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# Robins of modern times

## A modern girl in a Pre-Raphaelite landscape

Simon Poë



When *Robins of modern times* (Pl 1), a painting by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1829-1908), came on the market in June 1996, the authors of the notes in Christie's sale catalogue admitted that it remained a puzzle to them.<sup>1</sup> Soon, a broader public is going to have its first opportunity to see what it makes of the picture, when it is included in a major exhibition devoted to Pre-Raphaelite landscape painting opening in February 2004 at Tate Britain.

I think our best chance of solving the puzzle represented by the painting is to consider it in the context of Stanhope's better-known *Thoughts of the past* (Pl 2), which is in the permanent collection at Tate Britain.<sup>2</sup> The two pictures are painted on same-sized canvases, one in horizontal format and the other vertical. The titles of both contain references to time, forward-looking in *Robins of modern times* and retrospective in *Thoughts of the past*. Nothing appears to be happening in either of them: *Thoughts of the past* seems just to show a girl standing by a window looking out over the Thames and *Robins of modern times* a girl lying on the ground in the countryside. However, I shall show how the paintings suggest a linked pair of momentous events, and how these events – the first having just occurred in *Robins* and the second being just about to do so in *Thoughts* – form the opening and closing of a tragic narrative.

*Robins of modern times* shows a young girl, no longer quite a child, lying on a patch of grass on a rocky outcrop overlooking fields where men with teams of horses are ploughing. On the horizon, beyond the trees, we can glimpse a half-timbered farmhouse. The girl is lying with one knee raised so that her skirt has fallen back. Her dress is dark blue, and she is wrapped – entangled might almost be a better word – in a black cape or cloak. She holds a plaited crown of

<sup>1</sup> *Robins of modern times* by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1829-1908), c1857. Oil on canvas, 85.7 x 48.2 cm. Private collection

daisies in her right hand and clutches her side with her left. Scattered around her are broken twigs, fallen leaves and two apples. Very close, one at her foot and one at her head, stand a pair of robins. Her abundant brown hair is loose and fanned about her head. Throwing out a shoot towards her, prominent against her hair, is a patch of bindweed. Her heavy-lidded eyes are half-closed and her lips pursed as if for a kiss. The blush on her cheek offers a visual echo of the rosy apples and the cock-robin's red breast.

The painting is in the highly-coloured, sharply-focused style of first phase Pre-Raphaelitism. The trees on the horizon, and the tops of those in the dell beyond the outcrop where the girl is lying, are painted the same bright green as the grass on which she lies. The very bridle of the plough-horse on the far side of the field is in the same sharp focus as the daisies in her crown in the extreme foreground. As a result, the picture has a tapestry-like quality and the space it describes is not easy to read at a glance.

Years after the event, Stanhope described how he had moved from his early discipleship of Watts towards an adherence to Pre-Raphaelite principles.

As Watts was then living at Little Holland House I spent a good deal of my time there, and there it was that I first met Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and other Pre-Raphaelites. I was invited by Rossetti to join them in decorating the big room of the Union Club at Oxford. The lunette I painted was next to one Burne-Jones was working at, and we became warm friends.

As the art lines these Artists followed, especially as regarded colour, had much more interest for me than those on which I had been previously working, I adopted them...<sup>3</sup>

Anna Stirling, Stanhope's niece, wrote a biographical essay about him shortly after his death in which she quoted the following letter, which unfortunately he had sent undated:

We had a whole Pan full of the chief Pre-Raphaelites yesterday and had a very pleasant day of it. There was Hunt, Rossetti and Collins. I submitted my picture to their inspection and I must confess that their remarks on it were very flattering and that I have evidently taken up quite a position in their eyes. Rossetti has had the painting in fresco of the Oxford Museum entrusted to him... Besides this he is decorating the Union Club there in distemper, – this is voluntary. He has asked me to go and do something there, as there are several fellows working, so I shall certainly go and see, and, if it is advisable to do so, I shall take my share in the work.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs Stirling suggested that the picture praised by the 'chief Pre-Raphaelites' was *Thoughts of the past*, but I think she must have been mistaken. Mary Watts (GF Watts's widow and biographer) recorded that

It was in July [of 1857] that Rossetti and Burne-Jones began their work of painting on the walls of the Oxford Union, having drawn upon Little Holland House for the help of two young painters, Roddam Spencer Stanhope and Val Prinsep, who joined them a few weeks later.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the 'inspection' took place at Little Holland House, where Stanhope worked at Watts's side during 1850-57. The picture inspected could not have been *Thoughts of the past*, which was painted in the studio he took on the floor below Rossetti's apartment at Chatham Place, overlooking the Thames, and which was only started when he returned to London after finishing work on the Oxford murals. *Thoughts of the past* features a view through a window, recognisably that visible from Chatham Place.<sup>6</sup> Quite clearly, it was made *in situ* and cannot have pre-dated Stanhope's tenancy of the studio.

