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# Encountering the Phantasmagoria: Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetics as the Antidote for Victorian Decadence in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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# Encountering the Phantasmagoria: Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetics as the Antidote for Victorian Decadence in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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## Abstract

Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" engages with 'the problem of Raphael,' a Victorian aesthetic debate into which Browning enters in order to address Victorian society's spiritual impotence, which he connects to the societal emphasis on external appearances of virtue and nobility. This emphasis on appearances is reflected in Raphaelite aesthetics, for Victorians understood Raphael's paintings as representational pictures intended to cause viewers to contemplate spiritual states. The Raphaelite school of aesthetics saw Raphael's works as the pinnacle of the Christian visual art tradition, while the pre-Raphaelites sought to dissolve the distinction between sacred and secular, painting human bodies as they actual appear, with all of their awkward flaws, as opposed to the polished, perfected, demigod-like humans in a Raphael. This essay weaves Baudelaire's aesthetic theory of the phantasmagoria with the Victorian aesthetic debate over the problem of Raphael, and the pre-Raphaelite school of Victorian painters' associations with sacramental realism, for a new take on Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."

## Keywords

Robert Browning, Charles Baudelaire, William Etty, Victorian poetry, Victorian aesthetics, mysticism

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# Encountering the Phantasmagoria: Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetics as the Antidote for Victorian Decadence in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

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## Introduction

In his dramatic monologue, "My Last Duchess," published in 1842, Robert Browning chooses for his speaker a sixteenth century Duke of Ferrara. The duke directs his audience's attention to a portrait of his last duchess, whom he has killed, as is made clear by the poem's end. A footnote in the Longman Anthology of British Literature notes that the duke in Browning's poem is based on the historical Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, "who married the 14-year-old Lucrezia de Medici in 1558" (1328). When Lucrezia died in 1561, many people suspected that she had been poisoned, and in 1565, Alfonso II took another duchess. The duke's monologue centers on a painted portrait of his duchess, and the portrait seems to have caused him to break from his self-restrained aloofness and murder his duchess. But what exactly is it about the portrait that so disturbs the duke? As I will show, the answer to this question lies in Browning's engagement with the problem of Raphael, a Victorian aesthetic debate that Browning uses to underscore Victorian society's spiritual impotence—the necessary result of its emphasis on external appearances.

## Charles Baudelaire's Aesthetics

Charles Baudelaire's concepts of the "perfect *flâneur*" and the "dandy," described in his *The Painter of Modern Life*, provide a useful theoretical lens for evaluating "My Last Duchess." For Baudelaire, the artistic vision of the perfect *flâneur*, also called the "man of the world," presents an antithesis to nineteenth century academies' and connoisseurs' fetishization of Raphael (683). Baudelaire laments the fact that many spectators at the Louvre rush "past rows of very interesting, though secondary, pictures, to come to a rapturous halt in front of a Titian or a Raphael—one of those that have been most popularized by the engraver's art; then they will go home happy, not a few saying to themselves, 'I know my Museum'" (681). For Baudelaire, Raphael "does not contain the whole secret." Baudelaire's goal is to "establish a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of a unique and absolute beauty" (681). Baudelaire conceives of a two-fold beauty, "made up of an eternal, invariable element, . . . and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be . . . the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element . . . the first

element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation" (681). Baudelaire does not give primacy to any single historical period's iteration of beauty. Each work of art and each conception of beauty is determined, due to the circumstantial element of beauty, by the artist's historical moment.

