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“The Vocabulary of the Unconscious”: Burne-Jones’s First Story

JOHN PFORDRESHER

Edward Burne-Jones was, throughout his career, a literary painter. His first great success came at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 with the Malory-inspired *The Beguiling of Merlin*. A year later, thanks to that same picture and the Browningsque *Love Among the Ruins* he first caught the attention of the continental art world at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878. During the 1880s and 1890s he enjoyed considerable prestige, and echoes of his visual manner appear in the stylistic traits of both the arts-and-crafts movement in England and European *art nouveau*. But the most significant aspect of his impact upon the artists of his era appears in the tendency of symbolist painters to emulate his highly literary iconography.

At the time of Burne-Jones’s first appearance at the Grosvenor, Henry James already noted, with characteristic acumen, the peculiar character of his work: “It is the Art of culture, of reflection, of intellectual luxury...of people who look at the world and life not directly, as it were...but in the reflection and ornamental portrait of it furnished by art itself in other manifestations; furnished by literature, by poetry, by history, by erudition.”¹ Burne-Jones’s paintings—from his earliest, the ominous *Sidonia von Bork, 1560* (1860) based on Meinhold’s gothic tale *Sidonia the Sorceress*, to his last, the final homage to Malory, *Arthur in Avalon* (1881-98)—derive from his own strongly imagined reactions to literature. As a consequence, looking at a typical Burne-Jones picture, the viewer, led by suggestive visual hints, necessarily infers a narrative which lies behind them.

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Edward Burne-Jones, *Chant d'Amour* (1868-1873).

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Alfred N. Punnett Endowment Fund, 1947.

Since his boyhood Jones had been interested in that form of visual art most completely wedded to words, book illustration. Some of his earliest surviving drawings are boyish attempts to picture what he was reading. As a mature artist he devoted considerable energy to illustrating some of William Morris' greatest achievements for the Kelmscott Press. Significantly, this interest carried over into Burne-Jones's enthusiasm for painting sequences of pictures which tell the stages of a story—for example, in the celebrated *Briar Rose* series of 1870-90.

Because Burne-Jones's art was thus inextricably bound up with his interest in literature, it is not surprising to discover that as an undergraduate at Oxford he published two short stories, "The Cousins" and "A Story of the North." Moreover, most of the major Pre-Raphaelite artists—both the members of the original Brotherhood of 1848 and their followers of the late 1850s—made attempts at writing prose fiction. The first issue of the Pre-Raphaelite little magazine *The Germ* featured a short-story by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Hand and Soul." The fifth was to contain a second Rossetti tale, the unfinished "St. Agnes of Intercession." Concurrently J. E. Millais and William Michael Rossetti were making efforts at writing prose fiction, though their work has not survived. Privately, Christina Rossetti was writing a novella, "Maud," which she probably hoped would appear in *The Germ*, before financial losses halted its publication.²

For Morris and Burne-Jones the central Pre-Raphaelite story was Rossetti's "Hand and Soul." They read it during the summer of 1855, and even forty years later, Burne-Jones still retained a vivid impression of his first reaction, which he described to William Sharp: "We were so overcome that we could not speak a word about it."³ By late August of that same, crucial year the circle of friends which included Morris, Burne-Jones, Fulford and Dixon were planning their own journal, *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. It was to contain, as Cornell Price recalls, "Tales, poetry, friendly critiques and social articles."⁴ Each issue did, in fact, contain prose fiction, and two of the first stories to appear were by Burne-Jones.

At the time Jones seems to have had a strong sense of the social obligations which this new magazine, and his stories, were to fulfill. In a letter written to his cousin Maria Choyce in September or October of 1855 (that is to say, contemporaneous with the composition of "The Cousins") he describes the public voice and function of his work: "We have such a deal to tell people, such a deal of scolding to administer, so many fights to wage and opposition to encounter that our spirits are quite rising with the emergency... we wish to keep before us one aim and end throughout..." (*M*, p. 121). The previous summer both Morris and Burne-Jones had read Ruskin's *Edinburgh Lectures* (1854), with its courageous baiting of middle-class complacency, and were "as full of enthusiasm as the first crusaders..." to do something about social injustice in mid-Victorian England (*M*, pp. 99, 124).

