

From Academy to “Sloshua”: Joshua Reynolds’ Perception in the Victorian Era

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Abstract

The present article explores the perception of the figure of Sir Joshua Reynolds during the Victorian era. Although Reynolds became, during his life-time, an extremely celebrated artist, his reputation encountered some criticism during the 19th century. Particular attention will be paid to the discussion of the British master as an anti-model for an entire artistic generation. Indeed, Pre-Raphaelites identified themselves with the works and doctrines of one of the greatest rivals Reynolds ever had: painter and poet William Blake. Such a rivalry is at the core of the perception of Reynolds’ work which is both artistic and theoretical as the master left a series of writings on art. This article will demonstrate how this negative comprehension is constructed and debated thanks to a number of texts, biographies and articles dedicated to both artists.

Keywords: Reynolds, Blake, Pre-Raphaelite movement, Rossetti, Ruskin, Art Theory, Art Criticism, Victorian age

On August 30 1867, art writer and critic William Michael Rossetti (1820-1919), brother of the more famous Pre-Raphaelite artist Gabriel Dante Rossetti (1828-1882), recorded in his diary the visit of an exhibition of portraits in the London area of South Kensington. Among the different artworks exhibited, William Michael seemed captivated by a work by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). He reported that the famous *Mrs Abington* “in some hoydenish stage-part is wonderful with some others”.¹ Yet Pre-Raphaelites had a strong aversion to Reynolds, as William Michael’s annotations demonstrate: “Generally, however, my estimate of him is not reinforced by this exhibition”.² The artist’s words echoed the opinion of a whole generation which predominantly characterised art during the Victorian era. Despite the eulogies of his early biographers such as Edmond Malone (1741-1812) for instance, Reynolds’ oeuvre was discussed, projected as a model for British art but also often vehemently criticised throughout the 19th century.³ This process of double perception

developed in a series of texts which were compiled under a wide range of forms, from biographies to exhibition accounts. Leading to the construction of a legend (both positive and negative), these documents employed artistic and literary approaches to fabricate an image of Reynolds which responded to a model/anti-model duo. The purpose of my article is to study this rearrangement of Reynolds’ perception and to understand how his oeuvre was debated. During the 19th century, the comprehension of the artist is questioned and his theoretical vision is dismantled and manipulated to serve other artistic patterns. My objective is to examine these shifts in the masters’ reputation and to understand to what extent this perception affected Victorian artists.

Reynolds’ Critical Heritage: A double perception

The impact of Reynolds’ work can be measured through its impact on British art’s institutionalisation - Reynolds was the first president of the Royal Academy founded in 1768

¹ William Michael Rossetti, ed., *Rossetti Papers, 1862 to 1870*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 239. (hereafter Rossetti Papers).

² Rossetti Papers, 239.

³ For a general discussion on Reynolds’ perception and overall search for celebration see: Martin Postle et al., ed., *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* (London: Tate Gallery, 2005). On Malone’s biography of Reynolds see: Karen Junod, “A Picture of the Mind: Biography, Portraiture, and Edmond Malone’s Account of Sir Joshua

Reynolds (1797)”. *The British Art Journal* 12 (2011): 91-95. On Reynolds’ posthumous reception see in general: Richard Wendorf, *After Sir Joshua. Essays on British Art and Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005), especially the chapter concerning Pre-Raphaelitism: “Framing Rossetti”, 77-107.

- but also through the theoretical model he conveyed. Particularly, the *Discourses on Art*, which the painter published between 1769 and 1790, give evidence of his approach to artistic theory and stand as a how-to guide for academic training.⁴ They further offered ground to develop an image of the artist and to discuss his theoretical heritage. Much debated, the *Discourses* punctually represented a reference for both partisans and opponents of the British painter.