As an example of a perfect *flâneur*, Baudelaire presents "Monsieur C. G.," based on the journalist Constantin Guys. This journalist's sketches of the Crimean War, some of them depicting the desolation of the battlefield, certainly contrast with the idealized human figures in a Raphael or a Titian (682). Nineteenth century academies ascertained in Raphael's paintings a conception of beauty predicated on distinction from the mundane; Raphael captured the ideal beauty of the human form, not the ungainly spectacle of the ordinary human body. In opposition to the Raphaelite notion of a distinct, absolute beauty, Baudelaire asserts that "the mainspring of [monsieur G.'s] genius is curiosity" (681). Baudelaire compares Monsieur G. to a "convalescent . . . lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, . . . rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life" (682-3). The convalescent is not drawn to distinction; rather, since he has nearly lost his life, he is enamored with the entirety of the human experience—he sees everything as if for the first time. Baudelaire emphasizes the relational, spiritual element of beauty when he writes of the artist, "His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd" (683). This religious phrase, "one flesh," suggests a spiritual union between the artist and his subject: an idea further developed in Baudelaire's description of the artist as a "lover of universal life, [who] enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy." He is like a "kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of [the crowd's] movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I'" (683-4). Through the artist's spiritual marriage with the crowd, the synthesis of the 'I' and the 'non-I', he finds his vision. In the perfect *flâneur's* work of art, "the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator"—it is what Baudelaire calls a "phantasmagoria . . . distilled from nature" (684). The work of art is alive—it has a living soul that is the product of the artist's immersion in the reservoir of lived experience, of his becoming one flesh with the crowd.

Baudelaire's description of the "dandy" contrasts sharply with the perfect *flâneur*. The dandy is "in love with *distinction* above all things" (687). He is caught up in an elaborate "cult of the self which can nevertheless survive the pursuit of a happiness to be found in someone else" (687). He relishes the "joy of astonishing others" and obtains a "proud satisfaction" from never "being astonished" by anyone or anything else. Even if he experiences suffering, "he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox's tooth" (687). Clearly, the dandy is much like Browning's Duke of Ferrara, who would like to tell the duchess "Just this / Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, / Or there exceed the mark." And yet he cannot express his feelings to the duchess, for "E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose / Never to stoop" (37-9, 42-3). The duke cannot tell the duchess what he wants because doing so would be to admit that she has the ability to rankle and in some sense astonish him. Baudelaire asserts that "the distinguishing characteristic of the

dandy's beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved" (688). The Longman Anthology of British Literature notes that Browning himself was a "Byronic dandy sporting lemon-yellow gloves and gorgeous waistcoats, who loved dining out and yet kept both his private life and poetic practice out of the conversation" (1322). Thus, Browning could sympathize with the duke's propriety and guardedness—Browning exempt himself from his critique of Victorian propriety. Yet Browning also once wrote, "Art remains the one way possible . . . [of] speaking the truth" (1324). Clearly suffering from the repressive inauthenticity of Victorian society, Browning turned to art as an antidote. I will soon show how Browning suggests in "My Last Duchess" that when the dandy encounters true, living art—the phantasmagoria of some perfect *flaneur*—he recoils in fear and distaste because the spiritual fullness of true art reveals to him, perhaps on an unconscious level, his own spiritual bankruptcy, hidden behind the thin veil of dandyism and the idealism of Raphaelite art.

## Raphael and the Pre-Raphaelites

The conflict between the perfect *flaneur* and the dandy corresponds to the two opposing sides of the problem of Raphael: a debate central to the art and criticism of Browning's era. Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites represent one side of the problem of Raphael. Much like Baudelaire's perfect *flaneur*, Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites espoused aesthetic theories based on the assumption that the goal of the artist is to access and communicate sacred reality through ordinary human experience. According to Stephen Cheeke, in his essay "Browning, Renaissance Painting, and the Problem of Raphael," the Pre-Raphaelite movement celebrated the "naïve traits of frank expression and unaffected grace" in the work of the early Renaissance painters (438). The nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites offered an antithesis to the Victorian art establishment, which fell on other the side of the problem of Raphael. The mainstream Victorian art critics and connoisseurs deemed Raphael the climax and turning point of Christian art because, from Raphael forward, the artist's supreme goal had become to capture an idealized, larger-than-life, perfect beauty (438). In language reminiscent of Baudelaire, Cheeke writes that, in the works of the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites, the audience encounters "the crowded human reality pressing into and against the consecrated space" (439-440). Because of their Raphaelite conception of beauty, many Victorians, including Charles Dickens, cringed at "the sense that certain things had become too visible" in John Everett Millais' portrayal of Jesus and his family in the 1850 painting, *Christ in the House of His Parents* (409). But Browning aligned with Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and other artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement who insisted on the "connection between primitivism and a sacramental realism [and believed] that naivety or simplicity do not necessarily presuppose lower levels of complexity, but may offer direct routes to "reality"—including a Christian reality" (439). The ordinariness of Jesus's life as a barefoot little boy in a dirty carpentry shed was intended to heighten, not diminish, the painting's sacred realities.

