Charles Allston Collins's Paintings of 1850s

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Abstract:

This research paper presents an account of Charles Collins's major paintings of 1850s and of his complex and not yet fully understood relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It argues that Collins himself was regarded by contemporaries as a much more central figure than the one he seems to be intended to play in the narrative of his friend William Holman Hunt as evident in *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905). It shows that he was at least as troubled and tortured a spirit as any of the better-known members of the Brotherhood, and regarded as a standard bearer of the movement by many contemporary critics and commentators, even if the founding members narrated his participation in a way that seems meant to play down its importance or emphasise his lack of personal, sexual and artistic courage.

Introduction

The study is built on the premise that Collins is a talented painter/writer whose value has unfortunately or unjustly been obscured. It argues that his work deserves to be given a more central importance in our understanding of mid-Victorian culture than it has been so far. This process of recovering forgotten or 'lost' authors has often been allied with an analysis of canon formation. While taking some cues from this approach, the study has been throughout motivated by a fundamental curiosity not about Collins as a representative of a canonically under-represented group, but as a creative individual in the marketplace, who is fascinating because of his unrepresentativeness, and in the apparent oddity of his artistic trajectory.

In the current study, Collins's artistic legacy is surveyed in view of the main themes that inspired his paintings that attracted attention and critical response. As a Pre-Raphaelite, Collins showed interest in religious as well as secular subjects and his paintings reflect the main concerns and major sources of inspiration to the group.

Collins and Religious Themes

One of the essential struggles of PRB (Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) clearly concerned the attitude an idealistic young artist should have towards the established Church. The ritual of both the Roman and high extreme of the Anglican church clearly attracted Charles Collins and 'Puseyism' and the so-called Oxford Movement were at their height when he had visited the city with Hunt and Millais in the summer of 1850. Arguably, in her article 'Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites', Elizabeth Ludlow has given a significant weight to Collins's past in representing Pre-Raphaelite and Tractarian aesthetics: James Collinson had converted to 'Roman Catholicism under John Henry Newman, and his associates Charles Allston Collins and William Dyce were both committed High Anglicans. Like Millais, all three introduce Tractarian symbolism into their art'.[1] Nevertheless, while suspicion and prejudice against

[1] Elizabeth Ludlow, 'Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Oxford Movement*, ed. by Stewart J. Brown, Peter B. Nockles, and James Pereiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 427-438 (p. 428).

Catholicism was obviously part of the contemporary response in the Protestant press to the paintings and inferred ideals of the PRB, and to Collins's work in particular, it is notable that Hunt here and on another occasion in *Pre-Raphaelitism* quotes Millais in 1851 as explaining Collins's 'asceticism' as a reaction to rejection as an earthly lover:

> 'One objection to Collins was that none of the sleeping members knew him, but they suspected he was very much of a conventional man who would be out of his element with us.' 'But you see he is as good a little chap as ever lived, with no nonsense about him, except perhaps his new inclination to confession and fasting,' said Millais, 'yet he does not let strangers see his asceticism, which is only the result of his being hipped in love'. 'Yes,' I returned, 'but [Walter] Deverell was known to all of us. The real conclusion that I am driven to is, that we must let the nominal Body drift, and while we are working we must hope that true men will collect, and with these we may make a genuine artistic brotherhood, if discreetly chosen. Collins is happier, I think, in being left for this future combination rather than he would be in Collinson's place. His "Berengaria" and, still more, his "Convent Thoughts," with all their oversights, place him at once on a higher level in manipulation than other outsiders'.[2]

This is possibly Hunt's most nuanced account of Collins's relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which acknowledges that the Brotherhood itself represented at best a vague affiliation to an ideal that Collins both in skill and spirit could aspire to, both at that time and in the future. This allows therefore the question of 'Pre-Raphaelite' tendencies to be asked of his later work, in a different medium. The repeated use of the unusual term 'hipped' (crippled) in love is a curious one, given later rumours about Collins's impotence (the Conclusion, pp. 261-2). Various sources suggest that the subject of his unrequited love was one of the Rossetti sisters, Maria (1827-1876), who herself, following rejection by John Ruskin, went on to take Holy orders, joining the Anglican 'Society of All Saints Sisters of the Poor' in 1873.[3]

Renunciation was in fashion. So, S. M. Ellis argues that Collins at this time became 'imbued with the religious melancholy of the Rossetti sisters who both resigned the idea of marriage on earth for the consolations of the Spiritual Bridegroom': Christina Rossetti resigned James Collinson and Charles Cayley, and Maria Rossetti resigned Charles Collins and John Ruskin. Ellis and one of Wilkie Collins's biographers both note that Wilkie Collins became

[2] Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Vol. I, p. 268.

[3] E.g. Ellis. Anna Neale however, argues that there is no clear evidence for this, and suggests that the rumour comes from Millais's confused emotional state: 'Millais was distressed at the prospect of re-meeting a certain young woman when he was compelled to return to Oxford in 1852 to give evidence in a court case, and he did not totally overcome his emotions in this regard until September 1853, when he fell in love with Effie Ruskin' (Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, 2 Vols, I p. 93).

much concerned at this time, not so much for his brother's spiritual well-being but for his physical health, which he felt was likely to be affected by too much fasting. He tried to persuade Hunt and Millais not to worry Charles by attacking his eccentricities, as Millais was doing, but 'rather to leave him alone to his religious devices, until he tired of them. Within a few months, to his brother's relief, Charles became once again his normal self'.[4]

Collins's religious interest shaped his artistic visions and gave birth to paintings that have religious elements to them. Besides, the dissenting views among the brotherhood members paved the way for new trends to emerge. Meisel provides a valuable summation of Charley among the Pre-Raphaelites in the early 1850s:

> Interestingly, as the original group dissolved, its influence spread. Later it would spawn a second generation with different aims, built around an elder, Rossetti. The record of the years of Collins' participation is rich with evidence of collaborative support, but also competitive emulation.[5]

The rivalry between the members of the group is as important as the group's rebellion against the conventions and clichés of what they viewed as the worst of the traditional and commercialised 'Gallery' paintings of the Royal Academy Exhibitions.