One of the first steps in the questioning of Reynolds' oeuvre was assuredly Allan Cunningham's biography.⁵ The text's criticism towards Reynolds was so fierce, that contemporaries promptly denounced its vehement attitude.⁶ Cunningham pretended to produce an impartial assessment of Reynolds' work and, to claim his fair-minded attitude, he referred to the works of Malone and James Northcote (1746-1831), but used them to demolish the image of the British master and not to celebrate him.⁷ Malone's text contributed to put forward and question an important aspect of Reynolds' career: his theoretical corpus.⁸ In 1848, Ralph Nicholson Wornum (1812-1877), friend of the Rossetti brothers and curator at the National Gallery, published a revised edition of the *Discourses*, particularly insisting on the relationship between painting and artistic theory.⁹ This somehow contradictory relationship will indeed constitute the core of the Victorian perception of Reynolds' works.¹⁰ Wornum referred to some of the most debated artistic subjects, the opposition between line

and colour, and expressed his criticism by staging the thoughts of one of Reynolds' contemporaries, fellow painter John Opie (1761-1807). According to Warnum, Opie denounced the incoherence between the master's artistic production, where the colour was prominent, and his *Discourses*, which paid particular attention to the line, considered as a paramount tool to attain ideal beauty: "(...) and Sir Joshua Reynolds, the slave and master of colouring, to gain which he almost lost himself, though sedulously devoted to it in practice, seems, in his writings, to consider it as rather detrimental, if not incompatible with sentiment and the grand style of art".¹¹

The opposition Reynolds/Blake

The incursion of Opie's thoughts announces a development in the perception of Reynolds' oeuvre. Until the 1840s in fact, writers focussed on the biographical aspect of the master's life, reporting for instance, anecdotes which would serve his reputation. They also discussed the theoretical corpus as a how-to guide for prospective art students. The link between these two levels of analysis - biographical and theoretical - was the narrative, which contributed to assess the masters' glory. Both Malone's "introspective approach" - as Junod defined it - to the inner character of the painter, and Northcote's biographical strategies, aimed at one clear objective: the celebration of the founder of the British school. Victorians discussed Reynolds' perception referring to theoretical, artistic and narrative levels of analysis. But they used these standards differently. They focussed on the interactions of these aspects rather than considering these materials as a reference. Through this literary strategy, they constructed and questioned a perception of Reynolds' work based on artistic antagonism. Reynolds was progressively defined not as as a model but as an anti-model, the core of this contrast being an artist which Pre-Raphaelites cheered particularly: William Blake (1757-1827).¹²

It is through this artist that Pre-Raphaelite critics and artists staged Reynolds' oeuvre. Particularly, the *Rossetti manuscript*, a notebook

⁴ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997 [1797]). On the *Discourses* see, in general: Frederic Whitley Hilles, *The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Archon Books, 1967), 69-89, 129-145; John L. Mahoney, "Reynolds's 'Discourses on Art': The delicate balance of Neoclassic aesthetics, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (Spring 1978): 126-136.

⁵ Allan Cunningham, *The lives of the most eminent British painters and sculptors* (London: John Murray, 1830), 2, 140-179.

⁶ "It may also be objected, that partialities and prejudices are but too apparent in this work. Some persons are the objects of eulogy, other of a dislike, which nothing recorded in the text appears to justify. Reynolds is evidently the object of ill-will", *The Edinburgh review, or Critical Journal* 119 (April 1836): 49.

⁷ James Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Henry Colburn, 1813). As Malone's volume, Northcote's text provided a much celebrate vision of Reynolds. On Northcote's biographical approach to Reynolds see: Élisabeth Martichou, "Les *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds* de James Northcote ou la constitution d'une figure exemplaire du peintre", *Études anglaises* 65 (2012): 290-301.

⁸ Junod, "A Picture of the Mind", 93.

⁹ Ralph N. Wornum, *Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians*. Barry, Opie, and Fuseli (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848).

¹⁰ On the incoherence of some of Reynolds' purposes on artistic theory, see in general: Günter Leyboldt, "A neoclassical dilemma in Sir Joshua Reynolds's reflections on art", *British journal of aesthetics* 39 (Oct 1999): 330-349.

¹¹ Wornum, *Lectures on Painting*, 314.