Through their aesthetics of primitivism and sacramental realism, the Pre-Raphaelites countered the decadence and prudishness of the Victorian art establishment. They also

countered the dominant Protestant discourse, which espoused dispassionate, 'reasonable' forms of worship and denied, or at least deemphasized, the spiritual efficacy of the sacraments. In his book *Browning: Background and Conflict*, F. R. G. Duckworth tells of the stiff restrictions that artists faced in the Victorian era: "it is clear that the majority of Englishmen were ready to be angered with any writer who depreciated the material prosperity of the time or cast its progress in doubt" (19). The Pre-Raphaelites, however, often highlighted social realities that Victorian dandies wanted to conceal and forget—realities including, but not limited to, the brutal lives of Victorian England's working class. Additionally, Duckworth notes that, due to the Victorian's Raphaelite dandyism, "[if] the business, the thoughts, the manner of everyday life were to be handled by the poet, it would be on the condition that he avoided 'the slightest jar of vulgarity and laughableness'" (22). Indeed, artists who deviated from these expectations were promptly rejected by critics.

In the introduction to the Victorian Age in the Longman Anthology of British Literature, Heather Henderson and William Sharpe note that "anything that might bring 'a blush to the cheek of the Young Person'—as Dickens warily satirized the trend—was aggressively ferreted out by publishers and libraries. Even revered poets such as Tennyson and [Robert Browning's wife, Elizabeth] Barrett Browning found themselves edited by squeamish publishers" (1067).

William Etty, another artist who gained the derision of the Victorian establishment, created a series of penitent Magdalen paintings that constituted an erotic subversion of Victorian prudishness, decadence, and anti-Catholic sentiment. In "William Etty's Magdalens: Sexual Desire and Spirituality in Early Victorian England," author Dominic Janes observes that Etty's nudes seemed, to Victorian critics, specifically designed to evoke viewers' libidinous passions. The press noted of one of Etty's nudes that it had, "for a Magdalen, too much colour in the cheeks,' and a bosom too luxuriant" (287). In 1822, *The Times* remarked, in regards to one of Etty's Magdalens, "nakedness without purity is offensive and indecent," to which Janes adds, "Part of the problem was that Etty's female nudes looked like working-class girls play-acting as classical goddesses" (278). And, in fact, they were! Rather than the privileged body of a classical goddess or the Virgin Mary, Etty chose for his artistic subject the "degraded body, all too clearly composed of flesh and blood," of the repentant prostitute Mary Magdalen (278). Etty hired prostitutes off the streets of London to be his models. He writes of one model, "I am endeavouring to persuade her to get money in a way more artistical" (296). In direct opposition to the idealism and prudishness of Victorian art, Etty brought the dark, prurient netherworld of Victorian England into the spotlight, exposing the hypocrisy of the Victorian notion of a pure, dignified British culture.

Etty's Magdalens also activated Protestant anti-Catholic stereotypes and anxieties about Anglo-Catholic ritualism, a topic that Browning also addresses. Etty's use of Catholic iconography—crucifixes, illuminated Bibles, skulls, and embroidered cloths—raised the eyebrows of some critics. His Magdalens have rapturous expressions on their faces, their cheeks aglow as they gaze at a crucifix or an illuminated Bible. Ironically, while Victorians emphasized the importance of external appearances in matters of social propriety and

aesthetic beauty, in religious matters, they opposed the lavish ornamentation and sacraments of the Catholic Church. One critic of Etty's *Magdalens* asserted that "chastity and simplicity . . . are not reconcilable with jewels, lace, variegated cloths, and embroidery which are better fitted for the gorgeous pageantry of the church of Rome" (290).