One of the works in which religious contemplation found its way into is *Convent Thoughts*. Collins was, according to Anne Neale, the first of the Pre-Raphaelites 'to make explicit reference to medieval manuscripts in his work, and in *Convent Thoughts* he was also the first to demonstrate that medievalism and naturalism could be successfully integrated in a modern work'. [6] Hence, this integration may enhance an apparent coherence and consistency to the artistic strands of the products of early Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Collins exhibited his next major work, *Convent Thoughts*, at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1851. Here, Neale

[4] Ellis, pp. 59-60; Robinson, *Willkie Collins: A Biography*, p. 67.
[5] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety: Charles Allston Collins and the Electric Telegraph', p. 132.
[6] Anne Neale, 'Considering the lilies: Symbolism and revelation in *Convent Thoughts* (1851) by Charles Allston Collins (1828-1873)', *The British Art Journal*, 11 (2010), pp. 93-98 (p. 93).

argues that the rhetorical performance of the prosopopeia in the painting is designed to carry out the task of giving an imaginary voice to its pictorial environment, forcing the spectator to hypothesise completely about an absent person. In the catalogue (no. 493), the title was followed by two quotations. The first, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was 'Thrice-blessèd they, that master so their blood/To undergo such maiden pilgrimage', while the second was from Psalm 143:5: 'I mediate on all Thy works; I muse on the works of Thy hands'.[7] The painting depicts the chaste and contemplative life of a nun, but much deeper readings seem invited. The context of the Shakespeare quotation is important:

> Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires.
> Know of your youth. Examine well your blood—
> Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
> You can endure the livery of a nun,
> For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,
> To live a barren sister all your life,
> Chanting faint hymns to the cold, fruitless moon.
> Thrice-blessèd they that master so their blood
> To undergo such maiden pilgrimage.
> But earthlier happy is the rose distilled
> Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
> Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.[8]

Theseus does not present Hermia with a simple choice and he seems to be ambivalent himself about the renunciation of the world: 'Thrice-blessèd they that master so their blood' is positive about it, but the rose that is turned into perfume is 'earthlier happy' than the one which withers on the thorn. At the same time, earthly happiness only lasts a short time. Suzan Casteras believes that Shakespeare suggested a dilemma between actual death for the female protagonist in the play and a deathlike barren life of 'withering on the virgin thorn'. She also added that Collins, whom she describes as a High Anglican, may nonetheless be concurring with the view of the character Theseus in Shakespeare's drama that the young woman in question, Hermia, 'should carefully weigh the result of the sterile and inhibiting state of sequestered virtue in

[7] Neale, 'Considering the lilies: Symbolism and revelation in *Convent Thoughts* (1851)', (p. 93).
[8] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 5.

which she has undertaken to live. Whether or not the novice is pondering her plight is of course ultimately a matter of conjecture'.[9] It is one of the reasons the painting continues to trouble the viewer. Given what Millais, Hunt and Collins himself knew of the circumstances of its painting, it clearly carries with it a strong personal charge of dilemma.

Another major issue to be addressed in the painting arises from the main theme of Christina Rossetti's 'Convent Threshold' (1862), which can be set alongside Collins's *Convent Thoughts*. It is further evidence of the way in which the sexual mores of mid-nineteenth century early adulthood intertwined with those of the PRB:

> Your eyes look earthward, mine look up.
> I see the far-off city grand,
> Beyond the hills a watered land,
> Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand
> Of mansions where the righteous sup;
> Who sleep at ease among their trees,
> Or wake to sing a cadenced hymn
> With Cherubim and Seraphim;
> They bore the Cross, they drained the cup,
> Racked, roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from limb,
> They the offscouring of the world.
> The heaven of starry heavens unfurled.[10]

One of the poem's major themes is the binary contrast between heaven and earth, sin and virtue, pain and pleasure. In the poem Rossetti succeeds in suggesting that both heavenly and earthly routes can involve torture and peace in equal measure. Although the literal meaning of 'Convent Threshold' is the gateway to heaven, the narrator seems permanently poised in between.

Meisel accordingly argues that *Convent Thoughts* is a picture in which a young woman in religious dress is burdened with reconciling the claims of the spirit with those of nature and art. She turns from an illuminated book—which shows the Virgin and a Crucifixion—to meditate upon a withered passionflower, Nature's reminder of Christ's sacrifice and of the

[9] Susan P. Casteras, 'Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices', *Victorian Studies*, 24 (1981), 157-184 (pp. 172-3).
[10] R. W. Crump, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, 2 Vols (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), I, p. 62.

sacrificial meaning of a life of religious seclusion.

> Both the book and the flower speak of an absent male, both divine and imperilled, a figure of supreme power suffering extremity. But the walled garden, the nun's ambivalent stance, the vigor of nature, her novice's dress, also speak of an absent male who is secular and ordinary, the figure whose absence the choice of the cloister entail.[11]

Two pencil studies of the design for *Convent Thoughts* are archived in the British Museum. The first one is of 'a lady walking among lilies, with hands clasped and eyes raised, the design enclosed in a Gothic arch', and the second one shows 'a lady standing in a grass plot between ranks of lilies, one of which she bends down to hold in her hands, her figure is reflected in water, on which water-lilies bloom':[12]

Fig. 13: A study for *Convent Thoughts*. [Online display at] British Museum

[11] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', pp. 112-168 (p. 140).

[12] <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=740408&partId=1&searchText=Charles+Collins&page=1> [accessed 15 February 2018].

Fig. 14: A study for *Convent Thoughts*. [Online display at] British Museum

Below is the final version of the painting, which is currently dedicated a permanent place at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford:

Fig. 15: Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts* (1851), Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Picture: S. M. Al-Maliky, 2015. Reproduced with kind permission.

