornhill* as ekphrastic commentary on Pre-Raphaelite painting and illustration. Some of the artist's early sketches for *Once a Week* indeed seem to mirror a number of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, whose themes and hyperrealistic pictorial idiom they borrow. Another strong expression of the affinity between Pre-Raphaelites and their admirer could be a common pictorial legacy, an interest in strictly linear designs inherited from the Nazarenes, to which a number of sketches testify quite powerfully. However, du Maurier's pictorial manner also seems to have been significantly influenced by the various magazines' editorial lines. Beyond the obvious thematic as well as formal similarities between black-and-white artist and former Brothers thus emerges a dialogue across the nineteenth century visual field which also sheds light on the publishing environment as well as on the condition of artists themselves.

[2] Forrest Reid, *Illustrators of the Sixties* (London: Faber & Gwyer Ltd, 1928), p. 176.

Du Maurier's hyperrealism

In November 1860, du Maurier produced a small drawing entitled 'Non Satis' for *Once a Week*. Published as an illustration to a short poem, the sketch represented Emma Wightwick, the future Mrs du Maurier, standing in a garden.

Fig. 1. 'Non Satis', 1860, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*Once a Week* 3)

Slightly bent to pick a rose, the young woman leans on an ivy-covered wall, thoughtful and introspective. Around her, tree, foliage and flowers are rendered in detail, in obvious imitation of the Pre-Raphaelite manner. 'Non Satis' was cut by Joseph Swain, one of the most influential wood-engravers of the Victorian era and leading interpreter of Millais,

Rossetti and Sandys.[3] This faithfulness to nature had been, a dozen years before, one of the central tenets of the P.R.B who questioned the articifial rhetorics of Academy painting and pleaded for a scrupulous – even respectful – reproduction of reality, a return to nature also advocated by Ruskin in *Modern Painters*. In a letter written to his friend Tom Armstrong in the early 1860s, du Maurier expresses the same guiding principle, committing himself to this literal rendition of the outside world : 'I needn't say I work very hard, and do as much from nature as I can.'[4] With its clarity and meticulous treatment of flowers, each individual leaf and petal distinct from the others and traced with scientific accuracy, 'Non Satis' reflects this integrity of the artist, strongly evoking both Charles Allston Collins's *Convent Thoughts* (1850-51), with its nun contemplating a flower in a walled garden, and Arthur Hughes's *April Love* (1855-56), in which a young woman looks down at fallen blossoms in a minutely detailed undergrowth. The theme of the isolated female suggests another similarity with Pre-Raphaelite painting and illustration which 'tended to use a small number of figures or indeed a single one in their designs'.[5]

In 'The Hotel Garden', a sketch produced a year later for the same magazine, the Pre-Raphaelite inspiration is obvious. Conceived as an illustration to an eponymous poem by Annie Edwards, du Maurier's drawing represents a couple holding hands in a wood. And while the poet expands on the melancholy of old age and lost love, du Maurier approaches the text as a dramatist, registering its emotional dimension through a striking visual style. The artist adopts the formal language of fine art, emulating the seriousness of Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, a choice he actually claims in a letter sent a few weeks before: 'I want to reach the utmost perfection that my talent is susceptible of, and to get to that point that everything I attempt should turn out a complete and perfect work of art'.[6] With its serious outlook and carefully drawn figures, 'The Hotel Garden' testifies to this ambition which the illustrator shared with the former Brothers. The result – this bold and contrasted style - was all the more striking as it was engraved by such firms as Swain, Linton or the Dalziels. In 'The Hotel Garden', du Maurier's lovers display this subtlety and sharpness, their coupled figure powerfully occupying most of the picture.

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[3] Simon Cooke, *Illustrated Periodicals of the 1860s. Contexts and Collaborations* (London : The British Library, 2010), p. 100.
[4] *The Young George du Maurier*, p. 99.
[5] Paul Goldman, *Victorian Illustration. The Pre-Raphaelites, the Idyllic School and the High Victorians* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Scolar Press, 1996), p. 2.
[6] Leonée Ormond, *George du Maurier* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 138.

Fig. 2. 'The Hotel Garden', 1861, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*Once a Week* 6)

The drawing's composition is besides reminiscent of several Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which the young artist was sure to have seen at the time. One of his sources of inspiration may have been *A Huguenot* which Millais had exhibited, together with *Ophelia*, in 1852. However, the most obvious model for du Maurier's lovers was probably *The Black Brunswicker* (1860) which the painter had completed the year before and which du Maurier was familiar with. And though Millais depicts an interior scene, both pictures display a similar composition, with couples adopting almost identical poses.