"The Cousins" has been considered in this light by the few critics who have taken note of it. Observing that "the subject and melodramatic atmosphere" of some of its scenes "derive from [Jones's] study of Dickens, Walter Scott, and Charlotte M. Yonge," Harrison and Waters suggest that his interest in urban settings, and in the suffering of the urban poor, comes partly from his own memory of the Birmingham streets where he grew up; John Dixon Hunt sees Burne-Jones attempting to form "a 'vocabulary' of urban description and the accompanying chorus of grief and pain..."⁵ Certainly, the story's plot suggests at first that this is the way it should be read.

The narrator of "The Cousins" is a young man engaged to be married to his cousin Gertrude. He fears she no longer loves him, perhaps because his father has recently suffered certain unexplained financial reverses. Leaving a party where Gertrude is happily dancing with someone else, Charles wanders the streets, encountering battered wives and adolescent prostitutes. His feeble efforts to help them lead him to accept "a new order" (p. 120) in his life, and he resolves to serve the downtrodden. However, on returning home he discovers that his father has died after losing his entire fortune. Following the funeral Charles meets Gertrude for one last time. She summarily rejects him. In a delirium he leaves England, wandering south through the French countryside, dominated by "one fixed thought... a prophetic foresight of speedy death..." (p. 128). He tries to kill himself by leaping into the Seine, but is rescued by a French doctor who nurses him back to health. By a happy coincidence the doctor has married Charles's aunt, and he now falls in love

with the doctor's only daughter Onore, his other cousin. The story ends with the serene happiness of their marriage day.

Seen as a story describing a personal conversion to Ruskinian social commitment "The Cousins" is a failure, since its protagonist abandons his obligations to the poor to live in genteel obscurity in another country. However, if one considers the internal contradictions of the story as clues to a different kind of content, then it becomes much more interesting and, in certain ways, more successful as a story.

"The Cousins" describes a process of psychological fragmentation which climaxes in madness and attempted suicide. In tracing this process the narrator's own voice follows the same pattern of mental degeneration. When the tale begins, he is already talking oddly about his experiences. At the ball he finds himself wondering "often how it was that I felt so evil-minded..." (p. 115). Fleeing the dishonesty of high society, and troubled by the human suffering he encounters in the city streets that night, he feels "suddenly aware of a change come over me...[I] felt a shiver pass through every limb that the night wind had not caused..." (p. 120). Three days later, standing before his father's coffin, he swoons: "during that mysterious hour, I think I reached the limits of life and death, and was not far from overpassing" (p. 123). Though now he can speak about these inexplicable and ungovernable reactions in a calm voice, they remain, for the narrator, both irrational and overwhelming. This pattern climaxes during his journey through France when, in a delirium, he describes what he sees in terms of highly selective images of flowers, of light and darkness, and of water, which illustrate his inability to comprehend what is happening. Despite the calm and measured voice which he gives to his narrator, Burne-Jones thus reiteratively implies that the reader would be prudent to treat what Charles says with a certain degree of skepticism.

This is the best way to look at the two women who dominate the story. The very neatness with which they balance each other through a series of contrasts suggests that the narrator sees in them projections of his own problems and embodiments of his own desires, rather than their actual characteristics. The first, Gertrude, is physically active, bounding past the narrator in a merry dance as his tale begins. Minutes later he catches sight of her, her face "scarlet with the flush of dancing" (p. 116), as she whispers with another man. Early next morning, returning home after his conversion to new social responsibilities, Charles sees Gertrude handed out to her carriage by "an officer" who "discharged my duty, more gallantly, I confessed, and gracefully, than I had ever done it..." (p. 121). Gertrude enjoys a physical energy which the passive, inactive narrator lacks. The men hovering around her display a sexual power—suggested by the special locution "discharge"—which the narrator feels he lacks. The French cousin exactly reverses Gertrude's characteristics. She hovers by Charles's sickbed for days, never moving. There are no people in her life—the Doctor and Onore live in solitude. She falls in love with Charles without any effort on his part, and

without considering any competing suitor—her love for him is absolutely gratuitous.