¹² On Pre-Raphaelitism see: Elizabeth Prettejohn, ed., *After the Pre-Raphaelites. Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2000).

which Blake compiled around 1808 and which was subsequently acquired by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1847, represented a first step in the establishment of this famous opposition.¹³

The booklet contained a set of artistic notes through which Blake denounced academic art and formulated his own artistic theories, mainly as a fervent opponent of Reynolds. According to William Michael Rossetti, the impact of this manuscript on Gabriel Dante's artistic approach "conduced to the Pre-Raphaelite movement".¹⁴ It also allowed to identify those artists who Blake disliked, providing therefore Rossetti with a set of names to condemn: "(...) such painters as Correggio, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Reynolds, and Gainsborough—any men whom Blake regarded as fulsomely florid, or lax, or swamping ideas in mere manipulation."¹⁵ Rossetti further annotated this manuscript, mainly focussing on the criticism of Reynolds' artistic theory as formulated in the *Discourses*. He assuredly knew this text and particularly Malone's edition because Blake owned a copy of this text and annotated it around 1808. Through his comments, Blake vehemently demolished Reynolds' artistic doctrine.¹⁶

This approach and these two documents - the Rossetti's manuscript and Malone's edition of the *Discourses* - constituted the basis of Alexander Gilchrist monograph *The Life of William Blake*, published in 1863.¹⁷ This text contributed to state Pre-Raphaelites' artistic doctrine and explicitly marked the opposition between a model - Blake - and an anti-model - Reynolds. The Rossetti brothers largely contributed to the compilation of this work. When Gilchrist prematurely died in 1861, they helped his widow to finish off the manuscript. William Michael compiled a catalogue of Blake's works and Gabriel Dante wrote an essay on Blake's poems. Yet the most significant part of

Gilchrist's text is represented by chapter 29, entitled *Opinions: notes on Reynolds*. This part, consisting of about 30 pages, discusses Blake's annotations on Reynolds' *Discourses*. Gilchrist did not venture in a complete transcription of these comments, but published instead a selection of passages with a precise intention, that was to identify and put into context the aspects which will allow a criticism of Reynolds' artistic theory. Gilchrist elaborated a text by regularly interpreting, questioning and adapting concepts and words' meaning. In such a way, the scholar fabricated a fictional image of Blake consisting of a genius, a rebel and a talented artist. This figure strongly contrasted, evidently, with that of Reynolds. Blake's thoughts and considerations on art were interpreted and almost justified when they did not celebrate enough the British artist. For instance, by discussing Blake's approach to colour, Gilchrist mentioned the dislike of the artist for Venetian painters, which Reynolds, to the contrary, much appreciated. The writer promptly pointed out that Blake's opinion was based on prints after these artists and not on original artworks, as it was the case for Reynolds. The scholar's purpose here was clearly to justify what could appear at a glance a wrong impression: "(...) many readers of the present day, who have learned to almost worship the transcendent Venetian painters - Giorgione, Titian, Tintoret, Veronese, not to speak of the Bellini, Carpaccio, &c. may be startled to note Blake's pertinacious scorn of them. Such readers will do remember that Blake, who had never been abroad, must have formed his idea of the Venetians almost wholly from engravings, and from what writers like Reynolds say of the characteristics of the school".¹⁸

From this comparison, it emerges a contradiction between the paramount role of Reynolds in the construction of a British school of painting and his theoretical doctrine. Gilchrist alternated painted and written corpus in order to strengthen this contradiction and therefore reinforcing Blake's image. This antagonism relied indeed on the artists' scopes. Reynolds' contribution to English portraiture painting was essential whereas Blake was a visionary artist and a poet. The difference between these two scopes was so important, that Gilchrist compared it to the distance between a hilltop and a star shining in the sky - the star being, evidently, Blake.

¹³ The manuscript is now at the British Library (Add MS 49460). On the manuscript see: *The Notebook of William Blake*, ed. D. V. Erdman and D. K. Moore, New York, 1977; Mark L. Greenberg, "The Rossetti's transcription of Blake's notebook", and "William Michael Rossetti's transcription and William Bell Scott's tracings from Blake's notebook", *The Library: Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* 4 (1982): 249-72, and 6 (1984): 254-76.

¹⁴ William Michael Rossetti, ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir*, (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), 1, 109.

¹⁵ Rossetti, ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters*, 109.

¹⁶ On Blake's annotations of Reynolds' *Discourses* see: William Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 445-479; Hazard Adams, "Revisiting Reynolds' discourses and Blake's annotations" in *Blake in his time*, ed. Robert N. Essick et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 128-144.

¹⁷ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus"* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1863).

¹⁸ Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 283.

