

Review

Paola Spinozzi and Elisa Bizzotto, *The Germ: Origins and Progenies of Pre-Raphaelite Interart Aesthetics. Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts* (ed. J.B. Bullen), vol. 24. Oxford/Bern/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012. 284 pp. ISBN: 978-3-0343-0298-2, € 53,50.

Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, the ambitious exhibition organised by Tate Britain in 2012, spurred an increase in the already impressive stream of publications on Pre-Raphaelite art and literature. One of the publications that more or less coincided with the exhibition is Paola Spinozzi and Elisa Bizzotto's *The Germ: Origins and Progenies of Pre-Raphaelite Interart Aesthetics*. It offers a brief introduction, five chapters, a long, thematically organised bibliography and an excellent and very usable index.

Bizzotto and Spinozzi's book focuses, as the title indicates, on *The Germ*, the short-lived periodical founded in 1850 by the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Brotherhood itself was established in 1848 by a group of young writers and artists who aimed to rethink painting and literature along radically new lines. In *The Germ* they found a medium to publish their early literary and graphic work as well as a

vehicle to promote and disseminate their new ideas. The journal was edited by William Michael Rossetti, the brother of Dante Gabriel, and almost all of the Pre-Raphaelites and their closest allies contributed to it. Selling only a handful of copies, *The Germ* was hardly a success in commercial terms, and the publication was terminated after only four issues, all published in 1850. Nevertheless, the journal was a major site for early Pre-Raphaelite experiments and it still is an invaluable source for the study of the development of Pre-Raphaelite thinking. *The Germ* can be consulted online at www.rossettiarchive.org.

Bizzotto and Spinozzi's work almost seems to be an answer to Elizabeth Prettejohn's recent observation that there is still 'a regrettable segregation between the studies of Pre-Raphaelite literature and Pre-Raphaelite art.' Prettejohn made this observation in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, edited by herself and also published in 2012, which presents itself as the first general introduction to both Pre-Raphaelite art and literature and, not accidentally, offers a list of contents of the four issues that were published of *The Germ*. Following a similar agenda, Bizzotto and Spinozzi's

book aspires to bridge the gap between art and literature, even it tends to focus more on Pre-Raphaelite texts than Pre-Raphaelite images. Its main argument is that *The Germ* was the first and main locus of Pre-Raphaelite experiments with ‘interart aesthetics,’ with which the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates tried to redefine ‘the specificity of each mode of artistic expression while exploring the dynamic between word and image’ (back cover). Thus, the authors suggest that *The Germ* was a decisive, although hitherto underestimated, influence on later artistic practices associated with the Symbolists, Aesthetes, Decadents and even Modernists, while also anticipating Surrealism.

The approach adopted in the first two chapters of the book is mainly historical. The first chapter describes the foundation of *The Germ* and the critical reception of the journal up to the early twentieth century. The second chapter examines the biographical backgrounds of the individual collaborators and authors of *The Germ*, Pre-Raphaelites proper and others from their circle, and comments on their respective contributions. It also pays ample attention to the critical reception of their work until well into the twentieth century. If both chapters present little new material, they certainly have their value by bringing together much of the otherwise scattered information relating to the history of *The Germ* in a well-organised and accessible text. If anything, both chapters suffer a little from the double agenda that seems to haunt the book as a whole. On the one hand, there is a desire to present a specific argument relating to the historic legacy of *The Germ*; on the other hand,

the underlying ambition to make the book a comprehensive reference work on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s journal is apparent. This is indeed a difficult combination that sometimes risks drowning the book’s argument in enumerative lists, long quotes and an overload of attention paid to secondary figures and earlier publications on the subject.

In the next three chapters, however, the authors’ argument comes to the foreground. In the third chapter, they argue that the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates developed a new literary prose ‘style’ in *The Germ*, which Bizzotto and Spinozzi define as ‘aesthetic prose’ and subdivide into ‘creative aesthetic prose’ and ‘critical aesthetic prose.’ The chapter also examines the importance of this literary legacy for later generations. In the fourth chapter, aptly called ‘Germinal Poetical Imageries,’ the authors develop a similar argument for the poetry published in *The Germ*. Here, they cluster the poetical contributions to the journal under a number of themes, describing the poetry’s innovative character and, again, pointing out its significance for later authors. In the fifth chapter, *The Germ* as a whole is discussed as a model for later avant-garde periodicals, artists’ journals and the so-called ‘little magazines.’

It is in these three chapters especially that the urge to be exhaustive somewhat weakens the flow of the argument, although the authors certainly succeed in showing the importance of *The Germ* and its contents for later authors and publishers. Their arguments are, however, deeply steeped in a teleological logic of linear progress and innovation.

In some cases, this approach leads to a confusing form of circular reasoning. For instance, the authors characterize Pre-Raphaelite poetry as ‘proto-surrealist’ – a term that already highlights the (chro- no)logical problems associated with this sort of perspective – and subsequently write that Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘Repining,’ published in the third issue of *The Germ*, qualifies as Pre-Raphaelite precisely because it oscillates between Realism and Surrealism. In other cases, this approach results in an unbalanced modernist bias for originality, which is also present in the emphasis on ‘origins and progenies’ in the book’s subtitle. This leads the authors to measure the importance of artists by the innovative character of their art and, subsequently, by their ‘influence’ on later generations. If anything, however, the case of the Pre-Raphaelites, who so eagerly delved into the art of the past to assimilate what they

found for their own modern goals, shows that influence is hardly an appropriate conceptual category to analyse inter-generational artistic transfers. The artists of the Italian Duecento and Trecento did not influence the Pre-Raphaelites; they were used and appropriated by them. In the same vein, it seems more productive to conceive of the intergenerational transfers described in this book in terms of active assimilation by later generations, be they Symbolists, Aesthetes, Decadents or Modernists, than in terms of passive reception or influence. Nevertheless, Bizzotto and Spinozzi’s book forms a valuable contribution to the already rich and ever-expanding field of Pre-Raphaelite studies.

•> JAN DIRK BAETENS *is assistant professor at the departments of Art History and Literary & Cultural Studies of Radboud University Nijmegen.*