These twin feminine figures inhabit antithetical worlds. Gertrude's London is crowded with people divided by economic injustice and its consequent suffering. Hers is an urban landscape of mansions and tenements. Onore's Paris is unaccountably filled with flowers and devoid of people, and when Charles recovers they leave the city for an idealized, distant countryside. To go from one of these worlds to the other Charles must cross a series of thresholds or barriers—symbolized repeatedly in the story by rivers. On his night walk through London he lingers on a bridge over the Thames and in the “viewless” water rushing beneath him he perceives “the flow of silence and the darkness...darkness and silence infinite...” (p. 119). The language here, especially in the context of the whole scene, suggests that Charles sees in the river both the social barrier that divides rich from poor (and the correlative division between the guilt of the rich and innocence of their poor victims) and also the coming division in his own life between his feckless past and his new devotion to social justice.

But, in addition, the darkness of the Thames that night has already become intertwined in his mind with death by suicide—since as he looks down into its waters he recalls a “story of self-inflicted death and murder” (p. 119) which transpired nearby. When he learns of his father's death, and realizes that Gertrude will now certainly reject him, this association between water and death is confirmed. It appears in an extraordinary nightmare he has the night before he is to see her for the last time. After wandering through

a forest of funeral plumes instead of trees; suddenly someone was laughing above me, and the laugh, I thought, was Gertrude's, and looking up, I saw her standing on a platform that was near me; and while I yet looked there was another had come beside her, and they were both laughing together, I thought, at me. Whereat I grew angry, and an inexpressibly painful sensation came over me, while quickly, quite imperceptibly, I was struggling in water, and they still above me, leaning over the parapet of a bridge and laughing. I caught a rope that hung from the summit to within a foot above my head, and while my hand closed upon it, it became suddenly, I thought, a pistol, and with a quick, sharp clapping at my ear, shot me through; and the laughter died away upon the parapet far above me. (p. 124)

Here sexual humiliation, embodied in the dreamer's inferior position as well as in the laughter of Gertrude and his rival, can be only eliminated by suicide. As the last words of the dream indicate, the effect of the pistol shot is to silence the mockery. And, in addition, both ideas have become associated with immersion in a river.

Charles's subsequent madness feeds on this fantasy, and he finally tries to fulfill it by leaping into the Seine which, in his delusion, he confuses with the Thames. The most interesting aspect of the whole pattern is that once he leaps, Charles is, paradoxically, not punished, but rewarded. Suicide

(attempted) brings him a supportive, surrogate father in his uncle the doctor, and a replacement for his lost cousin-fiancée in a new woman who offers everything Gertrude had denied him.

The central puzzle about the story is Burne-Jones's own attitude toward this ending. Did he view it as simply a happy way to conclude his tale? Or did he mean the reader to question—as any modern reader must—the implications of a suicidal act which brings with it the fulfillment of a man's every wish. Certainly Jones's descriptions of Charles's experiences after the leap are stylistically quite different from those which precede it. Charles's new life is one of virtually complete physical inaction, in surroundings too simple and too good to be true. It makes sense only if we come to see it as representing a different mode of existence, a sort of life after death.

Read this way, "The Cousins" becomes not a story of conversion to social responsibility but rather its opposite, a tale of sexual humiliation and failure which turns inward to an active desire for death, a desire which receives a distinctly erotic treatment in that death by suicide receives as a reward all the properties of sexual fulfillment denied the protagonist by life.

The roots of these feelings, which are central not only to this story but to Burne-Jones's later work as a painter, lie deep in his private emotional life. His mother died within a week of his birth, and his father, evidently blaming the child, "could scarcely bear to take him into his arms..." until Edward was four years old (*M*, p. 1). He was cared for by a servant, a Miss Sampson, described by Burne-Jones's wife as "passionately devoted..." to the child, an "uneducated" woman with "strong feelings and instincts..." (*M*, p. 4).

These disruptions and revisions of normal emotional relationships may have been one of the reasons that Burne-Jones turned early in life to the delights of a world of dreams which he came to prefer to everyday reality. "Of course imagining doesn't end with my work," he once said, "I go on always in that strange land that is more true than real" (*M*, p. 116). But a few months before writing "The Cousins" he reported having "such an unutterable ecstasy" that he feared "my forehead would burst." And, he went on, "I get frightened of indulging now in dreams, so vivid that they seem recollections rather than imaginations..." (*M*, p. 97). It seems reasonable to perceive in Charles's desire to escape emotional failure through crossing the river threshold into a world of dreams, a repetition of the flight to a dream world Burne-Jones had frequently taken but now sometimes feared.