In an example of the artistic collaboration of these years that I have emphasised, the beautiful frame to the painting was actually designed by Millais,[13] with the single stem of Madonna lilies in high relief at each side, and inscribed '*Sicut Lilium*' at the top. The origins of the medieval-style script, and the naturalistic flowers as narrow vertical manuscripts, were introduced to Millais by Edward La Trobe Bateman (1816-1897), who has been identified by Anne Neale as 'an illuminator and botanical illustrator who was, like Collins, a friend of Millais and a close associate of the PRB'.[14] The '*Sicut Lilium*', together with the Madonna lilies, obviously evokes the Virgin Mary, as these words begin the passage that traditionally links her with this flower: 'As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters' (*Song of Solomon* 2:2).[15] There was an alternative title, '*Silent Lilium*', under which Collins's patron apparently bought the work. According to a label on the back of the painting, as cited in the files of the Ashmolean Museum, there was a note affixed by Thomas Combe, the purchaser:

> For this 'Silent Lilium' I gave only 150 pounds and it was the largest sum Charles Collins ever made from a picture. [. . . I]t was done with great labour and perseverance. He worked very slowly and I know that a flower of one of the lilies occupied a whole day—the flowers were all painted from nature in the Clarendon Press Quadrangle.[16]

Not long after the 1851 exhibition opened, Collins's picture was singled out for comment and caricature in *Punch.*[17] The critic asserts that the painting offends because it tells ugly rather than ideal truths, but is not otherwise very negative. It does however read the painting as advocating the cloistered life and misses the ambivalence and tension in the epigraphs and the subtlety of the response Neale, Casteras and Meisel offer, as discussed above:

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[13] Reported in *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of Royal Academy*, vol. 1, p. 100 that on 1 April 1851 Millais wrote to Mr Combe: 'I have designed a frame for Charles' painting of "Lilies," which I expect, will be acknowledged to be the best frame in England'.
[14] *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, I, pp. 93-4.
[15] Neale, p. 94.
[16] Cited in Casteras, p. 172.
[17] *Punch*, 'untitled', 17 May 1851, p. 219.

Our dear and promising young friends, the Pre-Raphaelites, deserve special commendation for the courage with which they have dared to tell some most disagreeable truths on their canvasses of this year. Mr. Ruskin was quite right in taking up the cudgels against the *Times* on this matter. The pictures of the P.R.B. *are* true, and that's the worst of them. Nothing can be more wonderful than the truth of Collins's representation of the '*Alisma Plantago*,' except the unattractiveness of the demure lady, whose botanical pursuits he has recorded under the name of CONVENT THOUGHTS. Whether by the passion flower he has put into her hand, he meant to symbolise the passion with which Messrs. Lacey, Drummond, and Spooner are inspired against the conventual life, or the passion the young lady is in with herself, at having shut up a heart and life capable of love and charity, and good works, and wifely and motherly affections and duties, within that brick wall at her back–whether the flower regarded, and the book turned aside from, are meant to imply that the life of nature is a better study than the legend of a saint, and that, therefore, the nun makes a mistake when she shuts herself up in her cloister, we are not sufficiently acquainted with Mr. Collins's ways of thinking to say. By the size of the lady's head he no doubt meant to imply her vast capacity of brains–while by the utter absence of form and limb under the robe, he subtilely [sic] conveys that she has given up all thoughts of making a figure in the world.

CONVENT THOUGHTS.

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Fig. 16: *Punch*'s new review and cartoon of *Convent Thoughts,* 17 May 1851, p. 219

The critic directs our attention to the idea that the *Convent Thoughts* represents an unnatural sacrifice of human desires in the interests of a domestic wifely future. The problem remained unspecified to the novice, which reveals anxiety chronically unsorted, an ambiguity of feeling. It might possibly unravel the conflict between 'wifely and motherly affections and duties' represented by the flower in one hand, and spiritual gain/heavenly paradise represented by the devotional book in the other. The satire also reveals that the 'Pre-Raphaelites' were not without their supporters in the press, one of whom was the influential art critic John Ruskin.

John Ruskin began working as an art critic with the publication of five volumes of *Modern Painters* between 1843 and 1860: these volumes were a comprehensive discussion of the principles of painting.[18] Ruskin wrote to protest the attack on the PRB in *The Times* of 3 May, which contained the following lines:

> We cannot censure at present, as amply or as strongly as we desire to do, that strange disorder of the mind or the eyes which continues to rage with unabated absurdity among a class of juvenile artists who style themselves 'P.R.B.,' [. . .] Their faith seems to consist in an absolute contempt for perspective and the known laws of light and shade, an aversion to beauty in every shape, and a singular devotion to the minute

[18] David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, 2 Vols (London: A Mandarin Paperback, 1960), II, p. 968.

> accidents of their subjects, [. . .]. Mr. Millais, Mr. Hunt, Mr. Collins, and in some degree Mr. Brown, [. . .] have undertaken to reform the arts on these principles.[19]

Ruskin's defence of the whole group actually centres on his response to Collins's painting, which continues the joking tone of *The Times*, but then declares the painting's value to lie, not in its spiritual content, but in the botanical accuracy of the plants:

> Let me state, in the first place, that I have no acquaintance with any of these artists, and very imperfect sympathy with them. No one [. . .] will suspect me of daring to encourage them in their Romanist and Tractarian tendencies. [. . .] I have no particular respect for Mr. Collins' lady in white, because her sympathies are limited by a dead wall, or divided between some gold fish and a tadpole (the latter Mr. Collins may, perhaps, permit me to suggest, en passant, as he is already half a frog, is rather too small for his age). But I happen to have a special acquaintance with the water plant, Alisma Plantago, among which the said gold fish are swimming; and, as I never saw it so thoroughly or so well drawn, I must take leave to remonstrate with you when you say sweepingly, that these men 'sacrifice truth, as well as feeling to eccentricity.' For as a mere botanical study of the water lily and Alisma, as well as of the common lily and several other garden flowers, this picture would be invaluable to me, and I heartily wish it were mine.[20]

