Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The Copyright Law of the United States **(Title 17, United States Code)** governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.

PROJECT MUSE®

Venturing All on the Unseen

Donald Stone

Sewanee Review, Volume 121, Number 3, Summer 2013, pp. 484-490 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sew.2013.0080

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/520739

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=520739

[Tue Sep 19 13:53:32 2023] Access provided at 19 Sep 2023 18:53 GMT from Boston College

VENTURING ALL ON THE UNSEEN

DONALD STONE

In late 1872 Ralph Waldo Emerson, visiting England, was taken by his friend Charles Eliot Norton to the studio-home of Edward Burne-Jones. "The richness and beauty of poetic fancy in the pictures," Norton noted, "the simplicity, sweetness, and wide cultivation of B-J, struck Emerson with surprise. He had not thought that there was so complete an artist in England." Five years later, at the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery, Henry James saw Burne-Jones as "quite the lion of the exhibition" (which also included works by Whistler, G. F. Watts, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Frederic Leighton) and "quite at the head of the English painters of our day." James characterized his work as embodying "the art of culture, of reflection, of intellectual luxury, of aesthetic refinement"—an art "furnished by literature, by poetry, by history, by erudition." For the readers of *Fors Clavigera*, John Ruskin, the preeminent Victorian art critic, was even more enthusiastic: "His work . . . is simply the only art-work at present produced in England which will be received by the future as 'classic' in its kind. . . . I *know* that these [pictures] will be immortal." Within a few years of Burne-Jones's death, however, his claim to immortality was questioned; and only in the past three decades has he taken his place as one of England's greatest artists. In her excellent biography of the artist Fiona MacCarthy traces his rise and fall from fame, and his triumphant resurgence.

MacCarthy views Burne-Jones as "the licensed escapist of the period, perpetrating an art of ancient myths, magical landscapes, incessant sexual yearnings, that expressed deep psychological needs for contemporaries." As the author of a superb life of William Morris (which I reviewed here in 1997), MacCarthy has reservations about her subject: "He was the greater artist although Morris was unarguably the greater man." Like his closest friend Burne-Jones "was set against the age," but, unlike Morris, he expressed himself entirely in his art and avoided political involvement. "I have no politics," he maintained, "and no party, and no particular hope: only this is true, that beauty is very beautiful, and softens and comforts, and inspires, and rouses, and lifts up, and never fails." MacCarthy subtitled her Morris biography, "A Life for Our Time." Burne-Jones, by contrast, is described as "The Last Pre-Raphaelite"—a spokesman for the "Victorian Imagination." To the modern sensibility Burne-Jones's artistic credo may seem a bit too detached from life: "I mean by a picture a beautiful romantic dream of something that

Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 2012. Illustrated. 656 pages. $35.

never was, never will be—in a light better than has ever shone—in a land no one can ever define or remember, only desire." MacCarthy's considerable achievement in this book is to have removed her subject from this artistic dreamland and placed him firmly on real ground.

Are women better biographers than men? Recalling the splendid biographies written by Janet Browne (Darwin), Hermione Lee (Wharton, Woolf), Hilary Spurling (Matisse), Claire Tomalin (Pepys, Austen, Dickens), among others, I am tempted to agree with MacCarthy—here speaking of the widow Georgina Burne-Jones's *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904): "It is the woman's sense of the importance of domestic background and emotional history that distinguishes her book from the event-centred biographies of men written by men." The three best Burne-Jones biographies were written by women: besides MacCarthy's, which is by far the fullest, there are those by Georgina and by the great British novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, who wittily observed of Burne-Jones that "nearly every woman he met wanted to look after him."

In real life Edward Jones's life began inauspiciously in 1833 with the death of his mother. (An older sister had already died in infancy.) A sense of guilt at having caused her death never left him ("I don't think it is ever out of my mind what hurt I did when I was born"); and "he claimed that this had made him kind to women ever after, as . . . recompense." Some of his most memorable images—Andromeda rescued by Perseus, Danaë locked by her father in a brazen tower—may reflect this chivalric impulse, although he would draw predatory females as well—*The Beguiling of Merlin* is the most famous example. The future artist's father was one of the humble poor, a seller of frames with no interest in the works he framed. "Art was always a great bewilderment to him," his son recalled.