The use of interactions between narrative, artistic and theoretical aspects is a frequently-used strategy for 19th-century writers, who punctually projected fictional anecdotes on artistic-related references. Writers employed a number of diverse documents and approaches to stage this projection. For instance, sculptor Frederick Tatham (1805-1878), one of Blake's pupils, wrote in 1832 a *Life of Blake* which included some correspondence. The work remained unpublished until 1906, when Archibald Russell edited it as a publication.¹⁹ Gilchrist knew Tatham and used his manuscript as a source for his work. This document would serve the same strategy of Gilchrist's volume: constructing an image of Blake where imagination played a crucial role for artistic creativity. Blake was thus different from Reynolds: unconventional artist, convinced that colour alone could not represent a unique artistic solution but that line had also to be considered. To reinforce this opposition, Russell went to deride Reynolds by means of his own doctrines. The first letter he mentioned was from painter John Flaxman (1755-1826) to William Hayley (1745-1820), a poet who commissioned Blake some prints. Russell took this opportunity to insist on the well-known quarrel according to which Reynolds apparently criticised Blake's early works and recommended him more precision and simplicity with regard to drawing's mastery. Russell hastily rectified such a debate and pointed out that Blake combined line and colour while Reynolds' paintings showed the predominance of colour. Such an approach stood evidently, according to Russell, as a contradiction because Reynolds advocated, in his *Discourses*, the importance of drawing as a crucial element of ideal beauty, this approach to painting being "wholly opposed to his own ideal, which was that of Dürer, Michel Angelo and the rest of the linear school".²⁰

A vehement cohabitation: the model/anti-model

This opposition between a model to follow and an anti-model to reject appears even more explicit in the works compiled by James Smetham (1821-1898). Landscapist and partisan of Blake's artistic and theoretical values, Smetham avoided to express his ideas in a

biography, and this supposedly because Gilchrist's work became a benchmark in Blake's studies. He also avoided to edit a correspondence, as contemporaries deeply knew and referred to Tatham's manuscript. He had to find another way to celebrate Blake's glory and to promote Reynolds' role of artistic anti-model. Smetham compiled two reviews and published them separately. The first one concerned the biography of Reynolds by Thomas Taylor and Charles Leslie and was published in 1866.²¹ The second one was an account of Gilchrist's volume on Blake and appeared in 1869.²² A few decades later, in 1885, William Davies published a monograph of Smetham's works and included both texts.²³ Model and anti-model were finally published together, one after the other. In such a way, the average reader could compare both examples and comprehend the related anecdotes and references. In his work, Leslie dealt with Reynolds' figure using the same stage strategy than the one employed for Blake by Tatham or Gilchrist for instance. Narrative and theoretical levels are mixed but, more importantly, they interact.

Reynolds was not a "marvellous boy" because he was not born with an innate talent, whereas Blake was a "dreamy boy" and had a unique, natural talent. Interestingly, in his review of Leslie's volume, Smetham identified and subsequently discussed a number of literary strategies through which Leslie celebrated Reynolds' reputation. According to Smetham, Leslie and Taylor attempted to settle Reynolds on a superior artistic rank. A wealth of documents, unpublished correspondence and notes represented the tools for the staging of Reynolds as an artist, a theoretician and a generally prominent figure. Smetham insisted on the fact that Taylor, who finished the compilation of the biography because of Leslie's premature death, punctually referred to a fictional level of analysis to propose an inward-looking vision of Reynolds.²⁴

Taylor's strategy relied on the valorisation of Reynolds' political career. Indeed, Taylor's opinions were somehow legitimated by the fact that the latter was firstly a painter, but also a

¹⁹ Frederick Tatham, *The Letters of William Blake*, ed. Archibald G. B. Russell (New York: Charles Scribner's 1906).

²⁰ Tatham, *The Letters of William Blake*, 19-20.

²¹ James Smetham, "Sir Joshua Reynolds", review of *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, by Charles Leslie and Thomas Taylor, *London Quarterly*, January, 1866.

²² James Smetham, "William Blake", review of *Life of William Blake*, by Alexander Gilchrist, *London Quarterly Review*, January 1869.

²³ James Smetham, *The Literary Works of James Smetham*, ed. William Davies (London: Macmillan, 1893), Reynolds: 3-97, Blake: 98-194.