This is almost to praise the scientific properties of the painting.[21] Ruskin goes on to suggest that in fact the Pre-Raphaelites are not retrogressive at all, but 'intend to surrender no advantage which the knowledge or inventions of the present time can afford to their art'. He interprets their intention as being historical only in the sense that in striving to represent honestly what they see in front of them they were doing what all artists did before Raphael's time, after whose time the convention began 'to paint fair pictures rather than represent stern facts, of which the consequence has been that from Raphael's time to this day historical art has been in acknowledged decadence'.[22] Ruskin's defence continued in another letter before the end of May, in which his discussion concludes with Collins's picture and a very strong endorsement

[19] 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy, (Private View) First Notice', *The Times*, 3 May 1851, p. 8.
[20] 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *The Times*, p. 8.
[21] The *Alisma plantago* had previously been examined by Ruskin in some detail under the heading "The Lamp of Beauty" in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), discussing many different water plants and their relations. Anna Neale suggests that a 'probable reason for valuing the plant depicted here [in *Convent Thoughts*] is that the arrowhead trefoil form of the leaf, most obvious in the lower left corner of the painting, can be read as "pointing the way" to the Trinity' (pp. 96-97).
[22] Neale, pp. 96-97.

of the movement:

> [A]ll I can say is, that instead of the 'pilgrimage' of Mr. Collins's maiden over a plank and round a fishpond, that old pilgrimage of Christiana and her children towards the place where they should 'look the Fountain of Mercy in the face' would have been more to the purpose in these times. And so I wish them all heartily good speed, believing in sincerity that if they temper the courage and energy which they have shown in the adoption of their system with patience and discretion in pursuing it, and if they do not suffer themselves to be driven by harsh or careless criticism into rejection of the ordinary means of obtaining influence over the minds of others, they may, as they gain experience, lay in our England the foundations of a school of art nobler than the world has seen for 300 years.[23]

Ruskin was not Collins's only defender in the press. Writing anonymously in *Bentley's Miscellany* on 1 June, Wilkie Collins gave a long account of the whole exhibition, mixing serious critical appraisal with praise, particularly in his account of the paintings by the PRB, and in particular his brother's *Convent Thoughts*:

> Mr. Collins's picture, in the Middle Room, is entitled Convent Thoughts and represents a novice standing in a convent garden, with a passion-flower, which she is contemplating, in one hand, and an illuminated missal, open at the crucifixion, in the other. The various flowers and the water-plants in the foreground are painted with the most astonishing minuteness and fidelity to Nature–we have all the fibres in a leaf, all the faintest varieties of bloom in a flower, followed through every gradation. The sentiment conveyed by the figure of the novice is hinted at, rather than developed, with deep poetic feeling–she is pure, thoughtful, and subdued, almost to severity. Briefly, this picture is one which appeals, in its purpose and conception, only to the more refined order of minds–the general spectator will probably discover little more in it, than dexterity of manipulation. Mr. Millais aims less high, and will therefore be more readily understood. If we were to characterise, and distinguish between, the three artists who have produced the[se paintings], in a few words, we should say that Mr. Collins was the superior in refinement, Mr. Millais in brilliancy, and Mr. Hunt in dramatic power.[24]

In the *Athenaeum*, the reviewer again singled out Collins's painting, in a way that shows that its combination of scientific accuracy, deep symbolism, and its capturing in a modern setting of the eternal spiritual dilemma had struck a chord with spectators:

> Of the Pre-Raphaelite brethren little need now be said, since what has been already said was said in vain. Mr. Charles Collins is this year the most prominent among this band in 'Convent Thoughts' (493). There is an earnestness in this work worth a thousand artistic hypocrisies which insist on the true rendering of a buckle or a belt while they allow the beauties of the human form divine to be lost sight of.[25]

Anna Casteras, alive to this earnestness, accordingly discusses the painting in terms of the

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[23] John Ruskin, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Artists', *The Times*, 30 May 1851, p. 8.

[24] [Wilkie Collins,] 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Bentley's Miscellany,* 29 (1851), 617-627. The praise was not unmixed with criticism: 'The faults of these painters are common to all three. [. . .] For instance, all the lines and shapes in Mr. Collins's convent garden are as straight and formal as possible; but why should he have selected such a garden for representation? Would he have painted less truly and carefully, if he had painted a garden in which some of the accidental sinuosities of nature were left untouched by the gardener's spade and shears?'.

[25] *Athenaeum,* 'Untitled', 7 June 1851, p. 609.

Victorian feminist movement and the idea of religious commitment, which many well-educated women of that period considered. Her discussion shows that Collins's painting had a strong contemporary relevance, through its representation of the critical moment experienced by many young women of Collins's generation, as they considered joining the recently established Anglican sisterhoods in England.

Anglican Sisterhoods were founded in the early 1840s: 6 sisterhoods were established between 1845 and 1851; 9 more of these monasteries were officially started between 1851 and 1858; and 15 more were added between 1870 and 1900. Many cities, all over England, were affected by this widespread phenomenon, including London, Oxford, Leeds, and Devonport, which both predated and outnumbered the subsequent reinstitution of religious communities for men.[26] Between 1845 and 1855 the continual growth of sisterhoods attested to the fact that they served a real social need: they ministered to the poor, the homeless, the ill, the elderly, and the unfortunate. Undoubtedly genuine religious vocation, in many cases, was the primary impetus, with the desire to be of service to humanity a secondary and interdependent motive.[27] While there were clearly supporters of the idea of sisterhoods, many Victorians were appalled by such a prospect, which to them was an unnatural cloistered life and an abdication of family ties. In a society that idolised the sanctity of the family and of motherhood, a myriad of Victorians did not believe that holy celibacy was a more honourable spiritual state than matrimony or that 'women possessed any right to dedicate their bodies and souls to God instead of to a husband'. The Victorians were also often 'sceptical of sisterhoods because they doubted the efficacy of such a retreat or isolation from society'.[28]

This was a public as well as a private subject, Casteras shows, and resulted in the mid-

[26] Casteras, p. 160.
[27] Casteras, p. 162.
[28] Casteras, pp. 164-5.

