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Liberal dreaminess and *The Golden Stairs* of Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)

Phyllis Weliver

On 19 November 1884, a few days before her 37th birthday, Prime Minister Gladstone's middle daughter, Mary, wrote in her diary about a dinner party hosted by William Graham's family. Her fellow guests were painter Edward Burne-Jones (B.J.), her brother Herbert, cousins Alfred and Laura Lyttelton, and horticulturist Mrs CW Earle.

Laura + Mrs Earle + B.J. kept up an incessant + brilliant fire at my end – talking of the Nihilists only addressing themselves to young + old for sympathy + help, middle age was condemned hopelessly. 'Young men see visions + old men dream dreams but the middle aged only chew.' (B.J.) The whole evening was good fun¹

Burne-Jones's repartee relied upon the context of the meal (chewing) and the fact that the party consisted of political liberals who felt their social visions to have biblical purpose. Burne-Jones knew his Bible. He had read Theology at Oxford with a view to becoming an Anglican vicar and, since the 1850s, had been designing stained glass windows, which required knowing and interpreting biblical texts. The painter's reference was to Acts 2:17: 'And it shall come to passe in the last dayes (saith God) I will powre out of my Spirit vpon all flesh: and your sonnes and your daughters shall prophesie, and your yong men shall see visions, and your old men shall dreame dreames'.² To the close-knit dinner group, hosted by ex-MP and art collector William Graham, dreams and visions were God's prophetic spirit poured upon all people, often through the medium of the arts. In the vein of the Romantic poet and illustrator William Blake, 'Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably.'³

By 1884, Burne-Jones had long been identified by his 'political notoriety, being described by William Allingham in 1866 as a "People's Man", [and] by Charles Eliot Norton in 1869 as "a strong, almost a bitter Republican", to whom the condition of England is ... a scandal and a reproach"⁴ Yet Burne-Jones's dreamy paintings have generally been understood as standing apart from this political radicalism – a disassociation seemingly supported by two well-known remarks. First, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, writing to William Allingham on 6 March 1856, spoke of Burne-Jones as '[o]ne of the nicest young fellows in – *Dreamland*'.⁵ Rossetti's judgment came from having only just met Burne-Jones; dreamland, he clarifies, is where 'most of the writers in that miraculous piece of literature [*The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*] seem to be. Surely this cometh in some wise of the Germ [*sic*], with which it might bind up.'⁶ A product of Burne-Jones's, William Morris's and William Fulford's Brotherhood while at Oxford, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* was indeed inspired by Rossetti's periodical, *The Germ*, which examined how 'works of imagination once served both devotional and social functions'.⁷ *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* differed in its overt social reform orientation. Rossetti's comment, moreover, was ultimately not the dismissal that it appears to be, for Rossetti subsequently contributed more than once to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* and in the process became close friends with Burne-Jones.⁸ Second, in his 1882



1 *The Golden Stairs* by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Bt (1833–1898), 1876–80. Oil on canvas, 269.2 x 116.8 cm. Tate Britain

lecture tour of America, Oscar Wilde remembered that Burne-Jones said, 'the more materialistic science becomes, the more angels shall I paint: their wings are my protest in favour of the immortality of the soul.'⁹ Rather than suggesting the paintings' escapism from or defiance to politics, what if those dreamy angels could be directly connected to Burne-Jones's political liberalism?

The scriptural verse that underlay Burne-Jones's dinner-table banter certainly became a sort of life creed to Mary Gladstone, perhaps because she and her circle understood it to align with liberal ideology. Liberal MP and biographer, George WE Russell, used the same words in his memorial of Mary's husband, Harry Drew, who was Vicar of a poor North Wales mining community:

'Young men see visions, and old men dream dreams.' Harry Drew saw visions all through his life. He saw a vision of a fair and stately edifice on the hill-top of Buckley, a Church which would create a sense of worship. [...] By the exercise of the greatest generosity and perseverance he raised or contributed the £10,000 which was required for the purpose.¹⁰

Drew and his wife, Mary, made real their visions: besides their dedication to making worship beautiful, they also proposed and funded the introduction of street lights in Buckley and campaigned to ensure Christian education in state schools.¹¹ This social theology aligned with the idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green, Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, which required the moral and physical conditions of impoverished Britons to improve for everyone's sake.¹² IM Greengarten summarizes Green's social position as: 'No member of society could achieve a truly moral existence while other members were prevented from doing so.'¹³

On 17 April 1912, a year after the publication of *Harry Drew: A Memorial Sketch*, 64-year-old Mary Drew similarly wrote in her diary about dining with George Wyndham, past Conservative Chief Secretary for Ireland and author: 'very clever, very interesting, yet it might be much better for while young men see visions, the author has forgotten that old men dream dreams, + he has altogether left out the possibility of life meaning "from strength to strength".'¹⁴ The life trajectory of visions to dreams, strength to strength, had been the Gladstone family reality as the patriarch's vigorous health seemed divinely preserved. The statesman mused on 28 December 1879, the eve of his birthday:

For the last 3½ years [...] the battle to be fought was a battle of justice humanity freedom law, [...] and all on a gigantic scale. The word spoken was a word for millions, and for millions who themselves cannot speak. If I really believe this then I should regard my having been morally forced into this work as a great and high election of God. And certainly I cannot but believe that He has given me special gifts of strength¹⁵

Because William Ewart Gladstone was 74 years old and robustly occupying only the second of his four prime ministries during the autumn 1884 dinner mentioned above, the creed also seemed a national reality.