What more hostile environment for a lover of beauty to grow up in than industrial Birmingham, his native town? Yet, as MacCarthy contends, "Birmingham made him the artist that he was." His "solemn mythic paintings" are a radical protest again the materialistic exploitative world of his childhood. They "say more of the condition of Victorian England than a great deal more overtly political art." As a schoolboy he read omnivorously, fascinated by the civilizations of Greece and medieval Europe, "Babylon and Nineveh, Persia and Egypt." He also began early what became the lifelong habit of making spirited sketches, ranging from scenes of Roman history to caricatures of his teachers. In his teens he idolized John Henry Newman, and "trudged many miles on Sunday evenings to hear Newman preaching. 'Wherever he had told me to go then I would have gone.'" To Newman, Burne-Jones ascribed his personal indifference to a life of comfort: "In an age of materialism he taught me to venture all on the unseen."

Admitted to Newman's Oxford in 1853, he very quickly became friends with another highly imaginative and omnivorous reader—William Morris. They shared a love of Chaucer, Scott, Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, and the

chivalric fiction of Charlotte Yonge. Above all they were passionate devotees of Ruskin, whose *Stones of Venice* (volumes two and three) had just been published. Through Ruskin, Burne-Jones learned of the new pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—Millais, Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti—and he understood "instantaneously" their goal to reform the arts.

In 1855 the two friends enjoyed a walking tour through northern France (with Morris generously paying their expenses). They were overwhelmed by the Gothic cathedrals; the sight of the stained-glass windows of Chartres inspired Burne-Jones to become the leading Victorian designer of church windows. And Burne-Jones was dazzled by the sight of early Italian paintings in the Louvre. In that age before widespread photographic reproduction, he had never seen, for example, Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin.* Morris made him close his eyes "while he led him up to the painting," and when Burne-Jones opened them he was "transported with delight." "The visit to Paris," MacCarthy observes, "altered his whole future attitude to art. Until then painting had been a form of art he had more or less discounted. Now he realized that painting would be the central thing." When they returned to Oxford, he and Morris abandoned their intention of becoming clergymen: "We resolved definitely that we would begin a life of art."

Back at Oxford they founded a literary journal (in which Burne-Jones reviewed Thackeray's novel about an artist's life, *The Newcomes*), and they discovered Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which provided them (in less "gushing" form than Tennyson's versions) with those legends of Arthur and his knights which henceforth dominated their imaginations. Burne-Jones did not stay at Oxford long enough to earn a degree, however. Instead he moved to London, where he met the most gifted of the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti, who encouraged his admirer ("one of the nicest young fellows in dreamland") in his artistic calling, and who changed his name from Ted to Ned Jones. Fifteen years later he would become "Edward Burne Jones" for the first time (the hyphen came later), explaining that he didn't want "to be lost in the millions of Joneses." In the late 1850s, with Rossetti as the driving force, Burne-Jones, Morris, and other aspiring artists painted murals with Arthurian subjects for Oxford's new Union building.

In 1856 Burne-Jones became engaged to the fifteen-year-old Georgina Macdonald, the daughter of a popular Methodist minister, and one of an extraordinary group of female siblings. Looking back at how her future husband first appeared to her, Georgina ("Georgie") recalled his delicate features and was especially struck by his eyes: "From the eyes themselves power simply radiated, and as he talked and listened, if anything moved him, not only his eyes but his whole face seemed lit up from within." The indigent young enthusiast overwhelmed Georgie and her family. But she too had much to offer: an artistic sensibility and a passion for social justice. In later years she devoted herself to the cause of women's rights. Her sisters were also remarkable. Through their marriages Georgie and her husband

would have as nephews a future Nobel-winning author (Rudyard Kipling) and a distinguished prime minister (Stanley Baldwin); one of Burne-Jones's brothers-in-law, Edward Poynter, would later serve as president of the Royal Academy and director of the National Gallery. The couple finally married in 1860; and the "formidable" Georgie (much more assertive than the wives of Rossetti and Morris) proved to be "in many ways maturer than her husband."

In 1856 Burne-Jones finally met his idol, Ruskin, who, he exulted, seemed "better than his books, which are the best books in the world." The meeting with Ruskin was of vast significance. The drawings which he showed his mentor were those of a largely self-taught artist, yet Ruskin saw great promise. Besides encouraging his new protégé and recommending his works to clients, Ruskin also provided the impoverished artist with the means to travel to Italy—in Ruskin's own company on his second trip there. Ruskin hoped to expand his young friend's artistic horizons, to introduce him to painters he was unfamiliar with. With his keen sensibility Burne-Jones discovered artists who were then virtually unknown in England—Botticelli, Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca. In one case he even made a discovery in Venice of a painter new to Ruskin—Vittore Carpaccio. Like Ruskin, Burne-Jones felt at this point in his career that art must tell a story with a moral, and what better model than Carpaccio's cycle showing the life of St. George? Or that of Giotto (another favorite of Ruskin) representing the life of St. Francis? Burne-Jones subsequently maintained that he was a native of Assisi, not Birmingham. In addition to feasting on masterpieces, Burne-Jones's sense of the possibilities of art expanded. Artist-craftsmen like Botticelli had expressed themselves in a variety of art forms. And so Burne-Jones would pour out his artistic genius in a variety of forms: stained-glass windows, painted furniture, tapestries, jewelry, illustrated books. Among the well-chosen illustrations to MacCarthy's book are photos of his designs for everything from mosaics (the spectacular cycle created for St. Paul's Within the Walls, the American Episcopalian church in Rome) to embroidered slippers.