Victorian period in a wealth of pictorial imagery of nuns and of nunneries. Through their paintings, Victorian artists attempted to generate partly voyeuristic, partly sentimental attitudes towards this topic. Revealing a great deal about the Victorian psyche, these artists explore numerous forms of quasi-religious imagery with considerable ingenuity from the 1840s through to the end of the century. Virginity, docility, dedication, spirituality, and modesty, these were the projected qualities of the nun in the Victorian era, representing an artistic stereotype of womanhood of this period. The majority of nuns depicted in this regard were quite pretty, but at the same time shown as apparently unattainable; thus, contemporary artists tried to reflect a distinct attitude towards the subject and underscored certain prevailing beliefs about repressed female sexuality. This worked 'to reinforce the Protestant belief that no woman could possibly prefer the life of a nun to that of a wife and mother'.[29] Casteras suggests that the novice in Collins's painting may have been a member of the Society of the Holy and Undivided Trinity at Oxford, which was where he worked on and completed the picture, and might have seen or known of the sisterhood. Grey robes were worn in other Anglican nunneries, but light grey seems to have been reserved for probationary stages at Oxford and elsewhere:

> Using [. . .] biblical allusion, Collins places a Madonna-like figure amidst virginal lilies as she meditates on God's work—her physical surroundings—in this modern *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden of chastity. The rose with thorns growing in this garden contrasts implicitly with the thornless Virgin, who was exempt from the consequences of original sin. The somber postulant marks two places in her missal with her fingers: one is an image of the crucified Christ, the Holy Bridegroom to whom she is now promised, and the other is a scene of the Nativity, perhaps an allusion to the role of mother and wife which she has spurned by electing to become a sister. As with other representations of this type, the young woman is isolated from representations type, young the outside world in a religious inner sanctum bordered by a high brick wall that restricts her sphere of action and forcibly closes out all reminders of the past. The artist uses several gold fish and tadpoles in the pool on this tiny island of chastity to contrast their procreative state with the young woman's virginity. The beautiful blossoms of agapanthus, lobelia, fuchsia, and other flowers similarly confirm the luxuriant, colorful vitality of nature, thus reiterating the contrast between the setting's bountiful lushness and the woman's austere garments and existence.[30]

Interpreted in this light, it is clear why Collins's painting provoked such strong reactions, as well as illuminating in a particularly poignant way aspects of his own artistic and personal

[29] Susan P. Casteras, 'Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists', (pp. 157-8).

[30] Casteras, 'Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices', p. 172.

dilemmas in a way that is clearly indicative of his own repressed sexual and artistic identity.

To look next at Collins's 1852 picture, *Beati Mundo Corde* ('blessed are the pure in heart') is to see some of the sentimentalising ideas Casteras warns of, brought into play. The painting is archived at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California. It has almost photographic characteristics in the precision of the facial expressions of the young nun.[31]

Fig. 17: Charles Allston Collins, *Beati Mundo Corde*, 1852, [Online display at] The Huntington Library, Art Collections.

Here, the sense of tension is much less, the novice or probationer is much younger, and the rich dialogue between natural 'background' and human 'foreground' is negligible. The quotation below the image— 'Let no earth-stain thy robe of glory mar:/ Wrap it around they bosom undefiled'—comes from John Keble's *Lyra Innocentium: Thoughts in Verse on Christian Children, Theirs Ways and Privileges* (1846), from poem 11, called 'White Apparel. The

[31]<http://emuseum.huntington.org/objects/4687/beati-mundo-corde?ctx=8ae92749-739a-4865-83b1-5ce4f1a6c547&idx=11> [accessed 9 March 2018].

Chrisom'.[32] John Keble, (1792–1866), was a 'Church of England clergyman and poet'; he 'remained as vicar of Hursley for thirty years until his death'; his volume of poetry, *Lyra innocentium* 'displays more metrical variety, greater lyricism, and in many respects a brighter tone than his earlier poetry'.[33]

Something similar could be said of another picture of this year, *The Devout Childhood of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary*, see below, which was exhibited at the RA Exhibition. It shows the much venerated and short-lived Catholic saint Elizabeth (1207-31), who was married at fourteen to Ludwig IV of Thuringia and widowed at twenty, and famous for charitable work from her childhood, kneeling at a closed wooden door in praying position. Roses growing up the wall relate to the miracle of the roses, which was a vision shown to her future husband, when she opened her cloak, which was filled with bread for the local poor. Instead of the bread being revealed, miraculously only red and white roses could be seen. The door is symbolic and also iconic, because it is the 'same' door at Worcester Park Farm that Holman Hunt used in his studies for *The Light of the World*.

[32] John Keble, *Lyra Innocentium: Thoughts in Verse on Christian Children, Their Ways, and Their Privileges* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), p. 276.

[33] Perry Butler, 'Keble, John (1792–1866)', *ODNB*, online edn, Jan 2006 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15231> [accessed 14 August 2017].

Fig. 18: Charles Allston Collins, *The Devout Childhood of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary*, 1852.