The biblical passage aligns with the idealism of British liberalism, more caustically alluded to in 1894 by future Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour while dining with his friend, Mary. Her diary entry for 20–27 February noted his comment: 'A Conservative believes in a real past, + a Radical in an imaginary future.'¹⁶ In referring to the past, Balfour intended a Conservative defence of the traditional feudal power base, the Church of England and the crown. In contrast, liberalism emphasized a constitutional government that was dedicated to making judicious reforms.¹⁷ It became gradually more interventionist at the turn of the century in order to further a social vision that often seemed utopic – to supporters genuinely so and to opponents unreasonably.

Liberalism has been criticized as a mask of power by Marxists, Foucauldians and poststructuralists,¹⁸ but in 1880, liberalism was presented and understood as a prophetic vision of spiritual human progress which aimed to address real social problems, founded upon ideas of individuals and classes in relationship, to mutual benefit.

The artistic perception and representation of a liberal world as existing 'in-between' people can be seen in *The Golden Stairs* (Pl 1), painted by the politically liberal Edward Burne-Jones and featuring at its centre a violinist and her listener – a woman turning her ear to the spectator and depicting sonic 'in-betweenness'. I intend by this term political theorist Hannah Arendt's definition of the 'world' as the 'in-between which should [...] form] between the individual and his fellow men'.¹⁹ As one of Mary Gladstone's closest friends, Burne-Jones often socialized with Mary and attended the Gladstone family salon. Every Thursday during the London season, Gladstone and his hostess (daughter Mary), led illustrious family, friends and acquaintances in conversation at two well-appointed, small breakfast tables, frequently followed at Mary's initiative in the 1870s by hours of music-making. The assembled group created an associational event that set aside the affronts caused by partisan debate in favour of witty repartee and a music-making that stressed the feeling relationships among music-maker(s), listeners and the divine.²⁰

Interpretations of *The Golden Stairs* commonly present its non-referentiality, but the painting can be read as showing the prophetic qualities perceived in liberalism and its leisured gatherings, and the invitation to listen. Such an interpretation rests upon contextualizing the canvas in terms of Burne-Jones's ongoing interest in the story of Jacob's ladder (frequently called the golden stairs), his Blakean approach, and details of the picture's execution and exhibition. This essay focuses on how a specifically musical dreaminess had an iconography that was yoked to the liberal sense of being guided by a prophetic vision that could be realized through judicious social reforms. These nested features are all found in the painting of Burne-Jones, the undisputed leader of the Aesthetic school of visual art.

Looking dreamy: Edward Burne-Jones

A dreamy, mystical quality is commonly acknowledged as an identifying feature of Burne-Jones's aesthetics, but this painter was much more than the Symbolist that convention would have. Burne-Jones was linked to the first phase of Pre-Raphaelitism through his close friendship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the original Brotherhood along with John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt. As Sophia Andres explains, a second phase of Pre-Raphaelitism, led by Burne-Jones, included his followers 'Spencer Stanhope, J.M. Strudwick, Walter Crane, Marie Spartali, and Evelyn Pickering.'²¹ Andres follows the standard critical idea of this second school as 'lack[ing] the detailed realism and narrative content of early Pre-Raphaelitism.'²² However, Burne-Jones's painting, *The Golden Stairs*, was in fact a vision of specific liberal political ideals. Reciprocally, this perception illuminates how components of Aestheticism impacted liberalism. The last – despite Linda Dowling's and JW Burrow's important work – still seems a startling formulation given the customary association of Aestheticism with the later socialism of William Morris and Oscar Wilde, not the staunch liberalism of Burne-Jones or even Morris who shared Burne-Jones's liberal views until 1883.²³

Aestheticism's dreaminess became chic at almost the exact moment that Gladstone assumed the prime ministry for a second time, but this dreaminess also achieved a specifically

liberal edge, largely due to Burne-Jones's celebrated painting, *The Golden Stairs*, first exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery at a private showing on 30 April 1880 and then opening to the public on 4 May.²⁴ As a result of 'Burne-Jones's wan and willowy maidens, exquisitely painted, who faltered up and down the Golden Stairs', novelist EF Benson reminisced, '[i]t became fashionable in cultured circles to be pensive', for women to be dreamy.²⁵ WS Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan famously found inspiration in the ladies on the golden stairs for *Patience*.²⁶ This operetta concerns the 'rivalry between two aesthetic fanatics, worshipped by a chorus of female aesthetes'.²⁷ In *Patience*, most of the female singers are clad in aesthetic robes and declare new-found love for a poet in place of the Dragoon Guards to whom they were engaged a year previously; 'since then' explains Angela in Act I, 'our tastes have been etherealized, our perceptions exalted'.²⁸ It seems potentially significant that *Patience* premiered on 23 April 1881, a year and a day after Gladstone formed his new government.