By the sound of it, Stanhope, acquainted with the Pre-Raphaelites who were visitors to Little Holland House, had absorbed their influence and adopted a style which attracted their admiration *before* he was recruited to assist with the murals, and had indeed already produced a significant painting in that style. Burne-Jones's studio assistant Thomas Rooke recorded a conversation on 7 January 1896 in which Sir Edward remembered Stanhope.

An extraordinary turn for landscape he had too – quite individual... Rossetti was in a perfect state of enthusiasm about it – that was how he got to know him.<sup>7</sup>

*Robins of modern times* – unlike *Thoughts of the past* – features landscape. It was exhibited at the Liverpool Academy in 1860. Stanhope only began to exhibit in 1859 – showing work at the Hogarth Club, the Royal Academy and at Liverpool – but he had been painting since the beginning of the decade. It is therefore perfectly possible that *Robins of modern times* had already been completed by 1857, even, perhaps, that it was the picture presented for the inspection of the 'pan full' of Pre-Raphaelites and about whose landscape element Rossetti was in such a state of enthusiasm.

No further work was done on the Oxford murals after March 1858, and the first we hear of Stanhope working at Chatham Place is in that invaluable document of Pre-Raphaelitism, the diary of George Price Boyce. In his entry for 21 June Boyce recorded a visit to Rossetti.

Jones and Stanhope were there. Went in to Stanhope's studio to see the picture he is engaged on of an 'unfortunate' in two different crises of her life.<sup>8</sup>

Six months later he recorded another visit to Stanhope's studio.

December 16. Called on Stanhope. He was painting on his picture of a gay woman in her room by side of Thames at her toilet. 'Fanny' was sitting to him. She afterwards went up to Rossetti and I followed.<sup>9</sup>

The implication seems to be that Stanhope was still at work on the picture Boyce had seen in June. 'Unfortunate' and 'gay woman' are both euphemisms for a prostitute, 'unfortunate' having the particular connotation of a 'fallen woman' who has been reduced to the expedient of prostitution by circumstances. The second entry in Boyce's diary clearly refers to *Thoughts of the past*, which it describes quite precisely, but the earlier entry is vaguer, referring as it does to 'the picture... of an "unfortunate" in two different crises of her life'.<sup>10</sup> Waterloo Bridge, a part of the view from the window in *Thoughts of the Past*, has particular significance, since, according to Olive Anderson, it 'had been renowned since its completion in 1819 for assignations and suicides'.<sup>11</sup> In 1840 around 30 of London's registered suicides (some 15%) were committed from it, and young women 'always particularly favoured drowning' as a way of killing themselves.<sup>12</sup> It was particularly associated in the public mind with the suicide of prostitutes, thanks to Thomas Hood's poem *The Bridge of Sighs* (1844), which concerns 'one more unfortunate' retrieved from the river at Waterloo. If the girl in the painting is a prostitute contemplating suicide, and if that represents one of two 'crises' in her life, it must surely be the second. So did Stanhope complete another painting representing an earlier crisis? We cannot say for sure, but if he did, I would argue that *Robins of modern times* might be that painting.

One of the 'pan full' of Pre-Raphaelites who praised Stanhope's painting was Holman Hunt, whose *The awakening conscience* was probably the principal influence on Stanhope when he set out to represent the career of a fallen woman (although his first mentor, Watts, had painted a prostitute *Found drowned* in the late 1840s). He will certainly have seen Hunt's picture when it was shown at the Royal Academy in 1854. We may be fairly sure that he also read Ruskin's letter about it, published in *The Times* on 25 May 1854, so completely does this summarise the project Stanhope seems to have undertaken when he began work on *Robins of modern times* and *Thoughts of the past*. The letter ends with an exhortation to examine the walls 'of all our public and private galleries'

and while pictures will be met with by the thousand which literally tempt to evil ... there will not be found one powerful as this to meet full in the front the moral evil of the age in which it is painted; to waken into mercy the cruel thoughtlessness of youth, and subdue the severities of judgement into the sanctity of compassion.<sup>13</sup>

For both paintings Stanhope borrowed the symbolic method Hunt had developed at the beginning of his career when he was exercised to create an art able to embody spiritual content in a modern, realist form. Hunt had found what he needed in the chapter of *Modern Painters II* (1846) where Ruskin analysed Tintoretto's *Annunciation* using an interpretative method, typology, more usually applied to Biblical exegesis than to art theory.<sup>14</sup> In typological symbolism the persons or objects with symbolic meaning are

a part of the reality represented, not an intrusion into it from another realm, and retain all their significance *qua* real simultaneously with their significance as symbols.<sup>15</sup>