The story of Burne-Jones's rise from a poor Birmingham youth to the major British artist of his time makes for engrossing reading. MacCarthy deftly describes the making of the masterpieces—among them *The Golden Stairs*, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, and *The Wheel of Fortune*; and she recreates that "domestic background and emotional history" needed for us to understand their creator. She shows how his marriage survived the pressure caused by Burne-Jones's wayward erotic impulses—his affair with Maria Zambaco, for example, whose portrait as Phyllis in *Phyllis and Demophoön* was recognized by knowing Londoners. This 1870 watercolor (inspired by an episode in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*) caused a sensation when it was shown by the Old Watercolour Society (from which Burne-Jones resigned after the scandal) because of the male's nudity; but it was purchased by Frederick Leyland, famous as the patron for whom Whistler

created the Peacock Room, but who was more interested in Burne-Jones's works. Leyland subsequently acquired *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1873–74), perhaps his most Pre-Raphaelite painting. Burne-Jones's personal favorite from among his works was *The Wheel of Fortune* (1875–83), which was bought by Arthur Balfour. The male nudes in this extraordinary work were inspired by the Michelangelos Burne-Jones had seen in the Vatican in 1871. By now Burne-Jones was confident in his artistic judgment, convinced "that nothing grander had been done in art than Michelangelo's prophets and sybils and angels in the Sistine Chapel." In this respect he took issue with Ruskin, who had attacked Michelangelo in 1871 for "that dark carnality" which (he believed) had "fostered insolent science, and fleshly imagination" in younger artists. They continued to be friends, however; and Burne-Jones was the key witness for the defense in the notorious Whistler-versus-Ruskin libel trial of 1878. In the same review of the Grosvenor Gallery's inaugural exhibition that contained his praise of Burne-Jones's "immortal" work, Ruskin had criticized Whistler for "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." At the trial Burne-Jones testified that Whistler's works revealed "lack of finish," but he also said that they "showed an almost unrivalled appreciation of atmosphere."

For the 1880 Grosvenor Gallery exhibition Burne-Jones exhibited, to great acclaim, *The Golden Stairs*, a tribute to the young women for whom the artist had intense feelings (among them Frances Graham, Mary Gladstone, Laura Tennant, and his daughter Margaret), and who grieved him when they chose to marry. The work contains (to quote the Metropolitan Museum's Burne-Jones exhibition catalogue for 1998) a "conscious cultivation of ambiguity." No longer was Burne-Jones in thrall to the Ruskinian formula that art must contain moral stories. Instead he asked that "everyone . . . see in it what they could for themselves." *The Golden Stairs* is one of the finest examples of the aesthetic movement ("art for art's sake"), which was more a European than a British phenomenon. Still the phrase *cultivation of ambiguity* might remind us that the young Burne-Jones was a great admirer of Browning's "difficult" poetry. Rossetti read "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" to pupils of the Working Men's College (which Ruskin had helped establish and where Burne-Jones also taught for a while) "on the grounds that 'it would do them good, whether they understood it all at first hearing or not'" (quoted from the Met's catalogue entry for Burne-Jones's watercolor of *Childe Roland*). If one must apply a meaning to *The Golden Stairs*, perhaps one need do no more than quote the title of a Proust novel: in his painting of maidens descending a staircase, Burne-Jones anticipates *a l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.

The ultimate Burne-Jones masterwork was *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1880–84), which, when exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1889, solidified his reputation as one of the leading European Symbolist painters. The artist received a gold medal and the cross of the

Légion d'honneur. One of the jury members who awarded the prize was the eminent French Symbolist Gustave Moreau, who was nicknamed the "French Burne-Jones." Bought by public subscription for the Tate Gallery in 1900, *King Cophetua* is the work, according to MacCarthy, "that sums up most exactly his philosophy of art, his conviction that a life lived through beauty was everybody's birthright regardless of income or social position. As he wrote, 'that is a type of life I should most love—a centre of beauty so surrounded with beauty that you scarcely notice it—take it for granted—a land where the lowest is as worthy as the King and yet the King is there.'" To a French admirer the artist had "depicted the Apotheosis of Poverty. It was the revenge of art on life."