Slightly ahead of the curve, Mary Gladstone noted with astonishment the qualities of Burne-Jones's dreaminess in August 1879, precisely as she was developing an awareness of how important her father was and honing a sense of what her own contribution to the world might be.²⁹ During Burne-Jones's visit to the Gladstone family home, Hawarden Castle in Wales, Mary explained in a striking letter to her closest friend, Margaret Cowell Stepney that, despite the received opinion, Burne-Jones seemed to be a believer. 'And you know it is rather a blurring in these days, but he is a Christian.'³⁰ Mary continued:

he has such curiously unexpectedly wholesome tastes for that sort of artist who lives in Dreamland, his devotion to Scott, his appreciation of [unnamed] Miss Austen, his enthusiasm for old ballads + wild flowers, + light + warmth + sunshine_ his great faith + simplicity, + Ruskin-like reverence + chivalry towards everything old + great, all these make a very a rare + attractive combination.³¹

The fame of Walter Scott, Jane Austen and John Ruskin rested largely on their realism in their respective genres of poetry, fiction, non-fictional prose and painting. In contrast, Burne-Jones burst into fame with what I shall describe as a sort of 'magic mirror' approach that nonetheless had its roots in his 'faith' and his attempt to unlock the visionary nature of this natural world in which he delighted.

The artist's wife described this method in relation to Burne-Jones's *The Flower Book* (1882; *posth.* 1905). 'The pictures in this book are not of flowers themselves, but of subjects suggested by their names.'³² 'Jacob's Ladder' does not picture the flower of this name. (Pl 2) Rather, the subtitle explains: 'These are Angels returning to heaven.'³³ Seven angels ascend a ladder in 'a circle about six inches in diameter – a kind of magic mirror in which the vision appears –' Georgiana Burne-Jones suggests in the Preface.³⁴ The 'mirror', instead of reflecting physical reality (a flower), is a 'magic' mirror that reveals a predominantly Old Testament 'vision'. To my way of thinking, *The Golden Stairs* also takes a 'magic mirror' approach to liberalism: it shows what seemed a prophetic truth.

This approach aligns Burne-Jones with William Blake's sense of how the arts and the Bible worked together. The Pre-Raphaelite circle had encountered Blake's radicalism far in advance of his revival in the 1880s,³⁵ and Burne-Jones's watercolours in *The Flower Book* show that he followed Blake's sense of true religion as coming from 'the immediate apprehension of God, which comes through vision'.³⁶ Christopher Rowland supports this assessment of the verity of 'the Spirit over the Letter' by making clear Blake's distrust of any text that might be seen as authoritative (the Bible or even his own illustrations of biblical text), preferring instead



2 'Jacob's Ladder' by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Bt (1833–1898), *The Flower Book*, London 1905, p11. Shelf mark L.R.27.a.9. British Library, London

a view of the Bible as 'the Great Code of Art' as he put it in his *Laocoön* engraving; his art expressed the world as 'a World of Imagination & Vision.'³⁷ For Rowland, Blake 'seems to indicate that the Bible offered in its variety and totality the prime hermeneutical and aesthetic guide, full of interpretative potential'. The text was thus 'a gateway to perception, a stimulus to the imagination' that emphasized the subjectivity of assessment.³⁸ To Blake, visual depictions of the Bible were finally supernaturally led. In *An Introduction to the People's Bible History*, WE Gladstone agreed with this historical theological view of the Bible as shedding light on a virtuous path for humanity; the Grand Old Man of British politics understood it as a historically-constructed book rather than an authoritative text.

Similar to Blake, Mary Gladstone noted Burne-Jones's 'definition of a picture' on the flyleaf of her copy of *The Stones of Venice*, volume 3: 'A beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be – in the light better than any light that ever shone – in a land no one can define or remember – only desire –'³⁹ This familiar quotation is usually taken as yet another instance of Burne-Jones's divorce from reality. But taken in context of where Mary placed it within the 39-volume *Works of John Ruskin*, as well as the fact that this is the only non-Ruskin annotation in her copious marginalia and that Mary was close to Burne-Jones and Ruskin, the citation reveals a valuable connection that she made between her friends' conceptions of dreams. Because Mary's practice was to annotate flyleaves with material relating to the contents of the book at hand (often relating to God and nature or art), there is strong evidence that something in *The Stones of Venice: Third, or Renaissance Period* inspired her to write Burne-Jones's words. Of the several instances in this volume where Mary marks Ruskin's text with a line down the margin (the sort that her father identified in the key to his annotations as a passage to 'notice'⁴⁰), the most relevant to the Burne-Jones citation is part of Chapter II, 'Roman Renaissance'. Having introduced the idea that art is not concerned with solar measurements but rather with how 'in the heavens God hath set a tabernacle for the sun,'⁴¹ §10 continues with the query, 'how is such truth as this to be ascertained and accumulated?'⁴² After the answer, 'by per-

ception and feeling', '[n]ever either by reasoning or report',⁴³ Mary drew a 'notice' line next to these sentences: 'Nothing must come between Nature and the artist's sight; nothing between God and the artist's soul.'⁴⁴ Placing these words by Ruskin next to those by Burne-Jones in a sense unlocks the fly-leaf quotation's own visionary potential; rather than 'dream' as unreality, pictures are sacred messages that communicate something dimly known and desired by all. To Burne-Jones, art unlocked the 'magic mirror' of Christian truths in the surrounding natural, social and political world, but not in an allegorical sense. He attempted to communicate inspired truths.

