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William Holman Hunt's *Hireling Shepherd*: A Divinely Ordained Victorian Ecology

By: Emily Beaulieu

Abstract: Typically understood as a pointed criticism of the English clergy, the message of *The Hireling Shepherd* by William Holman Hunt is uncovered in Beaulieu's paper as a complex intersection between humankind, nature, and religion. Beaulieu applies an ecocritical approach to argue that, amid rapid and aggressive industrialization in England, The Hireling Shepherd represents an early articulation of a theory of environmental change steeped in the language of Christian theology. Beaulieu argues that Hunt deploys the Christian parable of the bad shepherd—inattentive to his flock—to draw attention both to the loss of morality in English society as well as its nefarious impact on the natural world. A study of Hunt's artistic ideology points to a "Victorian ecology" which dictates that nature is balanced and fundamentally moral. Natural harmony for Hunt was thus a reflection of religious, divine order. Introducing Timothy Morton's theory of the "Victorian hyperobject," Beaulieu further elucidates Hunt's understanding of the intricate, divine relationship between humankind and nature, connecting what he saw as the consequences of a transgression of Christian morality with a degeneration of the natural order. For Hunt, a degradation of the natural environment is thus fundamentally a product of a society which loses its spirituality. Through her analysis, Beaulieu forwards a theory that with *The Hireling Shepherd*, Hunt was warning against the dangers of a burgeoning atheism and a negligent clergy, while proclaiming a rebirth of the religious spirit as the solution to a deteriorating Victorian society and ecology.

<u>Keywords</u>: ecocriticism, environmental change, Victorian ecology, hyperobject, Victorian England, William Holman Hunt, Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.



Figure 1: William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, 75.8 x 109.5 cm, Manchester City Galleries. Source: The Yorck Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM), distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH, William Holman Hunt, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The field of ecocriticism considers the interactions between human cultures and the environment, whether natural or artificial, often in an attempt to dismantle the persisting binary distinction which separates humanity from the world it inhabits.ⁱ Though analysis of art history through the lens of ecocriticism has garnered much attention in recent years, in many ways the scope of inquiry remains limited. With more efforts to right what has up until now been a blind spot for the critical lens, ecocriticism has only recently begun to delve into the rich material

offered by the Victorian age, and its great thinkers, writers, and artists. As part of my contribution to this emerging "Victorian ecocriticism," I will look at artist William Holman Hunt, a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and examine his 1852 painting *The Hireling Shepherd* (fig.1), through an ecocritical lens. Typically understood as a pointed criticism of the English clergy, the internal narrative of *The Hireling Shepherd* will be explored, instead, through Hunt's philosophical and artistic relationship with nature. This inquiry into Hunt's relationship with the natural world will reveal his painting to be an early articulation of a theory of environmental change, steeped in the language of Christian theology.

William Holman Hunt's Pre-Raphaelites sought to overturn the artistic conventions determined and enforced by the notoriously strict Royal Academy.ⁱⁱ Formed in 1848, the group outright rejected the academic style, which held up the achievements of the Renaissance as the highest forms of art.ⁱⁱⁱ The tenets of the Pre-Raphaelites were as follows: "1. To have genuine ideas to express; 2. To study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; 3. To sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; 4. And most indispensably of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues."^{iv} These tenets are wrapped up in a profound desire to imbue art with a sense of morality, which the Pre-Raphaelites felt had been lost since the Renaissance. The Pre-Raphaelites believed that by focusing on creating faithful depictions of nature, as opposed to what they saw as a classical preoccupation with ideal beauty, they could reveal a divine morality readily apparent within the natural order. Hunt and the Brotherhood yearned for a return to a more spiritual and emotional—fundamentally Christian—art, that would replace the idealized beauty of academic classicism; an idealized beauty found not in nature but in the depths of a corruptible imagination.^v The art of the Pre-Raphaelites, then, represented a

dramatic turn towards realistic representation. For these Victorian thinkers, good art possesses a moralizing power, and the best way to communicate it is through the truth of nature.

This understanding of nature and its power to divulge divine morality was made possible by an adherence to what has been recently referred to as a "Victorian ecology." Victorian ecology, as opposed to Romantic ecology, is based on a belief that nature is "fundamentally balanced, nurturing and intelligible."^{vi} In other words, nature adheres to human notions of order and virtue, and is thus moral. Romantic ecology, its ideological opponent, conversely viewed nature as "inherently chaotic, stochastic, and subject to catastrophic change"—or simply put, as immoral.^{vii} A strong belief in Christian morality inclined the Pre-Raphaelites to latch onto a Victorian ecology, and the cosmic balance they saw reflected in nature reinforced their faith in a divine order. Nature became a prism onto which Hunt projected his most profound convictions about the world. These convictions were then reflected back to him under a new form—the absolute truth of matter and existence as balanced, ordered, and perfect under God's all-powerful rule.