Which objects in *Robins of modern times* have this dual significance? First, most obviously, the apples. Apples are frequently symbolic of temptation, the Fall and the Garden of Eden. For instance, an apple features in Rossetti's *Bocca baciata* of 1859, a painting of Fanny Cornforth, who sat to Stanhope for *Thoughts of the past*, and who had just relieved Rossetti of his virginity.<sup>16</sup> The girl in *Robins of modern times* is represented not merely in the countryside (as opposed to the wicked city) but in an undomesticated, unploughed, patch of wild nature – in Eden. On the symbolic level, the apples represent Temptation, which has entered the Garden, whilst on the literal level they are just a snack she has brought with her. Remember, however, that in a typological scheme the literal element will also be charged with significance. So – has she brought one apple for herself and one for somebody she has arranged to meet? Has she, Eve-like, come to an assignation with her sweetheart and brought him an apple?

I will return to the full significance of the robins in a moment, but the fact that there are two of them, a male and a female, seems to me to support this analysis. The bindweed, and the tangle she has got into in her cloak, are pieces of scrupulously observed Pre-Raphaelite truth to nature, but they also imply that she is somehow *ensnared*. And what about the broken twigs and fallen leaves? The sky is clear blue now, but she has obviously just weathered some sort of storm. Making daisy chains is a quintessentially innocent, childish occupation, but the girl in the picture has just taken off her floral crown. We may read this as suggesting that she has also put off childhood and innocence along with it. She seems alarmingly young to have lost her virginity by our standards, but when Stanhope painted her the age of consent was only twelve years. Even the ploughing can be read symbolically – the plough a male symbol, the earth female, opened and made ready for the sowing of seed – and on the literal level there is a team standing unattended on this side of the field, just visible through the trees. Are we to understand that the girl's ploughboy sweetheart is making his way back down the hillock, just out of sight?

The popular assumption about the prostitutes of London was that many of them were country girls like this – 'betrayed' by lovers who had seduced them with a promise to marry, impregnated them, and then reneged – who had fled to the anonymity of the city to hide their shame. Failing to find other employment, they had then had to fall back on prostitution. This was deemed to be a fatal choice, the belief being that a girl, her virtue once lost, would descend rapidly through the ranks of her new profession until the moral and physical degradation consequent upon the work led her to an inevitable early grave. Many despairing, remorseful girls were also believed to anticipate this process by suicide, often drowning themselves by jumping into the Thames from Waterloo Bridge.

Stanhope implied just such a sad history for the girl in *Thoughts of the past*, using the language of flowers to spell out 'early attachment', 'faithfulness', 'early youth', 'sadness' and 'inconstancy'.<sup>17</sup> A lace curtain with a tear in it bellying out in the breeze suggests that she has lost her virginity and is carrying a child. In fact, the classic sequence – seduction, betrayal, prostitution and death – was much more common in Victorian painting and literature than it ever was in real life,<sup>18</sup> but it is just what Stanhope seems to be describing in *Robins of modern times* and *Thoughts of the past*. The young girl has just lost her virtue in *Robins*, and, having had time to



2 *Thoughts of the past* by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, 1858-9. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 86.3 cm. Tate Britain

experience the consequences, is nerving herself to end it all in *Thoughts*. The wages of sin is death. Stanhope's only apparent variation on the standard version of the tale is that the girl in *Robins of modern times*, who is quite well dressed (is she the farmer's daughter, perhaps?), seems to be enjoying a liaison with her social inferior, a farm labourer, rather than with that conventional betrayer, the squire's ne'er-do-well son – such as Arthur Donnithorne, the seducer of Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859).

I think, however, that this unambiguous reading might be usefully complicated and nuanced by an analysis of Stanhope's puzzling title. Robins are characteristically cheeky and confident – even, by the standards of their timid and dowdy cousin, the hedge sparrow, recklessly daring. Stanhope may have been likening the girl's behaviour – at once too brave and too trusting – to that of the little bird. *Robins of modern times!* or, as one might say, 'young girls nowadays!' However, the behaviour of the robin is natural, and such a reading of the title, without affecting the narrative content of the picture, acknowledges that the implied advice to young girls – that they should not do as the girl in the paintings has done – requires them to suppress *natural*

desires. Furthermore, though some natural desires – when symbolised, for instance, in the persons of pigs or toads – might easily be categorised as vicious, the implication of Stanhope's employment of the much-loved little gardener's companion could be that the actions of the girl in the painting, though certainly ill-advised, are not positively unwholesome.

According to this reading of his painting and its title Stanhope seems to echo the sentiments expressed by William Blake in his couplet from *Auguries of Innocence*:

A robin red breast in a cage  
Puts all Heaven in a rage.