To British Aestheticism and late Victorian political liberalism, looking dreamy signified inner Christian vision, muscular thought and the passionate modern energy of social reform. No allegory here. Gladstone's nephew by marriage, Edward Talbot, first Warden of the Anglican Keble College and convener of a group of Oxford followers of Green's ideas, was perceived in the early 1870s as having a 'half-dreamy, half-reflective manner which showed that he knew far more about you than you supposed'.⁴⁵ Similarly, Mary finally chose to marry a man who she described as 'sad and dreamy'.⁴⁶ Dreaminess indicated a liberal idealism, itself based on supernatural revelation. I do not mean that dreamy-seeming men and women must be political liberals, but rather that in Burne-Jones's hands dreaminess became an iconographic representation of a visionary humanism generally identified as liberal. Mary also described conservative Arthur Balfour as 'dreamy' in an attempt to make clear the 'visionary' qualities he seemed to have when she first met him, when his conservatism had yet to be established.⁴⁷

Mary herself was characterized by her chaperone to the May 1875 Düsseldorf music festival, Mary Elizabeth Ponsonby, as 'difficult to know; she certainly was not commonplace, a capital musician, and a kind of latent force about her reminding one of her father, but on the whole the unknown predominated, absent and dreamy like her mother'.⁴⁸ Equating dreaminess with 'absence' suggests precisely that lack of engagement that has so often been associated with Burne-Jones's '*Dreamland*'.⁴⁹ The Düsseldorf trip was indeed a sort of escapism in music for Mary Gladstone, who was reeling from the death of her beloved cousin, May Lyttelton, two months earlier on 21 March. Yet Mary was far from politically unengaged; she became her father's secretary in October 1876 and went on to serve as one of Gladstone's five prime ministerial private secretaries in 1881 – probably the first woman to have this role. As for Ponsonby, the politically liberal wife of Queen Victoria's private secretary made her observation over a year before Burne-Jones began *The Golden Stairs*. Such qualities may have been emphasized by Burne-Jones who believed that faces were more than likenesses: 'The only expression allowable in great portraiture is the expression of character and moral quality, [...] in fact you only want types, symbols, suggestions.'⁵⁰ Suggestions and symbols were remarkably concrete when they were modelled on the personalities of actual people or when they expressed values held in common with the larger social surround, where the simple fact of contemplating 'character and moral quality' in beautiful art was held to be possible for all people; aesthetic criticism was at root democratic, as Ruskin had taught in his 1851–53 masterpiece, *The Stones of Venice*.⁵¹

This dreamy iconography of liberalism has been critically neglected despite intersecting with a longer tradition in Western letters, literature and music. Elsewhere, I have explored how Aesthetic literature nests together depictions

of languid men with treatments of impressionistic music (eg, Chopin's salon repertoire) and vivid, energetic language that epitomized sumptuous expression for its own sake, or *l'art pour l'art*.⁵² In *The Vulgarization of Art*, Linda Dowling assesses the importance of 'aesthetic democracy' to Victorian Britain in a period reeling from a destabilizing sense of the extremity of rapid progress and the perceived spiritual desolation of Mammon-worship. There was undoubtedly a religious component to this 'Whig aesthetics'.⁵³ Thus John Morley, editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, understood Walter Pater's expression of liberalism as an outgrowth of the Oxford movement. Despite its removal from its theological foundation, Pater's aesthetics were 'equally a protest against the mechanical and graceless formalism of the modern era, equally an attempt to find a substitute for a narrow popular creed in a return upon the older manifestations of the human spirit, and equally a craving for the infusion of something harmonious and beautiful about the bare lines of daily living'.⁵⁴ An 1869 review in *The Times* of 'Preraphaelite' works tellingly linked the paintings to 'the influences which breed ritualism in worship,' and to medieval domestic decor which 'feeds [...] its faith on old legend and ceremonial, [...] Its tap-root, probably, is the natural reaction in a certain class of minds against the mean and prosaic aspects of contemporary work-a-day life.'⁵⁵ Mary Gladstone, her friends at Oxford (mostly theologians influenced by TH Green), and Burne-Jones continued to be guided by what Morley calls a 'powerful attempt to revive a gracious spirituality in the country by a renovation of sacramentalism'⁵⁶ and also by showing divine beauty in everyday, common life – including the gatherings of elite Londoners for conversation and music-making.

The Golden Stairs in context

The elements discussed above come together in a celebrated depiction of communal music-making that had substantial social and aesthetic impact. *The Golden Stairs* is considered one of the most representative paintings of the Aesthetic movement, which emphasizes the sensual rather than a recognizable subject or story. The imposing canvas (nine by four feet) was the first large work painted by Burne-Jones.⁵⁷ It shows eighteen beautiful, barefoot women descending an interior staircase. From its unveiling at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1880, the painting was considered mysterious because it was unclear where the ladies were going or for what purpose.⁵⁸ The focus is on slightly varied hues that rhythmically alternate, the long lines of loose gowns with pleated hems and the dreaminess of expression. Pre-Raphaelite FG Stephens put it thus in his *Athenaeum* review:

damsels, like those angels we see in heads of Gothic porches, such as the Portico de la Gloria of Compostella, carry various instruments of music, such as cymbals, silver trumpets and pipes, tambourines, violas, and dulcimers. They troop past like spirits in an enchanted dream, each moving gracefully, freely, and in unison with her neighbours [...] all are earnest⁵⁹