William Holman Hunt's belief in a Victorian ecology led him to rethink the use of symbolism in his works. A single question would dominate Hunt's entire artistic career: how to reconcile, or rather unite, realism and symbolism under a Victorian ecology.^{viii} In other words, how do you incorporate symbols—images that point beyond the confines of reality—in a thoroughly realistic style? *The Hireling Shepherd* represents Hunt's first attempt at solving the problem of incorporating symbolism into realism.^{ix}

In *The Hireling Shepherd*, Hunt wanted to create a pictorial system in which the form of the symbol echoed its content. Writing about a later painting, *The Light of the World*—one of his greatest religious works—Hunt expresses his aims in developing a type of realistic symbolism:

I may say that any occult meaning in the details of my design was not based upon any ecclesiastical or archaic symbolism, but derived from obvious reflectiveness. My types were of natural figures such as language had originally employed to express transcendental ideas.... The symbolism was designed to elucidate, not to mystify truth....^x

This was a very different understanding from the traditional, more allegorical symbolism, which used an arbitrary form—usually one still found in nature—to evoke a concept.^{xi} Instead, Hunt was striving to find symbols that were based in shared human experiences so that any viewer—even if he was unfamiliar with Christian iconography—could decipher the moralizing symbols in his works.^{xii} This was his solution to integrating symbols into a realistic approach to art and the faithful depiction of nature.^{xiii} Adhering to a Victorian ecology, nature, for Hunt, revealed a balance of forces and a structured morality akin to Christian theology. If truth is to be found in nature, then the symbolic representation of moral concepts must be rooted in those very same physical phenomena. Hunt sought to shed light on the true essence of nature, and in *The Hireling Shepherd*, he placed readily apparent symbols of a higher power out in plain sight, for everyone to see.

Unfortunately, the aims of Hunt's "accessible" symbolism were not to be realized. When *The Hireling Shepherd* was exhibited in 1852, the public failed to decode Hunt's (not-so) subtle symbolic project, instead understanding the painting in its most narrow, literal sense.^{xiv} One critic described the work as a "broad rural reality" which exhibited "no attempt at poetry."^{xv} Hunt's closest friends, William Michael Rossetti and F.G. Stephens, overlooked *The Hireling Shepherd*'s elaborate system of symbols to concentrate on the technical achievements of his painting, namely his skillful rendering of sunlight and shadows.^{xvi} It is regrettable (though not entirely surprising) that Hunt's contemporaries failed to decipher his symbolic project. Today,

however, the lens of ecocriticism equips us with the tools to examine the work in a new--and unexpectedly relevant--light.

The Hireling Shepherd represents the Christian parable of the bad shepherd, inattentive to his flock.^{xvii} Instead of fulfilling his duty, the shepherd is shamelessly flirting with a farm maid. Due to his negligence, the sheep are eating green apples—poisonous to them—and getting sick.^{xviii} On the lap of the farm maid, a lamb breathes heavily; a half-eaten green apple at his feet. Even though the sickly lamb and the poisonous apples are directly placed in the shepherd's line of sight, he is oblivious to the dire situation unfolding around him. Right behind the couple, three sheep roll around in the grass in visible discomfort. One of the three is even lying down, motionless and bloated, with his eyes half closed—suffering from his unsupervised snack. To make matters worse, another sheep is straying off the path and leading the entire flock into marshy land.^{xix}

The painting's narrative makes apparent that the shepherd's betrayal of his sacred duties to engage in unabashed flirtation has endangered the health of his flock.^{xx} This relationship between the sheep and human figures stands at the center of a complex symbolic system Hunt developed for *The Hireling Shepherd*, based on his commitment to a realistic symbolism. The sheep symbolize the very real consequences of the shepherd's unscrupulous behavior: death. Indeed, without supervision, the sheep are *dying* in Hunt's painting. In turn, the poisonous green apples—a forbidden fruit in this seemingly tranquil garden—also announce sickness and mortality in the midst of an otherwise beautiful landscape.^{xxi} The marshy land created by the narrow stream running through the right-hand corner of the work further symbolizes danger and death. Though perhaps not common knowledge today, marshy land poses the serious risk of sheep-rot—a common nineteenth century disease that kills the animal.^{xxii} A sheep behind the

couple, to the right, is leading the flock through this very marsh. In this way, the sheep are not only in danger, but they have also begun their own decline into immorality. The sheep leading the flock through the potentially lethal marsh is straying off the right path, much like the couple engaged in flirtation. To the left of the composition, in the presence of the couple's behavior, two rams are seen fighting, undoubtedly over an ewe, partaking in mating rituals of their own.^{xxiii} Thus, the sheep symbolize both the consequences as well as an emulation of the shepherd's behavior.

