

A rift at the edge of times: the Pre-Raphaelites' political faultline

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Abstract

In reaction to a dull, never-changing Royal Academy, and announcing movements focused on sheer artistic beauty, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is often seen as wrapped in a long, hazy, melancholy reverie. William Morris's political commitment spares him such labelling, but Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his disciples are often associated with past-obsessed aesthetics. This paper, based on the dissertation I defended in December 2020, takes a stand against such a bias, and emphasises the political aspects of their work along with the scope of their philosophical and ideological commitments. My analysis will probe the idea that rifts and faultlines represent both displacements and a creative principle, while simultaneously opening the way to a permanent challenging of dominant ideology and offering an alternative to subversion. The artistic twist on the faultline concept makes the Pre-Raphaelites craftsmen of a quiet revolution, meant to effect a deep transformation of Victorian society and art.

This paper will examine how the concept of faultline can cast light on the political project of Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites: a constant shift between what geologists might call partial superposition (tolerating, using, or supporting Victorian modernity), displacement (modifying and adapting Victorian tropes in order to show another possible reality), and divergence (offering a new social and political model, radically at odds with the Victorian mindset). This will be done by reading Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poems, most of them by the Rossetti siblings, Burne-Jones, and Morris, through the prism of 19th century theoretical texts and reflections by thinkers of modernity, counter-modernity, and alter-modernity.