Stephens acknowledges that Burne-Jones had in mind medieval figures ('Gothic porches'), befitting the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with Chaucer, a figure whom Burne-Jones treated in 'dream-vision works'.⁶⁰ Medieval precedents were important for Victorian ideas of democracy, too, which were conceptualized as developing a British tradition begun with Magna Carta. Thus poet Martin Tupper wrote to Gladstone a year before the Liberal party was established: 'We are perpetually expanding Magna Carta ... and all our reform bills & reforms are but the expression of our hatred against tyrannies & of our love of popular liberty. Therefore do we want as our great popular leader the

man who ... is rather for the many than for the few'.⁶¹

A frequent response to fears of excessive rationalism in Victorian Britain was to examine and emulate elements of seemingly model societies, including ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy (elements that palimpsest-like layer in *The Golden Stairs*, according to Stephens).⁶² Resulting studies of such cultures by Ruskin and Pater in the 1870s and 1880s, although predominantly focused on art and architecture, cast musical practices as communal, community-building and spiritualizing. Jacob Burckhardt's pioneering cultural history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860, trans. 1878), introduced by Pater to England, explains elite music-making in Italy: 'Wherever we meet with a description of social intercourse, there music and singing are always and expressly mentioned.'⁶³ Because Pater's *The Renaissance* similarly conceives of music-making as a communal activity, we can also find greater meaning in his statement regarding the aspiration of all art 'towards the condition of music.'⁶⁴ In his essay on Giorgione, Pater calls attention to music as imbuing a sort of democratic value in leisure time. 'In [...] music or music-like intervals in our existence, life itself is conceived as a sort of listening – listening to music, to the reading of Bandello's novels, to the sound of water, to time as it flies. [...] at such times, the stress of our servile, everyday attentiveness being relaxed, the happier powers in things without us are permitted free passage, and have their way with us.' The activity of listening to music positions the subject in relation to the external world (both social and natural). It creates and enacts the 'in-between', exchanging 'unexpected blessedness' and 'moments of play'⁶⁵ (playfulness, playing music) for modern stress.

Ruskin similarly made musical education fundamental to his vision of the experimental, neo-pastoral Guild of St George.⁶⁶ This ideal community was to be brought about, in part, by children executing Elizabethan chants at school services. In *Rock Honeycomb: Broken Pieces of Sir Philip Sidney's Psalter, Laid up in Store for English Homes* (1877), Ruskin opined:

Every child should be taught, from its youth, to govern its voice discreetly and dexterously, as it does its hands; and not to be able to sing should be more disgraceful than not being able to read or write. For it is quite possible to lead a virtuous and happy life without books, or ink; but not without wishing to sing, when we are happy; nor without meeting with continual occasions when our song, if right, would be a kind service to others.⁶⁷

The rhetoric of individual governance here has close synergy with ethical education and musical expression. During his 1870 Oxford 'Lectures on Art', Ruskin opined that of all the arts, music was the most moral: 'Question with yourselves respecting any feeling that has taken strong possession of your mind, "Could this be sung by a master and sung nobly, with a true melody and art?" Then it is right feeling'.⁶⁸ All art, but particularly music, is 'an index of the moral purity and majesty of the emotion it expresses';⁶⁹ to make 'true melody' requires 'moral purity and majesty.'

The dreamy ladies on *The Golden Stairs* are joined through their musicality, movement, earnestness and liberalism – a thus-far neglected politics that can clearly be seen when the picture is contextualized in terms of when it was created and exhibited. Christopher Wood is doubtless correct in surmising that when Society attended the exhibition, recognizing some of the models would have 'help[ed] to make the picture a topic of conversation at the Grosvenor.'⁷⁰ What remains unremarked is that the majority of the known models were liberal women, some of whom attended the dinner mentioned at the

beginning of this article: Burne-Jones's daughter, Margaret, in profile at the top with the trumpet; William Morris's daughter, May, playing the stringed instrument and facing out; the sisters Laura and Margot Tennant behind her (Laura would marry Gladstone's nephew, Alfred Lyttelton; Margot would become the wife of a later Liberal prime minister, HH Asquith); Frances Graham at the bottom holding cymbals; and the head of Mary Gladstone just behind her.⁷¹ Also featured are renowned beauties: the artist Mary Stuart Wortley (daughter of a Conservative MP but married in 1880 to a friend of Gladstone's, Ralph King-Milbanke, 2nd Earl of Lovelace), Julia Prinsep Stephen (wife of the then-politically liberal Leslie Stephen and model for photographer Julia Margaret Cameron), and actress Edith Gellibrand.⁷² Burne-Jones was politically liberal, too, and had a 'life long worship' of Gladstone, Mary confided in a letter to Cowell Stepney, penned on 19 or 20 August 1879.⁷³ Burne-Jones may therefore have simply painted the people in his immediate circle. However, the liberalism of the painting is further established by having been commissioned by Liberal MP, Cyril Flower, later first earl of Battersea. The world of art and politics additionally interweaves when we realize that Flower's wife Constance (née Rothschild) was cousin to Blanche, Lady Lindsay, and her husband, Sir Coutts Lindsay, founder of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 where Burne-Jones's art prominently featured.