His protagonist's emotional problems are the author's as well. The year before he wrote "The Cousins" his letters to friends were full of references to "heart-aches and love-troubles"—what he later described as "greater mental troubles than I ever remember" (*M*, p. 102). While nothing more than this is known about these torments of late adolescence, it is clear that the young Burne-Jones had virtually uncontrollable feelings about women. Chatting one day with friends he heard someone use the term "flirt." "At the word his face lit up suddenly, and without raising his voice at all he said with the utmost distinctness and volubility: 'A flirt's a beast, a bad beast, a vile beast, a

wicked beast, a repulsive beast, an owl, a ghoul, a bat, a vampire..." (M, p. 66).

If there is ample warrant for such strong feelings in his disrupted childhood, the problem for Burne-Jones the young writer was finding a useful form in which to express them. He was an "omnivorous" reader of stories of all kinds (M, p. 58), and so it is not surprising that he turned to this genre in formulating his own contributions for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. But at this point in time it was just about impossible to find any accomplished writer of short stories in England. Rossetti's "Hand and Soul" is an exception. A more typical example of the British models Burne-Jones knew is William Moy Thomas' "Alice and the Angel," the lead item in *Household Words* for March of 1851,⁶ and a tale Burne-Jones himself recommended to a friend (M, p. 142).

In this story a young sculptor enamored of a flirtatious girl, smashes in frustration the statue of an angel for which she modeled, and, after three years of separation, ultimately marries her, because she has secretly loved him all along. Here one sees some of the dominant motifs which reappear in "The Cousins": the tormenting woman, the self-destructive act (the statue is the sculptor's best piece of work), and the unmerited reward in sexual fulfillment. However, Moy Thomas earned the oblivion he now enjoys. "Alice and the Angel" has few rendered scenes. Most of the story unfolds through the lethargic voice of a first-person narrator who recalls his first meeting with his beloved this way: "suddenly raising my eyes, I saw a young woman looking at me from the gardens of the almshouses. She was but a few yards from me; and I fixed my eyes upon her, with the gaze of a person suddenly aroused from deep thought; for I saw that she was very beautiful" (p. 2). Such a passage illustrates the fact that while Burne-Jones's own narrative may seem the work of an amateur to modern readers, the foremost magazines of his day published stories which, while they may have shared the same themes, were technically far more primitive.

It was not to British models, but American, that Burne-Jones had to turn. Two years before writing "The Cousins" he remarked in a letter to a friend, "One thing I am almost ashamed to mention—viz. the spell that man Poe throws round me. His book of horrors is by me now. I know how contrary to all rules of taste are such writings, but there is something full of delicate refinement in all that hideousness." He urges his friend to "read particularly [stories] in which [Poe] exemplifies his notion of analysis of and identification with another's thinking...." Georgiana Burne-Jones notes, after quoting this letter, that "Edward's estimate of Poe's work always remained high..." (M, p. 88).

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of Burne-Jones's enthusiasm for Poe. In the absence of any extensive study of Poe's influence on England it is impossible to say just when the art of the modern short story first began to influence British fiction. For example, while Rossetti alludes to Poe around the time he was writing "Hand and Soul," there is no evidence that he

knew the stories, and it is rather more likely that he knew only Poe's verse. So that this letter by Burne-Jones may describe one of the first significant instances of modern short-story technique consciously being studied by a British writer.

Poe's influence on "The Cousins" appears in Charles's meditations on the bridge over the Thames: "I know not what unnameable horror is borne upon this nightly silence upon bridges—some dreadful dolour, ineffable, mysterious there is in it, which makes the great bridges at that hour, to my thinking, more awful than any place on earth. Where lies the horror?... Only this I know, that all weird perplexity, and strange uncertain horror, and ghastly trooping of multitudinous forms, that crowd and sway and palpitate in shifting gloom, are all, all gathered together here..." (p. 119). The sensible, yet puzzled tone of this speaker, the effort he makes to account for irrational reactions in a logical fashion, the vague character of his language, the hypnotic rhythms of his prose, all come directly from passages such as the following, from the first paragraph of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher": "I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit... I looked upon the scene before me... with an utter depression of soul, which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium... an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it... a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered."⁷

Common to both passages is an emphasis on the fact that an insoluble mystery confronts the speaker, that it is inherent in a place and time—the consequence of a location into which the speaker comes—that this place now affects the speaker's mind and spirit, and that finally the speaker abandons all effort to achieve understanding and seems almost to surrender himself to the forces of mystery. Though much remains unexplained here, both passages seem to imply, in their use, for instance, of terms such as "ghastly" and "shadowy," that the horror they feel is the horror of death.