In addition to Victorian's distaste for icons, the Gothic sensationalism of the eighteenth century "had popularized images of Catholics as being obsessed with sex and death" (279). Victorians suspected that the Catholic rite of confession involved a "perverse eroticism" related to the dirty details of confession (289). In her article, "Perverts to Rome: Protestant Gender Roles and the Abjection of Catholicism," Monika Mazurek notes that nineteenth century anti-papist pamphlets warned readers against the licentious intentions of priests during the rite of confession. These pamphlets register "the terror caused by the potential invasion of the English hearth by priests, acting as the third person in the marriage" (695). Anti-papists used the invasion-of-the-hearth argument against English Tractarians and Ritualists, who "tried to revive certain devotional practices, including confession" (695).

Etty's combination of overt eroticism and iconography in his *Magdalen* paintings addresses the hypocrisy of Victorian anti-Catholic sentiment head-on. While Etty's Victorian audience mocked Catholic devotion to dead icons and rituals, they themselves overlooked the sacredness of material reality, even of human life, choosing instead to worship the immaterial, idealized Raphaelite body. Etty's *Magdalen* paintings can be interpreted as living icons since they refer to the real, ordinary bodies of Etty's models. They are the antithesis of Raphael's larger-than-life bodies, which have no real correspondent. Additionally, by making the bodies of real Victorian prostitutes visible, Etty subtly hints at the inauthenticity of Victorian fashion and propriety.

Though Victorians conflated licentiousness and perversion with Catholicism, Victorian society had its own secret sins. British journalist William T. Stead exposed the "widespread existence of juvenile prostitution in London and the presence of an organized traffic in young English girls that supplied brothels on the continent" in his 1885 news series titled, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (Gorham 353). In "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' Re-examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England," Deborah Gorham notes that in Victorian reform, rhetoric figured child prostitutes as "sexually innocent, passive victims of individual evil men" (355). Reformers failed to recognize that many young working-class girls became prostitutes because they had no other way to earn a living—"the causes of juvenile prostitution were to be found in [the] exploitative economic structure" (355). Etty, Browning, and the Pre-Raphaelites recognized the dire spiritual bankruptcy hidden beneath the veneer of Victorian propriety and Raphaelite aesthetics. Cheeke notes that the Pre-Raphaelite artists overlapped with the Anglo-Catholic movement, which "emphasized the devotional employment of images and celebrated the simplicity and clarity of iconographical traditions" (438). Perhaps they thought it was high time for Victorian society to confess and repent. In the areas of aesthetics and religious worship, the Pre-Raphaelites chose the ordinary material world—not the idealized world of Raphael or the inauthentic masks of Victorian fashion and propriety—as the true path to sacred reality and spiritual life.

## Baudelaire, the Pre-Raphaelites, and “My Last Duchess”

Browning likely chose the Italian Renaissance as the setting for his poem because of the overlap between Victorian societal norms and the aristocratic culture of Renaissance Italy. In “Power and Passion in Sixteenth-Century Florence: The Sexual and Political Reputations of Alessandro and Cosimo I de’ Medici,” Nicholas Scott Baker explores the significance of the Italian ladder of love paradigm to the reigns of two dukes, both members of the influential Medici family. In this paradigm, reason is associated with virtue and spirituality, while passion is tied to the body and the animalistic side of human nature. Baker asserts that in the sixteenth century, there was an expanding group of texts on “comportment, manners, and etiquette [that] demanded increasing self-control from the social elite, . . . [while labeling] the anonymous mass of urban laborers and peasants . . . effeminate, . . . [and] closer to the body and its passions” (448). The impeccable restraint and social bearing of these Early Modern Italian dukes is reminiscent of the dandy’s “unshakeable determination not to be moved” (Baudelaire 688). Browning’s duke is driven by the necessity to maintain a composed, dispassionate appearance—he could not tell his duchess exactly what was wrong with her behavior or exactly how she ought to behave because “E’en then would be some stooping” (42). He could not express his feelings to the duchess since any emotional outburst would be perceived as effeminate; additionally, if he spoke to the duchess about her behavior, he would be admitting by his reproach that she had the power to emotionally discompose him. Furthermore, Baker’s note about the connections between “tyranny, effeminacy, and an overabundance of heteroerotic desire” helps explain the duke’s reticence to speak openly with his duchess, for the duke is clearly repressing his sexual desire while suffering from sexual jealousy (434). Browning’s Victorian audience, conditioned to pick up on any hint of impropriety, certainly would not have missed the sexual overtones running throughout the poem. Victorians would have been discomfited with the duke over “the depth and *passion* of [the duchess’s] earnest glance” and the fact that “twas not / Her husband’s presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek” (8, my emphasis, 13-15). As Mazurek’s research suggests, Browning’s audience would likely have seen Fra Pandolf’s presence as an “invasion of the hearth” (695). They certainly would have been appalled at the implicit prurient interests behind the comments that the duke attributes to Fra Pandolf when, trying to explain the reasons for the Duchess’ passionate aspect in the portrait, the Duke says,