Burne-Jones began *The Golden Stairs* during the summer of 1876 when Bulgarian atrocities attracted British attention and galvanized the semi-retired Gladstone to speak out on the so-called Eastern Question. As is commonly known, the 'EQ' was arguably the single political issue that was most responsible for leading to Gladstone's second administration; it drew him out of retirement in late August 1876 and was an ongoing concern in subsequent months and years. The canvas was in progress during the entirety of the political fervour leading to Gladstone's second premiership and the painter pressed himself to finish the canvas on 22 April 1880,⁷⁴ the day that Gladstone was invited to Windsor to form his government. During April, Burne-Jones was in close contact with Mary Gladstone, whom he urged to visit him. She clearly understood the purpose of the visit as tied to *The Golden Stairs*: 'I am going to try + get to B.J.'s today to see his Gros. Gal. picture wh. is just finished', she wrote to her cousin Lavinia Talbot on 24 April.⁷⁵ Despite her bustling life just then, with visits to the family home from 'ministers-to-be, touts, friends' and the Prince of Wales, Mary made a point of running off on the 24th to 'Mr. B.J.'s to see his lovely girls pic.' and then returning with cousin Alfred Lyttelton on the 29th (as mentioned, his future wife was also pictured).⁷⁶ The exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery commenced with a private showing on Friday, 30 April 1880, just days into the new Liberal administration. Mary attended both it and the Royal Academy, much preferring the Grosvenor; 'the Golden Stairs is most lovely', she recorded in her diary.⁷⁷

Taken together, the known models for the painting, its patron and the timing of the exhibition clearly references Liberalism, but to understand the painting's full contextual meaning, we need also to examine how the painting can be read as biblical vision. Then and now, 'the golden stairs' commonly refers to the ladder seen by Jacob in a prophetic dream:

And he dreamed, and beholde, a ladder set vp on the earth, and the top of it reached to heauen: and beholde the Angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood about it, and said, '[...] the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I giue it, and to thy seede. [...] I am with thee, and will keepe thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee againe into this land: for I will not leaue thee, vntill I haue done that which I haue spoken to thee of.'⁷⁸

The passage from Genesis is ordinarily interpreted as God identifying the chosen people and pledging to restore the earth to righteousness. Ruskin, for one, understood the story of Jacob's ladder as making clear the sacredness of the 'whole Earth', rather than the Church only being sacred; it can be 'any place where God lets down the ladder.'⁷⁹ God later changes Jacob's name to Israel and his children with Rachel begin the tribe of Dan.

'Jacob's Ladder' seems to have been an on-going interest to Burne-Jones. It was on his mind in the early eighties for he rendered it as the third watercolour in *The Flower Book* (he began the series of watercolours in 1882). In the early 1860s, Burne-Jones most likely helped to execute a mural in the master bedroom of William Morris's first commissioned home, Red House. William Morris, Ford Madox Brown, Elizabeth Siddal, and probably Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones together painted a representation of Genesis 30:6, the founding of Israel, using each other's faces for the figures of Adam and Eve, Noah, Rachel and Jacob with his ladder.⁸⁰ The painting was an enacted, energetic, interactive part of a boisterous social environment where youthful friends gathered together and played games, music and practical jokes.⁸¹ The biblical passage follows Rachel's realization that she cannot conceive a child and offers Bilhah as a surrogate mother, thus showing extreme loyalty to God and Jacob in desiring to found the people of Israel through producing a son. Because Genesis is the supreme book of revelation, and all of the depicted figures create important lineages, the mural depicts begetting the people of Israel in arts and politics. Of course, the young Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood conceived their art as a new style, and as dedicated to building domestic communities (through the establishment of Morris & Co.) and national utopias (Ruskin's, Morris's and Burne-Jones's strong convictions about art's democratic role). Because Jacob is one of the two most famous prophetic dreamers in the Bible (Joseph is the other), *The Golden Stairs* can also be linked to the passage from Acts that Burne-Jones quoted at the 1884 dinner (seeing visions, dreaming dreams).

The painting, read as a Christian insight into political liberalism, reveals the blue sky of heaven appearing through a hole in the roof. The angels who descend to earth to enact a divinely redemptive promise are liberal women holding musical instruments, some of whom languidly bow or pluck. The musical instruments and the pleased faces suggest sonic harmony and create a bond of like activity and response. These figures incline toward each other while talking, listening and looking. Mary Gladstone, first of the recognizable models (behind two anonymous figures), leads other ladies, named and nameless, down a stairway that might represent democracy in its plain materials and golden promise – the last may also be taken to reference Liberalism's party colour yellow. The statesman's daughter is both leader and one of a community that was vested with divine meaning. In *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, Catherine Robson presents the national fantasy that girls were 'both repository of purity and moral worth' – a belief that Ruskin's *The Ethics of Dust* (1866) furthered with its argument that 'young femininity is connected to the unsullied and vital purity of long-lost origins'.⁸² Burne-Jones knew Ruskin and the book, which was also owned and annotated by Mary Gladstone.⁸³ Unwed women were imagined as retaining something of the pure child, making them the ideal communicators of a divine message which, most perfectly, would be musical. In his 1839 article on 'The Opera', Carlyle

nicely articulated an enduring nineteenth-century perception: 'Music is well said to be the speech of angels, in fact, nothing among the utterances allowed to man is felt to be so divine. It brings us near to the Infinite'.⁸⁴

Angels at this time were also a way of speaking about good people. Because TH Green conceived that people were spiritual as well as animal, and becoming only more eternal with time,⁸⁵ the picture could have been read as an imaginative representation of what spiritually existed. Thus when Mary attended a service at St Anne's in London:

