

Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*

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Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) and Hunt's *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1854-60) exemplify the early Pre-Raphaelite use of typology as a basis for symbolic realism. Millais, who was inspired by a High Anglican sermon in Oxford to paint his picture, provides an instance of Tractarian use of such symbolism. His representation of an imagined event from the life of Jesus serves as an image of Christ as priest and sacrifice. The painter has represented the boy Christ immediately after He has wounded Himself trying to remove a nail from a board with pincers. Jesus, whom Mary comforts, holds up His hand so that both Joseph and the spectator can see His wound. The blood on His wounded palm and that which has dropped upon His foot presents a prefigurative image of both the Crucifixion and the resurrected Christ presenting Himself to the eye of faith in the form of the Man of Sorrows.⁵ Many of the details in *Christ in the House of His Parents* also prefigure the passion and death of Christ and thus reinforce the meaning of the picture's central image. The pincers and nail toward which Anne extends her hand are emblems of the Crucifixion, and the carpenter's tools and ladder on the wall behind Jesus also remind us of this event. Similarly, John's coming to Christ with a bowl of water probably serves as loose types of Christ's baptism and also of the vinegar and gall offered to Him when He was dying on the Cross. It is even possible that it could allude to the water and blood which poured forth from Christ's side when pierced by a spear — but here the possibility seems rather distant indeed. The partially woven basket on the painting's extreme left suggests both that the total scheme of Christ's atonement is not yet complete and that these reeds prefigure those mockingly thrust on Christ as King of the Jews. The bird perched on the ladder symbolizes the Holy Ghost, the sheep outside all human beings, and the workbench the communion table.

Whereas one set of types and symbols prefigures this imagined event's significance as a type of the passion and death of Jesus, another makes the

specifically High Church interpretation of them in terms of an ordained priesthood.⁶ Tractarian reserve, which colors High Church sermons, devotional poetry, and church design, here takes the visual form of a composition that separates the sacred interior inhabited by the Holy Family from that exterior space containing the sheep. Drawing upon older Northern Renaissance compositional schemes which derive from depicting the Virgin and child against a Cloth of Honour, Millais sets this event from the childhood of Jesus against a central panel surrounded by two openings into the distance. He then sets his image of the wounded Jesus close to the picture plane against the picture's central panel. Like Hunt's *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*, Millais's painting partially surrounds the young Jesus by a group of symbolic figures, and although Mary stands closest to her son in both pictures, she takes on a different meaning in each. In *Christ in the House of His Parents*, Mary joins her son as an object of veneration, for her sorrow at the young boy's wound prefigures greater sorrow in the same way that the wound serves as a type of the Crucifixion. In fact, Mary, who does not even embrace her son, appears to adopt a prayerful, reverent attitude as if she understands the full significance of this apparently everyday event. If Mary's attitude or pose is thus taken as one of sorrowful prayer, it may also be understood to prefigure her conduct at the foot of the Cross. In contrast, Hunt's portrayal of Mary and her son makes it clear that, however well-intentioned a mother she is, she takes her place with those in the temple who do not understand her son's message or significance.

Whereas *Christ in the House of His Parents* makes Tractarian emphases upon separation of priest and laity and upon the high spiritual status of Mary, Hunt's *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*, which obviously does not support Mariolatry, presents an Evangelical rendering of scriptural events. First of all, like the Evangelical preacher who emphasizes the importance of meditating upon the Bible's literal meaning or narrative, Hunt devotes much more

personal energy and pictorial emphasis than does Millais to elaborate archeological reconstructions of dress, custom, architecture, and facial type.

Whereas Millais relies upon types within Christ's life to prefigure the Saviour's death and passion, Hunt uses a similar gathering of images to present a more original interpretation of the person and message of Christ. In presenting that moment when Christ suddenly recognizes who He is, he presents a specifically Evangelical interpretation of older pictorial themes.

Like Northern Renaissance images of the Annunciation or Adoration which use types to transform these earthly scenes into emblems of the Eternal Mass in Heaven, Hunt employs a wide range of types to turn this historical moment into a privileged instant during which the temporal and eternal coincide. As one who placed little emphasis upon the sacraments, Holman Hunt was unable to devote himself, like Millais, to types which could create images of the Mass in this traditional manner, and so he dedicated much of his efforts in religious painting to finding modern equivalents for older themes. None the less, he still employs typology to surround a central image with scriptural symbols that serve to place it in a privileged, sacred time and space. For example, in *The Finding*, which combines Evangelical emphases upon preaching and conversion, Hunt includes types that comment upon the central encounter. Thus, the cornerstone originally rejected by the builders appears in the courtyard at the right side of the painting. Similarly, just as someone tries to drive out a dove, which represents the Holy Ghost, the Rabbis are trying to drive out Christ's new spiritualization of the Law. The blind beggar outside the door advances the picture's meaning in two ways: first, he serves as an emblem of the blind ignorance within and, second, he

is a type of the blind given sight by Christ. The lamb brought to slaughter over the objections of its mother offers another double significance: it parallels the relation of Christ and Mary and it shows Christ, the true sacrifice, coming to complete the Levitical law. Even the cross on Christ's belt, which had been an ornamental design since ancient times, becomes endowed with new significance in this context.

Typology, which has the intrinsic capacity to bridge pictorial realism and complex iconography, also serves to endow the scene represented with imaginative grandeur. Both Millais and Hunt produce realistically conceived representations of events from Christ's youth. Although only Hunt's subject receives the sanction of scripture, both use types to make the events they depict seem central moments in human history. Furthermore, both *Christ in the House of His Parents* and *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* use typological images to set their major actions in several temporal contexts. Millais's painting of the young Christ thus participates in several times: in that of the tormenting and Crucifixion of Jesus, His resurrection, and His presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Hunt's painting, which, unlike that of his friend, employs traditional Old Testament types, similarly participates in several times, since the images of lamb, cornerstone, and blind man set these events unfolding before our eyes within the context of Christ's later ministry and death as well as within that provided by the Church's later preaching of the Gospel. Furthermore, Hunt, who often tends to conceive himself as an artistic Messiah, also probably intends his image of Christ's discovery of His nature to apply to the self-recognitions of all those who would bring new truths to unwilling listeners.

1. Answer these questions before reading the article:

- i. Describe the paintings *Christ in the House of His Parents* and *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*. Try to find similarities and differences between the two.
- ii. How would you characterize the style of these paintings? What is the significance of other painted objects and persons around the main theme?

2. Read the article and mark the following sentences as true or false:

- i. Millais was inspired by a High Anglican sermon in Oxford to paint his picture.
- ii. Many of the details in *Christ in the House of His Parents* are only decorative.
- iii. The sheep in *Christ in the House of His Parents* symbolise the clergy.
- iv. Millais was inspired by older Northern Renaissance compositional schemes.
- v. In Millais's painting, the figure of Virgin Mary has only human features.
- vi. Hunt elaborates archeological reconstructions of dress, custom, architecture, and facial type in more depth, compared to Millais.
- vii. Holman Hunt places emphasis upon the sacraments.
- viii. Driving out a dove symbolically refers to the Rabbis, who are trying to drive out Christ's new spiritualization of the Law.
- ix. Both paintings are based on the Scripture.
- x. Both paintings participate in several periods of time.

3. Write a brief response to this text or to one of the paintings.