Brief easy on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their poetry.

The original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed by a group of young, anti-Establishment artists -- D.G. Rossetti, J.E. Millais, W. Holman Hunt, P.6 Stephens, James Collinson and Thomas Woolner -- who had drawn up a scheme for revolutionizing the pictorial arts in 1848. "The scheme entailed," says Andrew Sanders, "rejecting the norms of painting current since the late Renaissance in favour of what they insisted was the superior directness of expression of those artists who worked before the time of Raphael." It sought to combat the overtly ascetical 'Raphaelitism' (insisting upon the soul and the metaphysical-transcendental dimension being reflected in art and not the physically sensuous and 'fleshy') of the artistic establishment' by drawing on the detailed naturalism of medieval frescoes which had enjoyed its day before Raphael. Harry Blamires informs us: "In the short-lived periodical, The Germ, started in 1850, the movement was extended to literature, and it was in this journal that Rossetti's The Blessed Damozel was first published." These poets went back to the ardours of Keats who would "load every rift with ore" by embellishing ideas through sensuous detail; they also toed the line of Tennyson whose 'Parnassian' (as Hopkins styled it) fervour for the lovely and the sensuous got a further extension in their hands.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82), a painter and poet, was the man through whose work the phrase "Pre-Raphaelite Movement' came to have a bigger, vaguer, but nevertheless more useful connotation in relation to aesthetic ideals prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Blessed Damozel is a rich pictorial tapestry of literary medievalism in which the transfigured beloved leans out from 'the gold bar of Heaven', wishing for her earthly lover left behind. If the three lilies in her hand and the seven stars in her hair catch a note of Dantesque symbolism, the sensuousness of other images brings us back to the colour and warmth of the real earth. The Bride's Prelude expresses its romantic medievalism Ex with flamboyant ease and grace:

Against the haloed lattice-panes
The bridesmaid sunned her breast; Then to the glass turned tall and free,
And braced and shifted daintily
Her loin-belt through her cote-hardie.

A touch of Coleridgian magic pervades the strange haunting archaisms of ballads like Troy Town and Sister Helen, while Jenny, a poem in lively octosyllabics, is a
monologue by the poet offering sensuous descriptions of a prostitute whose hand he has on his kneel. Rossetti's sonnet sequence, The House of Life, 18 of interest since in some of these sonnets he records his love for Elizabeth Siddal whom he married and who had a premature death. Later, his Ballads and Sonnets came out in one volume in 1881, but by this time his addiction to chloral had sadly disordered him.

Rossetti's sister, Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830--94) counterbalanced her brother's excesses by remaining a devout Anglo-Catholic spinster and her poetry breathes this personality. She is known for the delightful verse fairy tale Goblin Market which apparently passes for a tale for the young but at heart is rich with psychoanalytical insights on a woman's identity. Some of Christina’s finest poems are exquisitely wrought miniatures, giving graceful stanzic form to descriptive scenes or reflective moods; her Twilight Colm and A Birthday contain many such sweet lyrics which are warm with personal emotions; e.g., 'My heart is like a singing bird'; 'When I am Dead my Dearest'. Keats is an influence on her, and Keats's diastant shadow haunts 'Autumn Violets', a poem that anxiously reverses the idea of autumnal fulfilment. Her Monna Innominate, a sonnet sequence, is her fervent record of love denied:

Many in aftertimes will say of you
'He loved her! -- while of me what will they say?...
I charge you at the Judgment make it plain
My love of you was life and not a breath.

It Rossetti's influence that first involved William Morris (1834--95) in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement and another crucial influence on him was The Stones of Venice (by John Ruskin), a three-volume treatise which exalted Gothic art and discredited Renaissance art. Morris was an artist-poet with socialistic leanings. His historical knowledge of the Middle Ages would not allow him to be satisfied with vaguely idealized Pre-Raphaelite medievalism and his reconstruction of the past in The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems releases dramatic energy, emotional tension and imaginative concentration which is closer to Browning than the 'parnassian' and 'languid' Tennyson. The Earthly Paradise (1868) comprised verse-tales which presents ... 'Pre-Raphaelite' poetry which becomes an intentional means of escape from contemporary ugliness:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke.
There is energy and freshness, too, in the long work, Pilgrims of Hope (1886), at once a poem of love and of socialism.

Charles Algernon Swinburne's (1837--1909) Atalanta in Calydon was a drama in verse on the classical Greek model and Tennyson praised it by saying: 'It is a long day since I have read anything so fine'; but it was the first of the three series of Poems and Ballads (1866, 1881 and 1889) which laid bare his poetic character and provoked the Saturday Review to call him 'the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs' with a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lempriere." No doubt Swinburne got what he asked for. As Blaimers says," he assumes the posture of a pervert prophet, preaching pagan sensuality in the negation of the religion of the ‘pale Galilean’. “However, the negative which gave Swinburne virtuosity for attractive versification was of a high order, but Swinburne laid it on waste largely by choosing tinsel for subject matter in his poetry.

In the end, Pre-Raphaelitism in painting and poetry was at heart a romantic movement which initially stemmed from a strong social conscience reflected, for instance, in the art criticism of John Ruskin, and to a lesser extent, Matthew Arnold. It reacted against the middle-class bourgeois philistinism and asked for authenticity of feeling and honest conveyance of it in art. It resisted the Renaissance paradigm (Raphael-bound) of art which pursued mere mechanical perfection to the disregard - almost cynical disregard - of spiritual feeling. As Marion Wynne-Davies points out, "This tenderness of of the spirit had existed in medieval art; hence the Brotherhood, by no means hostile to the highly polished technique, cultivated the spirit of the Middle Ages," It was also thus a protest against the crude materialistic Victorianism' of an imperialist England which had egotistically fallen into the rut of a snobbish charlatanism and philistinism in almost all spheres of life. The grounds of Pre-Raphaelitism were prepared by the Oxford Movement: in the Church of England; this had rejected the interfering state, and by its cultivation of ritual in religious worship asserted that it had brought beauty back into religion. The Pre-Raphaelites, likewise, lisped the Keatsian oracle: "Beauty 19 truth, Truth Beauty"!