Dr Colman's sermon today quite magnificent. specially the last half on 'The first shall be last, + the last first' – [...] All the latter part on the hidden angels of this world was splendid. [...] was never so excited by a sermon in my life.⁸⁶

The detection of the world's 'hidden angels' became an ongoing enthusiasm for Mary and her close friend, Henry Scott Holland, the Oxford don and later Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. Thus Holland to Mary in March 1883: 'I saw an "Angel" last night, a Mr. —, from some living in Northamptonshire, beautiful, intelligent, thoughtful, charming.'⁸⁷ Notably, Green was Holland's tutor for reading Greats at Oxford.⁸⁸ Similarly, in Burne-Jones's *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*, Chaucer seems to be dreaming of an angel and the titular 'good women'. Because we know that Burne-Jones was also inspired by Green's ideas,⁸⁹ might we not similarly interpret Burne-Jones's famous words, 'the more materialistic science becomes, the more angels shall I paint',⁹⁰ as a concern to communicate a spiritually beautiful world in the face of increasing materialism? This is a political stance. Painting angels is not escapist, but rather a liberal humanist and social theological vision of God's intrinsic presence in the world. In this sense, God is our best self and therefore perceivable through our glorious creations.⁹¹ *The Golden Stairs* is not an obvious reverie, as in *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*; it is a vision of God's angelic messengers.

The ideal civic bond, communicated through interactive angelic women in *The Golden Stairs*, can be seen to extend to the viewer through his or her contemplation of this sensuous harmony. Despite copious requests for an interpretation of the painting, Burne-Jones would not comply.⁹² He encouraged the viewer's subjective response; 'he wanted every one to see in it what they could for themselves', recalled Georgiana.⁹³ Thus her husband furthered a democracy of aesthetic perception that was something like what Friedrich Schiller eloquently expressed in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1794–95):

beauty alone can confer upon him [man] a social character. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual. All other forms of perception divide man, because they are founded exclusively either upon the sensuous or upon the spiritual part of his being; [...] only the aesthetic mode of communication unites society, because it relates to that which is common to all.⁹⁴

Simply highlighting beauty and the process of assessment as individually improving and therefore socially redemptive was a liberal stance extending back to the Earl of Shaftesbury as Dowling has taught us. It was shared by prominent Victorians including John Ruskin, William Morris, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater.⁹⁵ The dreaminess of the pictured ladies displays this (liberal) process of aesthetic contemplation, much like a 'magic mirror' turned on the spectator of the painting who gazes and sees reflected the ideal mode of perception. A few decades before, Arthur Schopenhauer had articulated how, upon the moment of seeing beauty, we lose ourselves in the perception and become will-less, timeless, harmonious subjects of knowledge, beyond individuation and one with a

3 *The Annunciation* by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Bt (1833–1898), 1876–79. Oil on canvas, 248.9 x 104.1 cm. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool

universal ideal.⁹⁶ Beholding Burne-Jones's picture might be said ideally to reveal one's own dreaminess; it certainly resulted in emulation as the figures' pensive expressions and willowy bodies became fashionable on stage and street.⁹⁷

The subject of *The Golden Stairs* implies that the viewer him or herself should listen along with the painted figures, for the ladies at the painting's centre model the action of consciously listening (rather than simply hearing) – attention is drawn to the act of listening and further emphasized by the punctuating gaps before and after the violinist and the woman with her ear turned outward. In a sense, the painting was itself aspiring to be relational: a listener as well as a (musical) voice. 'A picture,' Burne-Jones believed, 'should be no faint echo of other men's thoughts, but rather "a voice concurrent or prophetic."⁹⁸ More than 'illustration', Georgiana wrote in the Preface to *The Flower Book*, 'he wanted to add to the meaning of words or to wring their secret from them.'⁹⁹ *The Golden Stairs* could be said to be a huge magic mirror, communicating the prophetic voice of the 'heavenly' message of liberalism; the word, 'heavenly' was Burne-Jones's term in a letter to Mary of September 1879 describing one of her Papa's speeches to 'workhouse people, as beautiful as words could be'.¹⁰⁰ The 1880 painting depicts the 'secret' wrung from liberalism: musical women are agents descending from heaven on a stairway packed with partisan meaning. With his large canvas just finished, Burne-Jones even expressed enthusiasm about the new liberal government in painterly terms. 'And what joy and what brightness for us these days isn't it? I suppose you are very tired,' he wrote to Mary in early May 1880, adding 'but at any rate the course is won and that is everything + I shall paint righteousness + peace kissing each other'.¹⁰¹