In *The Hireling Shepherd*, death and the transgression of morals are not represented through abstract symbols that require ecclesiastical or iconographic knowledge. Hunt's symbols evoke the painting's themes by relying on common associations, creating a system that, above all else, is readily understandable. To reiterate, if Hunt's first goal was to create a system of relatable symbols found in the everyday human experience, his second was to restore Christian spirituality to art through realistic representations of the moral order Hunt saw inherent to nature. But, if Hunt saw the natural world as uniquely balanced, ordered, and Christian, why, then, is the inner narrative of *The Hireling Shepherd* so chaotic and immoral? The answer may have to do with the codependent relationship between nature and human activity as Hunt understood it. This is where Timothy Morton's theory of the "Victorian hyperobject" may help us to understand the profound connection between humans and the natural world expressed in Hunt's work.

In Timothy Morton's article, "Victorian Hyperobjects," he defines hyperobjects as "entities that are massively distributed in time and space. They are so massive that humans can think and compute them, but not perceive them directly."^{xxiv} Hyperobjects are overarching, allencompassing entities that include such phenomena as geological time, evolution, climate, capital, and industry.^{xxv} The concept of the hyperobject was born in the Victorian period out of

the phenomenological inquiries first introduced by German philosopher Immanuel Kant.^{xxvi} Simply put, Kant noticed a gap between a concept and its phenomenon as manifested in the world. Applied to Morton's theory, this gap means that what we can see of the hyperobject is only one part of a larger entity; almost as if what we see is only the symptom of the presence of the object.^{xxvii} These symptoms belong to a lower sphere of reality, to which we humans have access. Where the entity really lives, however, is in the higher dimension of reality—a dimension that we will never be able to fully grasp.

Let us now consider Hunt's depiction of nature as hyperobject and extend Morton's theory to Hunt's application of realistic symbolism. For Hunt, nature as we know it is the direct manifestation of morality and divine principles. Our understanding of it exists in the lower sphere of nature as hyperobject and represents only the symptoms, only a shadow of nature as a totality of divine truth and order. In the higher sphere, which we cannot fully grasp, nature exists as a purely moral total system. Hunt believed that the order, balance, and divine truth of Christian morality was reflected in a healthy natural environment.

Hunt's realistic style—a kind of *hyper*realism—helps bring our attention to this interaction between higher and lower spheres of nature as hyperobject. The hyperrealistic style with which Hunt depicts nature—outlining every leaf, flower, and blade of grass—lays bare the limits of human vision and indicates the existence of a "higher" nature we cannot completely comprehend. Crucially, Hunt's style suggests the two spheres—lower (nature) and higher (total system of morality)—are integrally related to the point that the higher sphere exists just out of sight. Consequently, any influence made on the fabric of nature as hyperobject in its higher sphere will affect its manifestation in the lower sphere. In other words, a transgression of traditional Christian morality (which occurs in the higher sphere) manifests itself in the lower

sphere as a decline in the condition of our natural environment. For Hunt, nature and divine morality are two sides of the same coin—separate and yet inseparable. Put simply, Hunt believed the health of the natural world *depends* on our moral and spiritual well-being.

With this new, deeper comprehension of Hunt's realistic symbolism, we can untangle the perplexing immoral representation of the natural world in *The Hireling Shepherd*. In the depicted narrative, the shepherd has failed in his duty to look after the sheep to pursue vain, materialistic, and immoral desires. In other words, he has transgressed the dictates of divine morality. Under Hunt's conception of nature as hyperobject, when individuals disobey the moral law of the higher sphere, the symptoms of that transgression are felt in the lower sphere, manifested in nature—here, in the form of the immoral, unhealthy, and unordered character of *The Hireling Shepherd's* pastoral scene. In light of this analysis, *The Hireling Shepherd* presents an example where immoral human activity results in a degraded natural environment : the shepherd's ignoble conduct unsettling nature and its eternal balance.

Hunt's painting does not seek to reveal the symmetry, balance, and health of a wellmaintained moral and natural order, but the consequences of a perversion and violation of it. Hunt deploys the Christian parable of the bad shepherd to draw attention both to the loss of virtue in English society as well as its nefarious impact on the natural world. A degradation of the natural environment, for Hunt, is fundamentally a product of a society which loses its spirituality. In an age of increasing modernization and secularization, Hunt saw humanity and nature as part of the same ecosystem and warned of the influence we have, but cannot fully comprehend, on the balance of divine creation.