perhaps  
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps  
 Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint  
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
 Half-flush that dies along her throat[.]” (15-19)

We might explain the whole poem by the duke’s sexual insecurity, or even impotence, if not for the next few lines in which the duke maintains that his duchess thought Fra Pandolf’s comments were mere “courtesy, . . . and cause enough / For calling up that spot of joy” (20-21). The duke seems to believe that the duchess did not transgress sexually in either mind



or body; however, we must bear in mind the circumstances of the poem: the duke is presenting his case to an ambassador of some aristocrat in the hopes that this aristocrat will give his daughter in marriage to the duke (49-53). Accordingly, the duke is trying to present himself as favorably as possible, and in order to do so, he must explain the death of his previous duchess in a manner that does not reflect poorly on himself. If the duchess did stray, it would bespeak some lack on the part of the duke—it would suggest that the duke had not been masculine enough to rule over and control his wife (Mazurek 435). Consequently, the ambassador would likely perceive the duke as unfit to rule in other matters like business and politics. If the duke could not control his wife, then he is not someone whom the ambassador's master could prudently enter into a business arrangement with. So the duke invents another explanation for his motivation to murder the duchess. He claims that his last duchess was low-minded—"She had a heart, how shall I say?—too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed" (21-23). Here, the duke seems to suggest that the duchess' blushes arose involuntarily as a result of her deviant mind, which refused to recognize the self-evident primacy of the duke over the other people and things in the duchess' world. Her smile, her blush, her thanks distributed evenly to those around her made it seem, to the duke, "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / with anybody's gift" (34). The duke's testimony of his duchess' deviant mind is a performance that allows him to deny, both to himself and to the ambassador, something lacking in himself. It seems as though the duke is suffering from both a sexual and a spiritual insecurity or impotence.

Browning forces his Victorian readers to recognize the marks of their own culture in the duke in order to make a case for Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics and sacramental forms of religious worship that depend on a belief in sacramental realism. As I have pointed out several times already, Browning's audience would have recognized the duke as a Victorian dandy. The duke's identity is based on his material property and his dignified manners. He takes pleasure in astonishing his guests with the wonders and rarities of his gallery while never allowing himself to be astonished. His identity is determined by things external to himself: things that he nonetheless expects the duchess and the ambassador to interpret as referring directly to him and conferring nobility on him. Thus he expects the duchess to recognize the distinction of his "nine-hundred-years-old name." His reliance on external signs as the mark of his dignity causes the duke to place the portrait of the duchess in his gallery and cover it with a curtain that only he "puts by" to reveal the painting (9). By killing the duchess and preserving the portrait—which is only revealed to the duke's guests when he is standing by, waiting for his guest's to ask "How such a glance came there"—the duke has ensured that the duchess' smiles refer only to himself, bear only *his* impress (12).