Collins planned to exhibit the painting alongside *Convent Thoughts* in 1851 but it was not finished (Hunt's painting was itself not finished until 1853 or exhibited until 1854). The frame was also designed by Millais. Another important feature of the painting is the fact that the artist's model was the young Elizabeth ('Lizzie') Siddal, the milliner's daughter who had been 'discovered' by Walter Deverell, and painted by a number of the PRB, before becoming the object of D. G. Rossetti's affection and eventually, though already ill and dying, his wife. This painting was lost from view until recently, when it was offered for sale in 2015 by the Maas Gallery. The *New York Times* wrote:

> The 1851-52 painting 'The Devout Childhood of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary' by Charles Allston Collins — friend of the painters John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt — is an even more spectacular discovery, being just about the only early Pre-Raphaelite school painting to have re-emerged in recent years. Retaining its original Millais-designed frame, and featuring a young Elizabeth Siddal as the model, the painting was made just three years after the foundation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and is offered by the Maas Gallery of London at €2.5 million, or about $2.7 million.[34]

Collins and Medieval England

Among Collins's works on the 1850s, *Berengaria's Alarm* stands out. The painting shows 'Queen Berengaria, wife of Richard I ("the Lionheart"), terrified that her husband might have

[34] Scott Reyburn, 'European Fine Art Fair Showcases Shaker Furniture', *New York Times*, 12 March 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/13/arts/design/european-fine-art-fair-showcases-shaker-furniture.html > [accessed 9 August 2017].

been killed in the Crusades after she is offered his belt, or "girdle" for sale by a peddler'.[35]

Fig. 12: Charles Allston Collins, *Portrait of Berengaria's Alarm for the Safety of her Husband* (1850)

'Berengaria' reveals that its painter actively participated in historical cross-cultural dialogues, but as Meisel records, the hostile press reviewers were more interested in linking Collins's work with other members of the young rebels:

> Berengaria's Alarm for the Safety of Her Husband, Richard Coeur de Lion, awakened by the Sight of His Girdle Offered for Sale at Rome, to give it its full title, was the first of Collins' paintings to earn him recognition as one of the brash and offensive little band that included Millais and Hunt. In the year of Millais' *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop*, the *Athenaeum* called Berengaria 'Another instance of perversion,' while the *Times*, finding it 'in the same grotesque style' as Hunt's *Converted British Family*, suggested it 'might pass for an illuminated chessboard'.[36]

The grouping of the figures (one stooping, one kneeling) around the strong horizontal lines of the table, which is being used as a workbench, and the distant vistas, are actually quite similar to Millais's controversial *Christ in the House of His Parents*, which was severely attacked in the press by Charles Dickens in the *Household Words* leader for 15 June 1850, titled 'Old Lamps for New Ones'. Here Dickens takes the opportunity to reduce PRB ideals to 'the notion of ignoring all that has been done for the happiness and elevation of mankind during three or

[35]Hawksley, *Charles Dickens' Favorite Daughter*, p. 58.
[36] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', pp. 112-168 (p. 137).

four centuries of slow and dearly-bought amelioration' and a 'great retrogressive principle'.[37] This allows him to satirise several contemporary movements in religion and culture that seem to look backwards as well as forwards. Eventually after his insulting remarks about the painting, Millais and Dickens were reconciled after a dinner in 1855 hosted by Harriet Collins at Hanover Terrace, at which both Charley and Wilkie were present. This was following a conversation about Millais's painting that year, *The Rescue*, which Dickens admired and felt was more in tune with the modern progressive spirit of *Household Words*. He sent him a copy of volume I of *Household Words* containing R. H. Horne's essay on 'The Fire Brigade of London', as well as 'Old Lamps for New Ones'.[38] The conflict between progressive and retrogressive principles in society and art is one that can easily be found in Collins's later writing, as subsequent sections will show.

Collins had read about the incident of Berengaria in Agnes Strickland's *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840-48) and the exhibition catalogue quotes this significant passage: 'The Provencal traditions declare that here Berengaria first took the alarm that some disaster had happened to her lord, from seeing a belt of jewels offered for sale which she knew had been in his possession when she parted from him'. The peddler, who supplied the short title by which the painting was later known, is not mentioned in this source, but as inadvertent messenger, and a presence that underlines the absence of the king, he has a significant function:

> The absent person in Berengaria—a legendary distillation of male power and authority—is represented by the rich and colourful but sadly drooping girdle, and also by the embroidery that echoes its colours and displays the Ricardian emblem of a lion rampant. These lie just under the midline of the painting, between the Queen and the peddler. The absence of the figure these tokens represent is emphasized by the threefold division of the back wall, like a triptych, with two of its openings occupied or covered. The central third opening, arched, fully bounded, and flanked by the two principal figures, stands empty except for the garden backdrop. It appears almost like a vacant frame.[39]

[37]< http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-265.html> [accessed 08 August 2017].
[38] *Letters of Charles Dickens,* VII, p. 517& nn.
[39] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety: Charles Allston Collins and the Electric Telegraph', p. 138.

While the painting establishes links with medieval England, the detail and patterning in the floor, the tapestries, the embroidery work and the illuminated manuscripts seems to be clearly biblical, signalling the affiliation with the 'Pre-Raphaelite' tradition. The tapestries in the background show two scenes from the life of the Old Testament Joseph, where the son of Jacob is given a coat of many colours (Genesis), before his jealous brothers arrange for him to disappear. It is interesting that although, as Meisel says, male authority figures are doubly absent in the drama, Collins himself is quite boldly written into the painting, as his name and the year '1850' are worked into the embroidery around the base of the stool of the seated lady-in-waiting.

Collins's Contemporary Themes

While his *Saint Elizabeth* and *Beati Mundo* of 1852 and *Convent Thoughts* of 1851 form a trio of paintings showing high formal devotion in young girls, with more or less Anglican or 'Romish' drama and tensions surrounding their renunciation of worldly affairs as brides of the absent figure of Christ, the painting for which Collins was particularly praised in the 1852 Exhibition was in a wholly different fashion. In this year, he was particularly applauded for his landscape picture, the minutely-detailed view of Regent's Park as seen from a house in Sussex Place: *May, in the Regent's Park*. As the Exhibition opened in May, it had the effect of seeming very topical.

Fig. 19: Charles Allston Collins, *Portrait* of *May, in the Regent's Park* (1851). [Online Display at] Tate Gallery.

