‘SIC LUCEAT LUX VESTRA’:
A STUDY OF ARTHUR HUGHES’S APRIL LOVE

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Man flourishes as a green leaf,
And as a leaf doth pass away


Eighty-two years after Arthur Hughes’s death, in other words after a purgatory of critical neglect that lasted as long as his lifetime (1832–1915), a study of his life and works (Roberts and Wildman, Arthur Hughes—His Life and Works) was published in 1997. More recently, the London 2003 exhibition, at the Royal Academy, of the Lloyd Webber collection enabled the public to see six major paintings by Hughes, amongst which was a smaller version of the Tate’s famous April Love. While April Love is a great favourite, and rightly considered as a Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece, its profundity—like the overall achievement of the unassuming, exceedingly modest Hughes—may well have been underestimated as this paper¹ will attempt to show.

The fact that Hughes was no member of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (he was only sixteen when it was founded in 1848) is of relative interest, for he seems to have been from the first a true Pre-Raphaelite. In 1853 the Brotherhood as such was defunct but “Pre-Raphaelitism as a style survived and for many years Hughes was seen as one of its main purveyors” (Roberts and Wildman, Arthur Hughes: The Last Pre-Raphaelite 5). The first issue (Jan. 1850) of The Germ, the short-lived Journal of the Brotherhood, made a deep impression on him and he rallied to the Pre-Raphaelite credo. It might be truer to say, however, that he found there something that was germane to his own aspirations, for the deeply-felt quality of all his work and the highly individual touch that he was always to retain preclude any servile emulation on his part. Pre-Raphaelites advocated a return to the sincerity and authenticity of the art prior to Raphael. Truthfulness to nature, a meaningful subject matter and an almost religious attention to detail were some of their more important requisites.