The duke's insistence upon his own distinction above everyone else's, as well as his absolutist notions of how the duchess ought to control her appearance (he wants to be able to tell her "Just this / Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, / Or there exceed the mark") serve to associate the duke with the Raphaelite conception of beauty, which is governed by strict rules (37-39). The duke's expectations for how the duchess ought to comport herself are unrealistic and unnatural, like Raphael's idealized beauty. The duke's apparent affinity for classical art—"Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity"—also marks him for a Raphaelite (54-55). The fact that the duke must kill the

duchess in order to force his stable meaning onto the portrait speaks to the unnaturalness of the expectations he places on the duchess as well as to the ultimate unreality of Raphaelite beauty. Browning suggests that the Raphaelite conception of beauty inadvertently purges all true spiritual life from the work of art as a result of its idealism. The duke can only “call / That piece a wonder, *now*,” after he has done away with the portrait’s real referent (2-3, my emphasis). When the duke kills the duchess, he makes the painted duchess only “As if alive,” whereas before he killed her, the painting itself was alive by virtue of its pointing to the sacred reality of the real duchess (47). Ironically, the duke’s desire to kill the real referent of the portrait proves his own spiritual deadness, for he always chooses the image over the living thing itself.

In contrast to the duke, the duchess is aligned with Baudelaire’s perfect *flaneur*, with Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and with sacramental realism. She exemplifies the curiosity that Baudelaire designates the mark of genius. She is keenly interested in everything that catches her eyes: “she liked whate’er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere” (24). The duchess, like the *flaneur*, does not find any pleasure in distinction, which is precisely what astonishes and frustrates the duke:

Sir, ‘twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. (25-31)

The duchess derives spiritual joy through her natural “appetite for the non-I” (Baudelaire 684). She rebels against her husband’s tyrannical possessiveness because of her instinct to become “one flesh with the crowd” (683). The duchess is continually absorbed with the project of accessing sacred reality through ordinary human experiences. That’s what the duke can’t stand. The duke’s identity depends on his construction of himself as the subject and everything and everyone else as an object. Whereas the duchess, like the *flaneur*, recognizes that she is most spiritually alive in the space between subject and object. The duchess’ and Fra Pandolf’s ability to mutually recognize each other as subjects (and Fra Pandolf’s ability to faithfully record this process) gives rise to the phantasmagoric portrait. Both of them are willing to become the object of the other. When the duke first saw the portrait, he recoiled in terror because he experienced the phantasmagoria—he recognized a spiritual vivacity in the duchess that made him aware of the emptiness of his own identity, which was built up of external signs. The duchess in the portrait was far too lifelike for the duke’s Raphaelite tastes—he had to ensure that the duchess of the portrait was only “As if alive” and only a disembodied ideal for which he could set the terms (47).

Browning’s poem suggests, then, that in the same way that the duke’s murder of the duchess reveals his own insufficiency, so the Victorian art establishment discrediting the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites speaks to the incompetence of the art establishment

itself. In "My Last Duchess," the underlying threat of the duchess communing with Fra Pandolf rather than with her husband activates the English fear that the reintroduction of certain sacraments and rituals would become a means for priests and prelates to invade the sanctity of the hearth. Yet Browning's poem subtly points to the real reasons anti-Catholic Victorians denied the efficacy of the sacraments and labeled Catholics as licentious: protestant attacks on Catholics and Ritualists served to deflect Protestant anxieties over the inefficacy of their own forms of worship.

## Raphael and the Pre-Raphaelites

Through reading "My Last Duchess" in light of Baudelaire's treatment of the problem of Raphael, we see how Browning's poem dramatizes the conflict between the perfect *flaneur* and the dandy, between the established Raphaelite ideal and the Pre-Raphaelite movement, between conservative Protestant forms of worship and Anglo-Catholics' return to devotional images and sacramental realism. Browning demonstrates how, in the realm of aesthetics and forms of worship, the dominant power exercises tyranny by controlling and qualifying the image and annihilating its true referent. In order to escape this tyranny and to accomplish true spiritual growth, we must abandon the idolatry of the sign and instead seek access to the sacred reality behind the signs. For Browning, the true work of art connects the audience to a spiritual reality by forcing viewers to look for the sacred in the natural, ordinary human reality, not in some idealized version of reality.

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