With *The Hireling Shepherd*, William Holman Hunt pours out his existential dread for the future. Against the backdrop of a rapidly industrializing England, Hunt rationalized the

degrading environment around him through a self-concocted theory of spiritual ecology linking human morality and nature. With *The Hireling Shepherd*, Hunt devised a system of symbols that he hoped would serve as a visual microcosm for this entangled relationship. Hunt sought to display the morality inherent to the "ordered beauty" of nature and expose its vulnerability to the power of human agents, warning against the dangers of burgeoning atheism and a negligent church. Still, more than just a satire of the Anglican clergy, The Hireling Shepherd seeks to explain the devastating impact of human activity on the environment through a Christian rather than scientific conception, proclaiming a rebirth of the religious spirit as the solution to a deteriorating Victorian society and ecology. Perhaps sabotaged by his own convoluted symbology, his prophetic observations of ecological deterioration were lost on his contemporaries. However, today we possess the tools necessary to unearth what Hunt believed he had placed out in plain sight. Much like what is achieved here with our analysis of *The Hireling Shepherd*, continued inquiry through the lens of ecocriticism, will help to shed further light on other moments throughout our history where—before we possessed a scientific explanation of climate change—our artists and thinkers grasped that humanity was playing a role in the forces that shape our environment. With his painting, Hunt confronts us with a terrifying reality, and offers us a choice. Will we be seduced by the alluring gaze of the farm maiden and give into our carnal, material desires? Or will we refuse the temptation? Hunt makes the choice easy for us. The consequences of moral decadence, of modernity, of upsetting the delicate balance of nature as hyperobject, are made clear: death permeates every brushstroke.

End Notes

ⁱ Purdue Writing Lab, "Ecocriticism // Purdue Writing Lab," (Purdue Writing Lab. Purdue University, accessed December 10, 2020), https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject specific writing/writing in literature/literary theory and sc hools of criticism/ecocriticism.html. For a more extensive description of ecocriticism, see: Alan C. Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History," American Art 23, no. 2 (2009): 24–28. ⁱⁱ Stephen Eisenman and Thomas E. Crow, Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 246. ⁱⁱⁱ Carol Jacobi, "Pre-Raphaelite Rebellion: Brotherly Love," in Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision, eds. Katharine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 2008), 36-37; 39. ^{iv} Jacobi 2008, 39. ^v Jacobi 2008, 37. Also, see John Ruskin, "Lecture IV. Pre-Raphaelitism," in Lectures on Architecture and Painting, Delivered at Edinburgh in November 1853 (New York City: Dossier Press, 2015), 43-44. vi Daniel Williams, "VICTORIAN ECOCRITICISM FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE," Victorian Literature and Culture 45, no. 3 (2017): 673. ^{vii} Williams 2017, 673. ^{viii} George Landow, William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism (New York City: Routledge, 2015), 40. Note that the author is not discussing the nineteenth century artistic movements of Realism and Symbolism, but the terms associated with the artistic practices more generally. ^{ix} Landow 2015, 41. ^x William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905), 350-351. ^{xi} Landow 2015, 10. ^{xii} Landow 2015, 34. ^{xiii} Landow 2015, 39-40. xiv Allen Staley, The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape, Oxford Studies in the History of Art and Architecture (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 21. ^{xv} Stately 1973, 21. xvi Stately 1973, 24; Carole Silver, "Visions and Revision," in Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision, eds. Katharine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 2008), 22. ^{xvii} Silver 2008, 22. ^{xviii} The poisonous nature of the apples in *The Hireling Shepherd* was noted in Landow 2015, 42. xix This detail was also noticed in Silver, "Visions and Revision," 23; Jan Marsh, "Men:Virtue and Valour," in Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision, eds. Katharine Lochnan and Carol Jacobi (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 2008), 101. ^{xx} This was also noted in Marsh, "Men:Virtue and Valour," 101. ^{xxi} Scholar John Duncan Macmillan directly associates the apples in Hunt's painting with the Temptation of Adam and Eve (Macmillan, "Holman Hunt's Hireling Shepherd: Some Reflections

on a Victorian Pastoral," *Art Bulletin* 54 (1972): 191-192). However, George Landow finds Macmillan's interpretation problematic, doubting that Hunt would have absorbed ecclesiastical imagery into his thoroughly realistic symbolism (Landow 2015, 42).

^{xxiv} Timothy Morton, "Victorian Hyperobjects," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36, no. 5 (October 20, 2014): 489.

^{xxv} Morton 2014, 489.

^{xxvi} Morton 2014, 491.

^{xxvii} Morton 2014, 491-494.

^{xxii} The sheep-rot was noted in Landow 2015, 42.

^{xxiii} The rams have also been noted in Marsh 2008, 101, who sees them as "reinforcing the theme of rampant sexuality."

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