Because it depicts visual phenomena from the fixed position of a room, the painting has a photographic quality, and seems like camera work. The solitary figures of a father walking a child might suggest and reflect an appetite for new social and visual experiences. The painting is 'a view eastward across Regent's Park, probably taken from a window in Collins' family home at 17 Hanover Terrace':

> it is a kind of setting much used in the novels of the artist's brother, Wilkie Collins. [. . .] Collins did sell it, apparently to a Mr Crooke of Cumberland Terrace on the other side of the park, for £100.[40]

The emptiness of the canvas, with grazing sheep as obvious signs of life as the human figures, is remarkable. Or rather, the canvas is full-of plants and growing foliage, that renders the occupation and concerns of the only human figures, almost irrelevant.

It is clear from the various canvasses that the combination or brotherhood of Hunt, Millais and Collins were working on in the early 1850s that the dialectic between contemporary and progressive versus reactionary, pre-Reformation thinking about spiritual no less than

[40] For more information, see Malcolm Warner in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Leslie Parris (London: Tate Gallery in association with Allen Lane and Penguin, 1984), pp. 101-102.

worldly matters was one which absorbed and worried them. Millais's son describes them at work:

> From ten in the morning till dark the artists saw little of each other, but when the evenings 'brought all things home' they only assembled 'to talk deeply on Art, drink strong tea, and discuss and criticise each other's pictures'. [41]

Collins seems not to have completed any paintings for display in 1853 or 1854, but in 1855 was still working hard in collaboration with Hunt and Millais, but in particular with the latter. All seem to have had difficulties in completing their work on time, given their meticulous way of going to work, and in 1855 it is clear that Collins was of use to Millais as a collaborator:

> In those days Millais was generally behindhand with his principal picture, and so much so with [*The Rescue*], that he greatly curtailed his sleep during the last week; and on the last day but one began to work as soon as it was day-light, and worked on all through the night and following day till the van arrived for the picture. (Mr. Ruskin defended the appearance of haste, which to him seemed to betray itself in the execution of this picture, contending that it was well suited to the excitement and action of the subject.) His friend Charles Collins sat up with him and painted the fire-hose, whilst Millais worked at other parts; and in the end a large piece of sheet-iron was placed on the floor, upon which a flaming brand was put and worked from, amidst suffocating smoke.[42]

This was, according to Millais's son, 'one of the very rare occasions when Millais permitted anyone to touch his work', but it is a significant one.[43]

On 13 July 1855 Millais married Euphemia ('Effie') Chalmers, another famous artist's muse. Collins was one of the first visitors to see the newly-married couple and at his request Millais's wife agreed to be painted by him and she sat for him every day for a fortnight. Then, however, seeing that 'the picture made very slow progress, and that she was presented as looking out of the window of a railway carriage—a setting that would have vulgarised Venus herself—she refused to sit any longer, and the picture was never finished'. [44] Collins's choice of a modern setting, showing Mrs Millais as someone able to travel alone by rail—as she had

[41] Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. I, p. 116.
[42] Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. I, p. 251.
[43] Cited in Ellis, p. 66
[44] Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. I, p. 288.

done since childhood—again seems to show something of the dialectic between ancient and modern typology in PRB thinking.

The Exhibition of 1855 seems to show a reversion on Collins's part, to the idea of a serious female portrait of lifelong piety and charitable deeds with *A Thought of Bethlehem* (whereabouts unknown). The contemporary Irish novelist and periodical contributor, Julia Kavanagh (1824-1877), from whom Collins derived his knowledge of the incident displayed, explains in *Women of Christianity* (1852) that the subject of the painting, Madame de Chantal had 'the passion of charity. The luxuries of her rank pained her; she could not bear to touch dainty food whilst the poor were starving [. . .] Madame de Chantal gave away not only the food from her plate', but 'everything it was hers to bestow, even to a ring from her finger, once that she had no money about her'.[45] *A Thought of Bethlehem* was apparently an attempt to explore Madame de Chantal's attitude towards bestowing alms upon the poor and clearly there is a contemporary theme here in that poverty, charity and women's role in Victorian society were all pressing social issues, albeit presented by Collins through refracted scenes. Luckily a description and analysis of the painting survives in Théophile Gautier's Exhibition notice of 1855:

> Under the title of *A Thought of Bethlehem* [Souvenir de Bethléem], M. Collins has actualised a passage in the life of Madame de Chantal. The pious lady, visiting a poor woman in childbed, is reminded of the birth of Christ in a stable: M. Collins' scene evokes the thought quite naturally. Barely sheltered by a lean-to covered in thatch, the young mother, lying on an unravelling grass mat and covered with a thin rag of stuff, holds up her infant whom she looks at with a liquid and tender eye. Behind her, a little girl strips and scatters marigolds [soucis]—sad flower of the poor—as if to celebrate the happy arrival of the newly born. Several bits of dead wood, first extinct, black embers clothed in a velvety white, are strewn on the ground, for there is no fireplace in this hut open to all the winds. Fortunately it is summer, and the sun plays among the transparent leaves. Otherwise, utter abandonment; no Saint Joseph, no ox nor ass breathing caresses on this little Jesus of wretchedness. But be easy; behind, Christian charity arrives in her nun's dress and, even as she walks, sewing a fustian vest, the first piece of the layette; this dear little angel will not die.[46]

[45] Julia Kavanagh, *Women of Christianity: Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1852), p. 169.
[46] Cited in Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', p. 142 [trans. Meisel].