Moreover, and beyond a shared thematic inspiration or hyperrealistic touch existed a common pictorial legacy, an interest in strictly linear designs inherited from the Nazarenes, which brought former Brothers and young illustrator even closer.

‘The Plodding Labor of Many Midnights’[7]

In May 1861, *Once a Week* published a poem by Arthur J. Munby entitled ‘On her Death-Bed. A Lullaby’. Composed of four rhyming quatrains, Munby’s ballad tells of a mother’s grief at the loss of her child and her hope of being reunited with him in the afterlife. Du Maurier’s illustration to this piece, one of his best drawings of the early 1860s, suggests a dramatic treatment of the subject.

Fig. 3. ‘On her Death-Bed’, 1861, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*Once a Week* 4).

Within the cramped space of a peasant’s bedroom, the illustrator features three characters : on the left, lying in a wooden bed with half-closed curtains is a young woman holding her newborn baby in her arms, while in front of her, an old peasant is huddled up on a

[7] George du Maurier, *Peter Ibbetson* in Project Gutenberg Ebook < http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9817/pg9817-images.html > [accessed 12 June 2016].

chair, overcome by grief. On either side of the mother and child, the carefully drawn shape of the bed hangings both reveals and suggests the tragedy depicted, their heavy verticality materialising partition and separation. This crammed composition, which 'might be mistaken for the work of Matthew Lawless, an artist directly working in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition', is certainly also strongly evocative of the Tennyson sketches by Rossetti, Millais or Hunt.[8] 'Mariana in the South', produced by Rossetti for the Moxon Tennyson in 1857 could have been one of du Maurier's sources of inspiration. Historians of Victorian illustration have highlighted the impact of the wood-engraving revival on the emergence of a distinctive visual style which, in turn, influenced the Pre-Raphaelites. The 'German manner', a resurgence of medieval black-and-white art in the style of Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein or Alfred Rethel, had a widespread impact on the former Brothers. In 1849, the publication of a picture book called *Auch ein Totentanz (Another Dance of Death)* left a durable mark on artists such as Pickersgill, Shields or the Dalziel Brothers who displayed a Rethel influence throughout the 1850s and 1860s. As an heir to the former Brothers' visual style, du Maurier shared this admiration for Rethel whose designs he carefully copied.[9]

In 'A Time to Dance', this aesthetic choice is obvious. Du Maurier's strict linear art is here at its best, strongly inspired by German graphic art. Kneeling at the top of a watch-tower, the bride stands out against the white standard floating around while just behind her, a cross is visible. The scene's medieval context is here treated in a Romantic vein, the artist's strong contrasts dramatizing the bride's feelings and emotions. Through the German aesthetic legacy, a strong pictorial affinity seems to unite du Maurier and several great names, Frederick Sandys in particular.

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[8] Ormond, p. 111.
[9] Thomas Armstrong, *A Memoir 1832-1911* (London : Martin Secker, 1912), p. 159.

Fig. 4. 'A Time to Dance', 1861, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*Good Words* 2).

However, reasons accounting for du Maurier's visual style may also be found within illustrated publications themselves. Sixties illustration, as it appeared on the pages of the periodicals, was not to be understood as autonomous – the creation of a single artist - but as 'products of collaboration and conflict' the result of 'guidance and direction from other professionals, under pressure of time'. [10]

[10] Cooke, p. 205.

Du Maurier, Pre-Raphaelitism and the context of 1860s illustration.

In the case of du Maurier, the argument is convincing. In his letters to his family and friends, the young artist laments the difficulty of knocking at the doors of editors in search of work. His need for a regular income certainly made him more open to what was demanded of him by the various magazines. 'I am very anxious to be kept on *Once a Week* as it is the swellest thing out, and gets one known,' he writes to his mother in 1861, 'and the more carefully I draw the better it will be for me in the end [...]'.[11]

Fig. 5. 'The Cilician Pirates', 1863, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*The Cornhill Magazine* 7)

In April 1863, *The Cornhill Magazine* published one of du Maurier's finest illustrations of the period. Engraved by Swain, 'The Cilician Pirates' offers a high angle view on a pirate ship, suggesting, through a carefully constructed composition, the hierarchy of the ship. Remarkable for its mastery of light and shadow, it adopts an oblique perspective, inviting the viewer to follow the woman's gaze, from the grapes she is holding in her left hand towards the background in which another group of pirates is depicted, drinking and

[11] *The Young George du Maurier,* p. 36.