²⁴ Smetham, *The Literary Works*, 7.

writer and a poet. He therefore was entitled to refer to diverse approaches of Reynolds' oeuvre. Smetham claimed that the success of the publication resided indeed in such a strategy, and that Taylor and Leslie borrowed most of the material from the master's contemporaries. The majority of the anecdotes reported in the work had, for instance, to be ascribed to James Northcote. Further, another of the master's closest friends, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), was more concerned with Reynolds' theoretical aspect and so defined the British painter: "He [Reynolds] possessed the theory as perfectly as the practice of his art. To be such a painter, he was a profound and penetrating philosopher".²⁵

These flattering remarks embarrassed Smetham's purposes and the scholar accordingly, and promptly, reacted. The last 15 pages of the review are dedicated to deconstruct and criticise Burke's eulogies and Taylor's consideration of Reynolds as an outstanding and paramount figure for British art. Smetham admitted, however, that the contemplation of Reynolds' portraits belonged to the traditional customs of cultivated Englishmen because of their graceful and untroubled character. Nonetheless, Burke's praise of portrait painting as a divine art had not to be entirely embraced. Smetham resorted to a comparison which was very close to Gilchrist's statement opposing the hilltop and the shining star. According to Smetham, Reynolds went down from the top of invention whereas Blake did the same but from the paradise of creativity.²⁶ Blake was not directly called into question but the reference to his oeuvre was however explicit. Artworks inspired by a divine imagination were far from those produced by Reynolds. Even though Smetham recognised the master's grace, he admitted his lack of artistic vision: "Whatever he [Reynolds] could reach by vision and taste he could do, but the gates of imagination were closed and sealed to him".²⁷ Such a criticism further concerned the *Discourses* which were nothing but 'inaccurate' writings, contrasting with the artistic approach that Reynolds adopted for his portraits. And this because painting was, according to Smetham, a practice different from the mere use of a series of words: "Reynolds was a pioneer in the direction of statement on art".²⁸

Mixed views: moderate criticism

Victorians, and Pre-Raphaelites in particular, had to cohabit with mixed views on and a changing perception of Reynolds's work. Sometimes writers attempted, but failed, to a coherent account of Reynolds' talent based on new material. For instance, William Cotton's monograph of 1856 proposed to put forward the opinions of Reynolds' contemporaries as a gauge of scientific exactitude.²⁹ However, Cotton's references were subsequently criticised and perceived as a lack of argument inasmuch as his focus on the painter's early career was denounced as a poor approach to the oeuvre of such a great master.³⁰

Pre-Raphaelites stigmatised this image of Reynolds as an artistic example not to follow. Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) went even to devote a couple of pages of one of his publications to the anti-model Reynolds represented.³¹ For Hunt, who founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 together with John Everett Millais (1829-1896), the issue of the reception of the British master resided in his blind appreciation of Italian artists and in his belief that these foreign artists represented the starting and learning point for British art students.³² Such a vision, oriented towards foreign sources, was opposed to a national, humble apprenticeship of painting, such as the one followed by Hunt. As a result, Reynolds' artistic doctrines did not represent a constraint for Hunt because they were formulated to encourage students to approach art in a superficial and reverential way, especially with regard to what art represented in the past. This attitude was dangerous because it only provided students with an indirect mastery of the perfection art could attain.³³ For Hunt, the aftermath of such perspective was obvious: Reynolds was considered, by his contemporaries, as a conventional artist although his teaching proved him wrong, at least since the 1850s.³⁴

²⁵ Smetham, *The Literary Works*, 77.

²⁶ Smetham, *The Literary Works*, 87.

²⁷ Smetham, *The Literary Works*, 91.

²⁸ Smetham, *The Literary Works*, 91-92.

²⁹ William Cotton, *Sir Joshua Reynolds and his works. Gleanings from his diary, unpublished manuscripts, and from other sources*, ed. John Burnet (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1856), 6.

³⁰ "William Cotton, *Sir Joshua Reynolds and his works.*", review of *Sir Joshua Reynolds and his works*, by William Cotton, *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review* February (1857): 208-210.

³¹ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), 82-84.

³² Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 1, 81.

³³ Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 1, 83.

³⁴ Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 1, 84.