The canvas's political vision was tied to the elite social world by the communal group that it depicted on an interior stair, as well as by where it was meant to be hung. *The Golden Stairs*, after its exhibition in the Grosvenor Gallery, was destined for the wealthy walls of a Liberal MP where the painting would enhance the texture of the living world of hosted dinner parties. Victorians imaginatively inhabited a classical and biblical world through the life-size murals, tapestries and paintings with which they adorned the walls and stairwells of their homes. The Flowers' London home, the sumptuous Surrey House mansion at 7 Hyde Park Place, had an art gallery featuring works by Botticelli, da Vinci, Rubens and Whistler among others, but the Flowers hung their Gladstonian art works in their main socializing spaces. The *Harmsworth Magazine* of 1901 described how 'one of the most life-like portraits [photographs] of Mr. Gladstone ever taken' hung in the dining room, and '[o]n the grand staircase hangs Burne-Jones's "Golden Stairs," in a position where the soft light brings out to the best advantage the graceful figures and drapery in the composition.'¹⁰² Thus far overlooked by art historians, Burne-Jones painted a staircase to hang on the stairs; like *The Flower Book*, *The Golden Stairs* would then unlock what was suggested by the stairs and the figures (it was not an exact reproduction of the models or the Flowers' home). Costumed liberal ladies hung framed in gold, and the originals and their friends beheld the picture. The Flowers' guests included the Gladstones more than once. Mary wrote on 26 February 1881 of one evening passed at the Flowers' country estate, Aston Clinton: 'A jolly evening of mujack [music], everybody devoted – I enjoyed it so –



singing + playing – we all performed more or less.'¹⁰³ Similar evenings of communal music-making must also have occurred in London near the gaze of Mary's own painted dreamy self and musical friends. Mary and the Lytteltons (Alfred and Laura) attended a 'Very spicy dinner' there in 1885, for example.¹⁰⁴ A magic mirror, indeed.

There was therefore meaning imparted by the visual art to the socializing itself as people passed or lingered under the art that was most prominent in each interior space. From viewing *The Golden Stairs* on the Surrey House stairs, guests would advance to the dining room (featuring the photograph of Gladstone), and after dessert adjourn to 'the music room, an apartment whose gorgeous decoration is skilfully subdued by a suggestion of dim atmospheric' according to the *Harmsworth Magazine*. By 1887, Burne-Jones's painting, *The Annunciation* (1876–79, copied in 1887), featured prominently at the end of the room, its 8.2 x 3.4 foot canvas enlarged further by a heavy gold frame and

an even larger carved wood panel (Pl 3).¹⁰⁵ In after-dinner music-making, guests would feast their eyes on an annunciation scene, where God's angel brings word of the greatest miracle to the Virgin Mary.

The original painting of *The Annunciation* was owned by George and Rosalind Howard, who hung it in December 1879 in Rosalind's boudoir at 1 Palace Green, an Arts and Crafts house built in Kensington by architect Philip Webb.¹⁰⁶ The painting had radical associations beyond the fact of Burne-Jones's close friendship with the Howards, for George was Liberal MP for East Cumberland in 1879 and from 1881–85, and as of 3 January 1880 Rosalind had aspirations to make 1 Palace Green fit for Liberal party entertainments, including a suitable music room.¹⁰⁷ A few years later, in 1887, Burne-Jones painted a full-size replica of *The Annunciation* for Cyril Flower, which Lene Østermark-Johansen observes was possibly intended 'as a companion piece for the other large white and golden composition in his possession, *The Golden Stairs*'.¹⁰⁸

It is hard to miss the similarities between Burne-Jones's two canvases. Both pictures resemble each other in their narrow, vertical compositions of domestic interiors, peopled by figures in heavily pleated gowns. They feature the same model, Julia Prinsep Stephen, and contain figures with similar poses. While *The Golden Stairs* lacks an overt narrative, placing *The Annunciation* after it in the progression of social spaces, and requiring guests to pass the first painting again upon their exit, bestows contextual meaning on *The Golden Stairs*. Thus in *The Annunciation*, Gabriel floats above Mary, looking down at her and presenting his ear to the viewer, like the central figure (Laura Tennant Lyttelton) does on *The Golden Stairs*. Their hands are similarly posed, too; Gabriel could almost be holding a musical instrument like that held by Laura. Just below these listeners, the postures of Mary (Julia Stephen) in *The Annunciation* and May Morris in *The Golden Stairs* also almost exactly duplicate each other, again with a musical instrument only physically depicted in *The Golden Stairs*, but with the Virgin's stance suggesting that she could almost be holding a violin, too. Burne-Jones started both canvases in 1876, finishing in 1879 and 1880 respectively, suggesting further synergy as he worked simultaneously on these doubled representations of Marian and angelic qualities. Something of this symmetry was discerned and enhanced by how the Flowers hung the paintings. Upon entering the Flowers' home, *The Golden Stairs* would be first and last encountered, but guests would be able to gaze longest on *The Annunciation* during post-prandial socializing. The paintings would accrue meaning for viewers who recognized the attitudes of a (ghostly) musicianship in *The Annunciation* while listening to real performances in the music-room, as if music were a 'magic mirror' illuminating qualities of the divine message. In this setting, Gabriel presents his ear to actual music-making and the audience (of the performance and of *The Annunciation*). Reciprocally, the spiritual force of the bevy of musical virgins on *The Golden Stairs* would be revealed through the 'magic mirror' of the compositional correspondence to *The Annunciation* – a picture with a clear narrative.

The entire procession, then, would be from one image of divine messengers to another (young girls on *The Golden Stairs*; Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin in *The Annunciation*), in between which hung Cyril Flower's photograph of the Grand Old Man. From here, the guests would again pass *The Golden Stairs*, whose meaning would be even more precisely mirrored than the first viewing; now guests

and pictured ladies descended together. Thus Burne-Jones and his patrons unlocked the meaning of the Flowers' opulent stairs, built upon the plainer materials of democratic ideals, where liberal messengers departed after dinner under Gladstone's image, and a 'devout' musico-religious socializing associated with *The Annunciation*.

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