This was not published until 1863 (In Alex Gilchrist's *Life of Blake*, completed after his death in 1861 by his wife Anne with Rossetti's assistance), but might not Stanhope have had access to it in manuscript? Andrew Wilton identified Stanhope, with Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon and William Blake Richmond, as being among the relatively few artists of his generation whose work shows the influence of Blake.<sup>19</sup> If his title *does* contain a direct reference to Blake's words, then so far from issuing an unambivalent condemnation of the girl's sexual behaviour, Stanhope was suggesting that sexual restraint enforced upon the young may be not only against Nature but possibly even against the very will of God. And even if there is no such reference, he did contrive at least to make *Robins of modern times*, while it articulates a warning to young girls, an expression also of misgiving about restraints set upon the natural instincts and impulses of youth.

Of course, it is tempting (though vain) to speculate about youthful skeletons in Stanhope's own cupboard.<sup>20</sup> Did he have a liaison on his conscience, with a country girl (like the one in the picture) near his family home in Yorkshire, perhaps, or at Oxford (where, according to contemporary sources quoted by Arthur Engel,<sup>21</sup> there was one prostitute to every three students in 1847 when Stanhope went up to the University)? Tom Brown – in *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), the sequel to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* – is on the point of ruining Patty, an innkeeper's daughter, when his friend Hardy's warning deflects him at the last moment.

If you go to Abingdon Fair with her ... you will return a scoundrel, and she -; in the name of the honour of your mother and sister, in the name of God, I warn you.<sup>22</sup>

Was it, one can't help but wonder, a situation like this which, in Ruskin's words, 'waken[ed] into mercy the cruel thoughtlessness of youth, and subdue[d] the severities of judgement into the sanctity of compassion' and inspired the painting of *Robins of modern times* and *Thoughts of the past*?

1 Christie's London, *Victorian Pictures, Drawings and Watercolours*, 7 June 1996 (578).

2 I have written about this painting at greater length elsewhere. See Simon Poë 'Roddam Spencer Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past*', in Martin Hewitt, ed, *Representing Victorian Lives*, Leeds Working Papers in Victorian Studies, vol 2, Leeds, 1999, pp75-88.

3 William De Morgan, Introduction, *Catalogue of Pictures and Drawings by the Late Roddam Spencer Stanhope*, exh cat, Carfax Gallery, 1909, pp7-8.

4 AMW Stirling, *A Painter of Dreams and other biographical studies*. London, 1916, pp312-13.

5 Mary Watts, *George Frederic Watts: Annals of an Artist's Life*, 2 vols, London, 1912, I, p171.

6 According to John Fisher, Keeper of Prints and Maps at the Guildhall Library, for whose assistance I am grateful.

7 Mary Lago, ed, *Burne-Jones Talking: his conversations 1895-*

*1898 preserved by his studio assistant Thomas Rooke*, London, 1982, p77.

8 Virginia Surtees, ed, *Diaries of George Price Boyce*. Norwich, 1980, p32.

9 Ibid p32.

10 Boyce's handwriting in his diaries, which were destroyed in the blitz, was difficult to decipher. If 'picture' should actually read 'pictures' it would not be the only transcription error in the published version.

11 Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford, 1987, p201.

12 Ibid, p115.

13 John Ruskin, in ET Cook & Alexander Wedderburn, ed, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, London, 1903-12, XIV, pp333-35.

14 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, in Cook & Wedderburn, op cit, IV, pp3-357, pp264-65.

15 George P Landow, *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*. London, 1979, pp9-10.

16 See Leslie Parris, ed, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, exh cat, Tate Gallery, p25; Barbara Bryant [in Andrew Wilton, & Robert Upstone, ed, *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain, 1860-1910*, exh cat, Tate Gallery, pp96-7]; and Surtees, op cit, p34.

17 See the note, dated June 1980, in Stanhope's file in the Tate Gallery Archives. I am grateful to Jennifer Booth, the Tate Gallery Archivist, for permission to examine this.

18 Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*. Cambridge, 1980, p18; and Anderson, op cit, p136.

19 Wilton [in Wilton & Upstone, op cit], p25.

20 Though I have found the biographical approach very useful in previous investigations of Stanhope's work. See Simon Poë, 'Roddy, Maria and Ned (and Georgie, Topsy, Janey and Gabriel): an Entanglement' in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, ns 9

(Fall 2000), pp69-87, and 'Penelope and her suitors: women, war and widowhood in a Pre-Raphaelite painting' in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, ns 11 (Spring 2002), pp68-79.

21 Arthur J Engel (1979) 'Immoral Intentions: the University of Oxford and the Problem of Prostitution, 1827-1914', in *Victorian Studies*, vol 23, no 1, pp79-107.

22 Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, London, nd, p220.