Before his death in 1898 Burne-Jones worked on various major projects: more stained-glass windows (including a beautiful memorial window to honor the late prime minister William Gladstone, whose daughter Mary was one of the maidens on the Golden Stairs); a design for a magnificent tapestry depicting *The Adoration of the Magi* (as in *King Cophetua*, the artist depicts the proud and mighty bowing before innocence and poverty); the sets and costumes for a stage production of *King Arthur* (a sentimentalization of the story, which Burne-Jones disliked); and the mosaics for St. Paul's Within the Walls in Rome. He also continued work on a vast canvas depicting *The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, "a last homage to Malory and a memorial to Morris," who had died in 1896. Morris had drifted apart from Burne-Jones for a time, as a result of Morris's active participation in the socialist movement, through which Burne-Jones felt that his friend was being exploited. But they reunited triumphantly in their labors on the Kelmscott Press, fulfilling "their 'dream of making a beautiful book with beautiful pictures in it.'" For their greatest joint undertaking, the Kelmscott *Chaucer* (1896), Burne-Jones provided eighty-seven illustrations. The ultra-serious Burne-Jones was also the creator of outrageously funny caricatures of Morris ("Topsy"). The most nearly lethal of his caricatures, however, are the ones Burne-Jones created of himself. At the height of his artistic and social fame Burne-Jones looked back wistfully to their early days as schoolmates, "when we were all young and strong and meant to beat this world to bits and trample its trumpery life out."

At the end of her book MacCarthy describes her own first impressions of Burne-Jones, in 1971, when she was "a young woman wheeling my infant daughter in her pushchair around the [Sheffield] City Art Gallery," which had mounted an exhibition of his work. "To begin with," she admits, "I found Burne-Jones mystifying but I liked him more and more." The Sheffield exhibition was followed by the Tate's retrospective in 1975, which provided the "first real revelation of Burne-Jones's magnificent strangeness." By the time of the Met's exhibition (*Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist and Dreamer*, 1998), one could appreciate the artist's complete oeuvre: from the Pre-Raphaelite watercolors to the late Symbolist paintings, including such

delightful oddities as the piano covered with paintings illustrating Morris's poem *The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice*, that he made for his favorite patron, William Graham, in 1879. When I first visited this exhibition I was not at first convinced that Burne-Jones was worthy of such a massive exhibition at the Met; but, like MacCarthy, I eventually came to admire the many beautiful pieces on display—and to laugh at the lively and humorous caricatures. MacCarthy's book proves, once and for all, what a great artist Burne-Jones was. For the cover illustration the editors have chosen an exquisite drawing of the head of a woman, painted in gold on a purple ground; and it seems to me as lovely as one of the early Renaissance drawings Burne-Jones loved.

The organizers of the Met exhibition called him "the greatest British artist of the nineteenth century, after Turner and perhaps John Constable." (I would place Constable at the top of the list.) But perhaps the best tribute to Burne-Jones was made by his friend George Eliot: "I want in gratitude to tell you that your work makes life larger and more beautiful to us."

JOSEPH FRANK ON DOSTOEVSKY AND MODERNITY

Franklin D'Olier Reeve, a regular contributor to the SR *since 1982, died at eighty-four of complications of diabetes on June 28th. Among his many books was an account of his acting as translator for Robert Frost when Frost visited the Soviet Union during Nikita Khrushchev's stint as premier. The visit occurred in 1962 at the request of President John F. Kennedy. Mr. Reeve translated eight books from Russian; wrote five plays and seven novels, five books of criticism, and over a dozen books of poetry. Educated at Phillips Exeter Academy, Princeton, and Columbia, he gave up a tenured position at Wesleyan to become a full-time writer. Earlier he had considered acting as a career. His many other accomplishments included founding the* Poetry Review, *translating Solzhenitsyn's Nobel lecture (1970), and delivering the keynote address at the International Conference of Translators of Russian in 2007 in Moscow. He also earned the Tate prize for the best poetry published in this magazine in 2004.*

Joseph Frank, *Responses to Modernity: Essays in the Politics of Culture*. Fordham University Press, 2012. xii + 234 pages. $45; Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, ed. Mary Petrusewicz. Princeton University Press, 2012. xxiv + 968 pages. $24.95 pb.