Gautier, who describes the 'English School' as the most important in Europe after the French, goes on to put Collins in context:

> This painting is painted in the Gothic manner, dry and naive in the way that characterises the English Pre-Raphaelite sect, of which the leading lights are Messrs. Millais and W. Hunt. The detail, rendered with an extreme minuteness, possess a surprising reality, without, however, destroying the sentimental effects of the work.[47]

It is clear from the above critical excerpt that the surprising reality of the Pre-Raphaelite focus on details and the sympathetic effect of the whole attracted Gautier's attention and he acknowledges them as well as recognising the affective importance of what is not there: the comforting presence in that other scene, in Bethlehem, and most significantly, the absent father, the New Testament Joseph. According to Meisel, Collins faced difficulties in achieving this painting:

> Whether the impediments Collins encountered in painting *A Thought of Bethlehem* had to do with the subject is not immediately apparent. The historical Madame de Chantal was a woman of ardent piety and powerful mind, a friend of Francis de Sale, who after fulfilling her duties in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French society as daughter, wife, and mother, gave her life to charity, founded an order, and achieved sainthood. Collins' painting offered a typifying incident in her life [. . .]. He cited it in the Royal Academy catalog: 'A poor strange woman **** was taken with the pains of labour in the course of her wandering; she sought and found refuge in a stable, where she gave birth to her child. Madame de Chantal walked a considerable distance in order to visit her **** All the time she was engaged in her pious office, Madame de Chantal confessed that she thought of the infant Jesus in the stable of Bethlehem'.[48]

In showing Mme Chantal not yet arrived at the new mother's bedside, Collins avoids the kneeling configuration and its direct archetypal implications, and instead gives us the picture of the 'thought' of Mme Chantal as she walks, likening in her mind the hut to the stable of the Nativity. The fact is, in the incomplete domestic trinity of man, woman, and child, Madame de Chantal cannot supply the missing figure.[49]

In spite of Gautier's enthusiasm, *A Thought of Bethlehem* was respectfully but unenthusiastically received by English critics. However, it was again accompanied in the

[47] Théophile Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe, 1855*, First Series (Paris: Michel Levy Freres, 1855), p. 80. Trans. J. Drew.
[48] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', p. 141.
[49] Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', p. 141.

gallery by a painting with a modern theme, which uses the figure of a musing female to comment on contemporary affairs, in an agricultural setting. This he had been working on for several years, and was entitled *The Good Harvest of 1854*, see below:

Fig. 20: Charles Allston Collins, *The Good Harvest of 1854*

The 1850s saw several bountiful harvests in England, following a series of disastrous harvests leading to shortages and famine in the 'hungry forties'. This painting celebrates the wonderful harvest of 1854. Collins adds symbolic dimensions by painting the child holding a bound sheaf of wheat, both the traditional symbol of peace and the symbol of Ceres, classical goddess of abundance and agriculture. The ivy on the wall is an attribute of the wine god Bacchus. Indirectly on this occasion, Collins may be presenting the bread and wine of the Eucharist in conjunction with the picture of the serious-faced girl, meditating beside the same Worcester Park Farm doorway that seems, like the wall in *Convent Thoughts*, to show the hard and unforgiving struggles of the world.[50] It was exhibited in the shadowy backwater of the National

[50] See 'Historical Context Note',<[http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O15025/the-good-harvest-of-1854-oil-painting-collins-charles-allston/ >[accessed 9 August 2017].

Gallery's Octagon Room at the Exhibition, and Ruskin commented in his *Academy Notes* that '[t]here is much careful painting in this little study, and it was a wicked thing to put it into a room in which, while its modest subject could draw no attention, its good painting was of necessity utterly invisible'.[51] According to Ellis, in a simplistic account:

> [T]his was the last picture Collins ever exhibited, for henceforth his vacillation and dissatisfaction with his art had become an obsession with him. He would commence a new painting and before it was half-finished he would doubt its worth, become disgusted, and cast the unlucky canvas on a heap of its elder discarded brethren, though his delicate touch with tone and tint was ever exquisite.[52]

This seems an unjust and exaggerated account of the creative process by which Collins and the other Pre-Raphaelites worked, spending considerable time in field work over one or more seasons, painting from nature, and finding backdrops and backgrounds for themes that took time and pains to discover. Most paintings had more than one study, and it is not accurate to assume that these were necessarily unfinished paintings.

Ellis is possibly taking his line from Millais's son, who, following Hunt, likes to find some kind of contrasting moral lesson in Collins's progress in painting. John Guille Millais writes, for example, of the productive summer of 1851:

> At this time Charles Collins was engaged on the background for a picture, the subject of which he had not yet settled upon. He got as far as placing upon the canvas an old shed with broken roof and sides, through which the sunlight streamed; with a peep outside at leaves glittering in the summer breeze; and at this he worked week after week with ever varying ideas as to the subject he should ultimately select. At last he found a beautiful one in the legend of a French peasant, who, with his family, outcast and starving, had taken refuge in the ruined hut and were ministered to by a saint. The picture, however, was never finished. Poor Collins gave up painting in despair and drifted into literature; and when the end came, Holman Hunt, who was called in to make a sketch of his friend, was much touched to find this very canvas (then taken off the strainers) lying on the bed beside the dead man. The tragedy of vanished hopes![53]

It is likely that Collins's *A Thought of Bethlehem* embodied the background and subject described here, and whatever painting Hunt saw unfinished in 1873 was a study for it.

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[51] *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols *(*London: George Allen, 1904), XIV: *Academy Notes. Notes on Prout and Hunt and Other Art Criticisms*, p. 29.
[52] *The Works of John Ruskin*, XIV, p. 66.
[53] Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, Vol. I, p. 133.

Final Remarks

Nevertheless, enough has been shown in this account of Charley among the Pre-Raphaelites to conclude with certainty that he was at least as troubled and tortured a spirit as any of the better-known members of the Brotherhood and regarded as a standard bearer of the movement by many contemporary critics and commentators, even if the founding members narrated his participation in a way that seems meant to play down its importance or emphasise his lack of personal, sexual and artistic courage. Collins the 'doubter and fearer' could also be resolute and versatile, as this chapter has shown, even when drawn to a partly feminised representation of Christian ideas of renunciation. Meisel suggests that for Collins, 'the doubts came in the wake of more focused anxieties whose theme was originality and influence, the immediate product of Collins' association with a band of heterodox contemporaries'.[54] This refining of the idea of the 'Collinsian nerves' is an important one, as it looks forward, in distinguishing between anxiety about success and anxiety of influence, to the great crisis of 1856.

[54]Meisel, 'Fraternity and Anxiety', p. 129.

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