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Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais
(review)

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Journal of Victorian Culture, Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 2006 , pp.
184-188 (Review)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jvc.2006.0006>



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Faulk in his nomination of a bourgeois class fraction of cultural gatekeepers as ideologically autonomous, whereas Platt demonstrates how a cadre of cultural producers thrived through their collusive exploitation of a redefined hegemony. Of the two monographs, Platt's is the more satisfactory for its greater attention to social and historical context, still too often absent or scanted in CS, or in literary studies claiming its kudos.

Peter Bailey

Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), ix + 229 pages, illustrated, hardback, £55 (ISBN 0 7546 3297 0).

Nostalgic lists are currently very fashionable in the British media. In any account of the 100 greatest Victorian paintings, judged by criteria such as Tate Britain's best selling postcards or the number of reproductions of an individual canvas in contemporary coffee-table surveys, one would expect to find at least four of John Everett Millais' early oils featured prominently. These are *Isabella* (1849), *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-50), *Mariana* (1851), and *Ophelia* (1852). Each is deservedly famous in its own right, and is characterised by a meticulously-detailed Pre-Raphaelite surface, by the emotional intensity and complexity of its principal protagonists, by a sophisticated play of realism and iconography and of two and three dimensions, and by subject matter deriving from either the Bible or mainstream British literary history. Further down the same list, one might be similarly surprised if Millais' 1853 portrait of John Ruskin did not figure alongside two of Millais' more melancholy subject pictures, *The Blind Girl* (1854-6) and *Autumn Leaves* (1856). *Cherry Ripe* (1879) and *Bubbles* (1886) are perhaps less palatable to contemporary sensibilities, but would probably also merit a mention.

Given Millais' continuing popularity, it is perhaps remarkable that only four book-length accounts of the painter's work have appeared in the last decade. Millais' scholarly neglect is, of course, part of a broader trend within Art History, in which Victorian painting has been habitually passed over in favour of French art of the same period. Indeed, the historiography of Modern art is widely presumed to bypass almost entirely British art movements, such as Pre-Raphaelitism, in favour of a sequence of 'isms' – Realism, Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism – that originated in Paris and New York rather than London. What might come as more of surprise to Victorianists of a more literary bent, however, whose research is characterised by a tradition of rigorous, contextualised close

reading, is how little attention some of their art historical peers have paid to the formal and material qualities of the Victorian painting they discuss. Paul Barlow's remarkable and ambitious *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (2005) poses a significant and successful challenge to all of that.

Barlow wisely begins his book with an account of some of the perceived problems with Millais from a contemporary art historiographical perspective still dominated by presuppositions derived from Modernism. (Modernism is here to be understood both in thematic and formal terms, as art engaging with the most contemporary issues, with the particular problems and possibilities inherent in its preferred media, and that sought to be avant-garde, rather than revivalist or *retardaire* in idiom.) With these still dominant criteria in mind, Barlow frankly acknowledges the apparent discrepancy between Millais and his more conventionally Modernist peers. For example, Barlow documents how many of Millais' French contemporaries, such as Courbet, Manet and Monet, were rebelling against the social and pictorial expectations of traditional art institutions, such as the Paris Salon, and focussing their energies upon developing new visual idioms to engage with the unprecedented forms of modernity then emerging in the most recently constructed neighbourhoods in Paris. At the same moment, Barlow reveals, Millais was abandoning his early, more vanguard Pre-Raphaelite credentials to become a Royal Academician, simultaneously turning his attention to aristocratic portraiture and crowd-pleasing pictures of little girls in mob cabs. One of these, *Bubbles*, was later successfully employed in a Pears soap advertising campaign. As Barlow concisely puts it on the first page of *Time Present*, and in terms implicitly deriving from Clement Greenberg's still influential accounts of Abstract Expressionist painting, if Manet and Monet are undoubtedly 'modern' according to most contemporary art historians, in the eyes of a significant number of Millais' contemporaries and our own, the painter's work was pre-eminently 'kitsch', which is to say, 'finicky, prissy', and 'literary' (1).¹

Time Present also does not shy away from including two oft-repeated anecdotes relating to Millais' private life and professional self-assessment which seem at first to bear out this negative critical assessment. In the first, we find the painter marrying Ruskin's ex-wife, Effie, and raising together eight children, causing him to abandon his earlier Pre-Raphaelitism in order to come to terms with the debasing but financially necessary requirements of patrons aristocratic, popular, sentimental and imperial. In the second, we find Millais bursting into disillusioned tears on seeing the juxtaposition of his later and earlier work at his 1886 Grosvenor Gallery retrospective (2, 168).

Barlow acknowledges the seductive appeal of these myths of Millais's professional fate as a sort of Victorian 'morality story' (196). However, *Time Present* significantly rejects this caricature of the painter's biography and returns Millais' complex canvases to centre stage, making them newly appealing to an early twenty-first-century audience. Like many contemporary historians of Victorian art, Barlow does so by suggesting that Millais was a Modernist *avant-la-lettre*, demonstrating how the painter's 'insubordinate' works challenge both 'social and artistic hierarchies' (13, 19). For example, *Time Present* demonstrates that Millais shared with a wide range of high Modernist artists a passion for the kinds of pictorial flatness and insistent facture so adored by Greenberg's still influential generation, but whose taste for such formal features did not appear *ex nihilo* in second-empire Paris or post-war New York, as one might have imagined from Modernist critical rhetoric, but could also be found in the work of Velazquez, Gainsborough and Reynolds (2, 134).