There are other, more complex themes these writers share, though here the argument for direct influence is more tenuous at times. The most important parallels appear in a comparison of "The Cousins" with a series of stories Poe wrote about the same topic, the relationship between men and women: "Eleonora," "Ligeia," "Morella," "Berenice" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." In them one finds an unusually close kinship between the male protagonist and the women he loves (and/or hates). Poe's narrator cannot recall when he first met Ligeia, they have been friends so long. Berenice and Eleonora are cousins to the tellers of their respective tales. Madeline is twin sister to Roderick Usher.

Usually the men in these Poe stories are spiritually dependent on the women. The narrator tells us that Morella's "powers of mind were gigantic," and so, he explains, "... I abandoned myself implicitly to the guidance of my

wife...."; similarly the protagonist in "Ligeia," "aware of her infinite supremacy," decides to "resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance..." (I, 152, 225). All these men are subservient and inactive, whether they love or hate. Their passivity, coupled with their passion for women closely akin to them, suggested to D. H. Lawrence that lurking behind these stories is the taboo desire of incest, most clearly depicted in the final death embrace between Roderick and Madeline Usher. It is the weakness of the men in these stories which especially recommends such a reading. As Lawrence sees it, "Incest-desire is only one of the modes by which men strive to get their gratification of the intensest vibration of the spiritual nerves, without any resistance....The root of all evil is that we all want this spiritual gratification... *without resistance*."⁸

In these nineteenth-century tales, by both Poe and Burne-Jones, the sexual longing of a man for a woman gets combined with his related need for self-discovery and self-fulfillment. The women are forced to embody the goals which the man seeks, and so in his eyes they take on the characteristics of the state he desires for himself, be it learning ("Morella") or will-power ("Berenice"), or the opposing worlds of social success and isolated tranquillity embodied in Burne-Jones's Gertrude and Onore. Such love is fundamentally narcissistic, the man pursuing aspects of himself which he has projected onto the woman, rather than her own innate characteristics. It is no accident that these women are intimately related by blood to the men, since the men are looking for a person most nearly like themselves, who can be made to carry these imposed traits. But the terrible moral consequence of this inverted passion arises from the fact that it is incestuous.

Allen Tate, considering this problem in Poe's stories, contends that the "mysterious exaltation of spirit which is invariably the unique distinction of [Poe's] heroes and heroines... *inhabits a human body but that body is dead*." Poe's protagonists reiteratively find themselves driven by incest-desire, and "physical incest moves towards the extinction of the beloved's will in complete possession, not of her body, but of her being...."⁹ Herein lies the paradox that Poe's heroes, so seemingly prostrate before the powerful egos of their women, are at the same time so busy burying them. The men want to take over and command that power, by inhabiting the dead body with their own craving spirit. But, Poe's tales keep insisting, this will not work. As Tate puts it, the effort to achieve these ends precipitates "the reciprocal force, returning on the lover, of self-destruction" (p. 85). The protagonist in "Ligeia" strives to bring her back from the dead through the force of his own desire, but he can succeed only for a moment. Then he loses her irrevocably.

In Burne-Jones's "Cousins" a similar drama unfolds. Charles's weakness repels Gertrude and in despair he tries to kill himself, primarily to extinguish her mocking laughter. He wakes to discover Onore, who embodies all of the traits he desires in a woman. The incest-fantasy seems to be rewarded. He has found someone so closely akin to him that she is really just a body in which his desires come to life. Yet the dread penalty returns covertly. The

life Burne-Jones imagines for these two has no relationship to ordinary life. Rather, it is the life of the living dead, without companionship, activity or productive consequence. Like some of Poe's heroes, as Gerhard Joseph characterizes them, Charles woos "a deathlike isolation" which describes "the moral price—hallucination, psychic abandonment, nightmarish division of personality—to be paid for...the freedom to enter into the world of his dreams."¹⁰