dancing. Sitting behind her, the man on the left, with his carefully oulined muscles, denotes a classical restraint inherited from David's classicism as taught in Charles Gleyre's Parisian studio. Here, the emphasis on draughtsmanship is obvious. With his vigorous and carefully delineated back, the figure of the master oarsman in the centre echoes such paradigms of male heroism as classic painters like Poynter or Leighton produced at the same time in their depictions of mythological males such as Odysseus or Perseus.[12] As it is, 'The Cilician Pirates' is noticeably different from du Maurier's work for *Once a Week* or *Good Words* as presented earlier. One of the reasons for this could be the influence of George Smith, who acted as editor for *The Cornhill Magazine* and who rejected the picture several times, only accepting it when it had been redrawn in the manner of Leighton.[13] This anecdote sheds interesting light on du Maurier's (supposed) Pre-Raphaelite style, which could then possibly be interpreted not only as an aesthetic choice on the part of the artist, but also as the result of a number of constraints exerted on him.

This could have been the case for one of du Maurier's most famous early 1860s series, 'Eleanor's Victory'. Mary E. Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* was serialised in *Once a Week*, between March and October 1863 and illustrated by du Maurier in the form of sixteen half-page engravings. In one of the central episodes of the series, the heroine goes out at night to spy on a young man she suspects of conspiracy. Du Maurier depicts her as she walks past a wall, wearing a shawl over a white dress. There again, the accurate treatment of foliage and flowers is reminiscent of the hyperrealism of the early Brotherhood paintings. Published in July 1863, the drawing is noticeably distinct in tone from 'The Cilician Pirates', produced three months before and whose classical restraint du Maurier seems to have abandoned in favour of the detailed treatment of Hunt, Millais or Charles Allston Collins he had already opted for. In other words, the illustrator's visual style as it is expressed in these drawings may have had as much to do with the publication they appeared in – *The Cornhill* and its insistence on 'propriety', *Good Words* and its moral agenda or, as is the case here, *Once a Week* and hyperrealism – as with a pre-conceived vision of the subject represented. As an editor of *Once a Week*, Samuel Lucas had precise - even exacting – artistic requirements.[14] As a result, he 'pressurised his artists into replicating Pre-Raphaelite 'realism', and it is noticeable that 'his' illustrations are far more detailed than those appearing in *Good Words* and *The Cornhill*.

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[12] Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), p. 43.
[13] Cooke, p. 59.
[14] William E. Buckler, 'Once a Week under Samuel Lucas, 1859-65', *Papers of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)* 67 (1952), 924-941, pp 928-29.

‘Working to the editor’s agenda,’ Cooke remarks, ‘the artists of *Once a Week* convert the magazine into a Pre-Raphaelite journal, essentially a much more effective realisation of the Pre-Raphaelites’ ideals than their own periodical, *The Germ*’.[15]

Fig. 6. ‘Eleanor’s Victory’, 1863, George du Maurier.
Wood-engraving (*Once a Week* 9).

[15] Cooke, p. 101.

Conclusion

As they appear in the pages of *Once a Week, The Cornhill Magazine* or *Good Words* throughout the early 1860s, George du Maurier's plates suggest powerful visual responses to Pre-Raphaelite challenge and disruption of periodical art. An interpretative rendering of the author's meaning rather than a mere visualisation of it, they certainly borrow the delicacy and precision of the former Brothers' manner, testifying to common sources, references and fields of artistic interest. But beyond the obvious influence exerted on the young illustrator by artistic figures he knew and greatly admired, du Maurier's Pre-Raphaelite drawings also reflect the broader publishing environment in which cartoons were produced and consumed.

In october 1864, the sudden death of John Leech resulted in du Maurier becoming a permanent collaborator to the magazine, to which he had contributed on the piecemeal basis over the last four years. The elaborate mock-Pre-Raphaelite series the illustrator then produced under the title 'A Legend of Camelot' (1866) together with a parody of William Morris's *Defence of Guinevere* confirms both his compliance to *Punch*'s more and more conservative editorial line and his pictorial affinities with an artistic avant-garde he knew and admired. In the late 1870s, du Maurier's interest for and reaction to the artistic avant-garde of his time found another striking expression in his scathing anti-aesthetic series for *Punch* which, under the editorship of Shirley Brookes (1870-74) and Francis Burnand had by then become the voice of the artistic Establishment. Oscillating between compliance to the magazine's conservative agenda and personal interest for his subject, du Maurier had by then shown the world that he was no longer a 'damned prœrapahelite'.

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