Barlow's discriminating account of Millais' facture does not, however, simply reduce the painter's interest in the surface of his work to a proto-Modernist idea that the purity of the medium was the most appropriate message. Instead, *Time Present* provides a detailed account of the formal and thematic significance of the wide range of paint-marks on display in Millais' work, differentiating helpfully between the painter's more 'forceful brushwork' and his 'experiments with blocking, flattening and dissolving of objects' in line with contemporary understandings of the spirit world (29, 123). In his account of other works, Barlow also describes Millais' more 'Aesthetic' emphasis' on the 'calligraphic rapidity of painting' and the more general and productive tension, in individual canvases and across the painter's oeuvre, between 'violent and decorative' paint-marks (124, 161). In so doing, *Time Present* returns repeatedly to Millais' complex understanding of the nature of painting as a medium existing on the 'border between solidity and fragmentation, solid modelling' and decorative surface (127-8).

Barlow is equally careful in his account of Millais' relationship with Aestheticism: a vanguard late-Victorian art movement concerned with promoting formal and physical perfection at the expense of thematic, political, didactic or moral content. For example, *Time Present* finds in Millais a useful candidate to challenge the repeated leftist critique of Aestheticism as an elitist, hedonistic movement troublingly preoccupied with the objectification of the adolescent body. That is because Barlow successfully reveals the ways in which Millais' was an 'ironic exploration of the new pictorial sensualism' promoted by some Aesthetes, a painterly preoccupation with the particularities of his

medium that nevertheless sought to integrate 'inclusive humanist values', and an Aesthetic project in which viewers, far from being offered adolescent bodies for their erotic delectation, are never allowed to forget the 'struggle between vitality and decay' (100, 110, 145).

Aestheticism studies have also recently been focussed on the movement's significance for straight women and queer subjects of both genders. And perhaps with Elizabeth Prettejohn's witty, recent observation of the unexpected marginalisation of some straight male Aesthetes,² *Time Present* powerfully reconceptualises Millais' landscapes as more 'masculine version[s] of the Whistlerian nocturne', focussed on scenes in which Millais was as adept with a gun as a brush. In so doing, Barlow allows Millais a certain comical machismo, a 'virility and vitality', 'wilderness and masculinity', perhaps designed to appeal to those art historians who remain enamoured with the macho values emblematised by Rodin, Picasso or Pollock's brands of Modernism (80, 131, 160-1, 199).

In addition, *Time Present* also successfully demonstrates that central to much of Millais' supposedly sentimental work is an insistence upon the inevitably alienating 'tension' and 'awkwardness' that are encountered in any intimate relationship (15, 23). And, like the significantly better respected Dickens, who Millais knew well, Barlow understands Millais' art to be 'accommodating', 'inclusive', and complex, so that its obvious 'popular appeal' does not necessarily preclude its 'aesthetic sophistication' (38, 42, 74). Rather than seeing Millais' work as part of a common, supposedly Pre-Raphaelite project, *Time Present* also successfully excavates from Millais' canvasses the painter's own particular subjectivity. Barlow's readers thus learn much of the painter's complex relationships with predecessors such as Rembrandt and Turner, and peers such as Holman Hunt and Leighton (37, 146, 153).

In demonstrating the ways in which Millais' work 'seems to satisfy most of the traditional "formalist" criteria' for avant-garde art, then, *Time Present* is, as I have already noted, representative of an exciting, historiographically ambitious, current wave of revisionist Victorian art history (177). And like many of his peers, Barlow makes a strong case for Millais' art in relation to international Modernism.³ In so doing, *Time Present* further upends the supposedly 'opposed realms of avant-garde and kitsch' which so consistently structured accounts of Victorian art across much of the twentieth century (176).

Perhaps more significant still, however, is the way in which Barlow interprets Millais' work in the light of the culture in which the painter 'so fully and energetically participated' (112). Indeed, one of the most praiseworthy aspects of *Time Present* is the way in which it is embedded

in its nineteenth-century material. The overall argument moves effortlessly and swiftly between analyses at a near microscopic level to interpretations from an ambitiously global perspective; from detailed accounts of Millais's individual pentimenti to contextualisations of his work in relation to the then furthest reaches of the Victorian empire. If anything can dislodge the so-called 'horror victorianorum' that was one of the 'triumphs of modernism', it will be such visually, imaginatively, intellectually and emotionally compelling research (194).

Towards the end of *Time Present*, Barlow observes that Millais' work often hovers on the 'brink of several different possibilities' (201). Now that the presumptions of Modernism are finally starting to be overturned, and the new history of Victorian art that emerged in its wake is fast becoming mainstream, what future challenges might Millais' work pose for art historians? Perhaps for reasons of economy or copyright, perhaps because they are a hostage to Modernist fortune, neither *Bubbles* nor *Cherry Ripe* are reproduced in *Time Present*. Nor are they fully analysed in Barlow's otherwise near exhaustive account of the canvasses that he mentions. In spite of the sophisticated work of Carol Mavor on the eroticism of childhood and adolescence in Victorian photography, *Time Present* perhaps suggests that the time may not yet be right for the detailed analysis of apparent childhood eroticism in Millais' work.⁴ However, until that conceptual space can be carefully and self-consciously opened up, I would suggest, our understandings of Millais' historiography, of the painter's popular appeal amongst his peers, and of the kinds of queasiness some of his works generate amongst our own, will remain an unfinished project.

Jason Edwards

Endnotes

1. Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) and 'Modernist Painting' (1960-65), in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Geiger (eds), *Art In Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 529-41; 754-60.
2. Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Introduction', *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 10.
3. For example, see Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'The Modernism of Frederic Leighton', in David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (eds), *English Art 1860-1914: Modern Artists and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); and David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).
4. For example, see Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), and *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).