The criticism on Reynolds' artistic behaviour exacerbated the perception of his whole oeuvre and led to mockery. In the last issue of *The Germ*, the periodical where Pre-Raphaelites expressed their opinions, John Tupper (1826?-1879) published a tribute-poem dedicated to the Brotherhood. The last couplet significantly referred to Reynolds' misleading approach to art: "And who paint as Sloshua did / have all their sloshy fingers frozen".³⁵ Sloshua, was the humorous name that Pre-Raphaelites gave to Reynolds.³⁶ Hunt further explained that the term "slosh" was very popular among Pre-Raphaelite artists and that it contained a direct reference and criticism to Reynolds. Slosh indicated indeed something inaccurate, roughly and hastily made. The word was progressively employed to describe Reynolds' oeuvre. As a result, the artist was also called "Sloshua-Slosh", provided, once again, an insight of what an artist should not do, an anti-model.

As Leonée Ormond pointed out, the term "slosh" indicated a dislike for Reynolds and academic art, but also a dispraise for Renaissance and Baroque painters such as the Carracci brothers and Guido Reni.³⁷ Such an attitude is representative of Pre-Raphaelites' approach to old masters, as referred by the same name of the movement. Indeed, Rossetti and his companions shared an admiration for early Italian artists such as Cimabue or Giotto for instance, and rejected Renaissance painters. Raphael being the reference master of 16th-century art, the term "Pre-Raphaelite" notably indicated an appreciation for those who were active 'before Raphael'. This approach to Renaissance, including a criticism to Raphael, was supported, at least in the early 1850s, by one of the most influential Victorian art writers: John Ruskin (1819-1900). The latter's advocacy for Pre-Raphaelites has evidently influenced the popularity of the movement and importantly contributed to the spread of their artistic doctrine.³⁸ However, after the dissolution of the

Brotherhood in 1853 and its subsequent success, Ruskin started to question his opinion and to reconsider both, the praise for Pre-Raphaelites and the criticism to those artists who, such as Raphael, were considered hostile to the doctrine of the movement.³⁹ Almost in parallel though a few years later, Rossetti's consideration of masters such as Rubens or Titian, who were among his most disliked painters, started to change.⁴⁰

But while for Rossetti it was mainly matter of reconsidering old masters, Ruskin realised that his approach to Reynolds was somehow misleading. This feeling became dramatically prominent in 1875, when Ruskin gave a lecture series on Reynolds' *Discourses*. In the notes of these conference papers, the scholar thus admitted: "In my early work, I had to show the mischief which arose from obeying Sir Joshua, misunderstood. In my late work, I have to show the good which is to be found in his teaching, read as it was meant".⁴¹ In the paragraphs following this statement, Ruskin attempted to reconstruct the image of Reynolds and justified the criticism moved to the master. For instance, when it comes to discuss one of the master's most controverted opinions, that was that apprenticeship should be based on the copy after old masters instead of being issued from the training on which every student should embark, Ruskin promptly justified Reynolds' misleading attitude: "This was an entirely deadly and horrible error, but inevitable by sir Joshua under the conditions of his time".⁴² Ruskin claimed that the British master did not reproduce such an error and that the *Discourses* were written accordingly. But, however, his teaching had been used to serve such a misleading opinion.

The perception of Reynolds was contested and regularly called into question throughout the 19th century. The master's primary role as a major figure of the British artistic scene did not cease to be rearranged, reinterpreted and reshaped. Victorian art writers such as James Smetham or John Ruskin importantly contributed to this readjustment by means of their writings. Furthermore, the fact that

³⁵ *The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature on Poetry, Literature and Art* 2 (February 1850), in Rossetti, ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters*, 157.

³⁶ Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 5.

³⁷ Leonée Ormond, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Old Masters", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006): 153-168, 155.

³⁸ Ruskin compiled his support to the Pre-Raphaelites under the form of a letter addressed to *The Times* (May 1851). See: Inga Bryden, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites. Writings and sources* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3, 39-68; Elisabeth Prettjohn, *The Art of Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000).

³⁹ Aoife Leahy, "Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites in the 1850s", *Pages* 1999 (2000): 125-131.

⁴⁰ Ormond, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Old Masters".

⁴¹ John Ruskin, "Studies in the 'Discourses' of Sir Joshua Reynolds", in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. Elliott T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), 22, 493.

⁴² *The Works of John Ruskin*, 494.

Reynolds left a theoretical corpus evidently affected the debates on his artistic and theoretical heritage. Textual levels of analysis such as the narrative and the biography well

demonstrate to what extent this discussion was important to the comprehension of the British master and to the role of model and anti-model developed during the Victorian era.

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