His penalty appears particularly in the way the story describes Onore. From the moment when Charles first awakens after his suicide attempt, she is a nearly constant presence in his life, sitting for months by his bedside. In celebrating her beauty Charles repeatedly makes specific reference to her "wide, deep eyes" (p. 129) which seem to dominate him, so that "She looked most queenly from her dark and regal eyes" (p. 131). Starting out of a nightmare during his illness, Charles sees only "the large shadow of the watcher on the wall, with her head bowed above me, and, raising lifeless eyes, [I] met...that one sweet face..." (p. 130). Onore dominates in these scenes, her eyes the symbol of her spiritual power over the virtually lifeless Charles. But she is what his fantastic desire has made of her, and so in another sense it is Charles who dominates, through his absolute possession of her. Finally, though, Charles wins nothing from this power, since he finds himself eternally trapped in these interlocked glances. In Onore's gaze he sees the power of his own self-destructive urges, and he falls in love with them, to his own self-destruction.

The world they inhabit repeats this paradoxical combination of the appealing and the appalling. Waking after his attempted suicide Charles's first perception is of the "fragrance of freshly-gathered flowers" (p. 128); as he comes to know her, Onore's voice sounds to him more musical than that of "singing bird, or wind among the trees" (p. 130); and on their wedding day Onore and Charles are "upon the hill of Canteleu" from which they can see "the valley and the river, and the city of the towers..." (p. 131). This is just about all the reader sees of their new world. It comes directly from one of Poe's oddest stories, "Eleonora," whose name anticipates that of Burne-Jones's heroine. In Poe's story two cousins live a life of complete isolation in "the Valley of Many-Colored Grass." In this strictly schematized and symbolic landscape one finds "The river of Silence" and lots of flowers—and not much else. (I, 373). Death parts Poe's lovers, and the young man, deserting the valley, goes to a crowded city where, despite a vow that he would never betray his first love, he marries again. Eleonora comes to him in the night as a spirit, pardoning his offense and blessing his second love. As in Burne-Jones's later tale, here there is the motif of the two opposed women and the two opposed worlds, and both stories end in the hero receiving an unmerited reward of sexual delight. The only difference, and it is a significant one, is that in the Poe tale movement is from the country into the city. Burne-Jones takes his protagonist away from the world of action, social responsibility and change back into the verdant but unreal world of youthful imagination, and leaves him there among the flowers, one of the living dead.

* * *

So "The Cousins" must be read as a story about falling in love with death, a death that seems as beautiful as Onore and her world are to her dreamy and passive lover. This fatal woman had already become a significant, recurrent symbol in the literature and art of the nineteenth century, first appearing, perhaps, in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci."¹¹ Burne-Jones found her everywhere in the stories of Poe, as well as in the work of his favorite English poet, Tennyson, in lyrics with names such as "Madeleine," "Lilian" and "Eleanore," that may have suggested the titles of Poe's later tales. In these poems a passive speaker celebrates the attractive power of a woman's sadistic cruelty, sometimes intending eventually to control it, at other times simply wishing to suffer through it. In "Eleanore" (and again one hears an echo of Burne-Jones's Onore) this theme reaches a certain culmination. Dominated by the beauty of her "large eyes, imperial" (l. 97) the speaker finds that he will "muse, as in a trance, when'er / The languors of thy love-deep eyes / Float on to me" (ll. 75-77). As she utters his name, he falls into a swoon in which "...I lose my colour, I lose my breath, / I drink the cup of a costly death..." (ll. 137-38). Yet he ends the poem confessing "...I *would* be dying evermore, / So dying ever, Eleanore" (ll. 143-44).¹²

In a letter of 1 May 1853 Burne-Jones writes of his own peculiar and suggestive reasons for loving the poetry of Tennyson. To his mind Tennyson is "the only guide worth following far into dreamland." And, he continues, "There are some passages here and there [in Tennyson's poetry] ... strangely accordant to that unutterable feeling which comes on one like a seizure at certain times, and which Schlegel writes of under the term 'Sighing after the Infinite'..." (*M*, p. 76). As an example he cites lyrics from *The Princess*.

In the relationship between Princess Ida and the narrator/protagonist of that poem, Tennyson's youthful obsession with the kinship between love and death reappears, especially in a series of new passages interpolated into the text in 1851 which describe a series of "weird seizures" (Part I, l. 14) that afflict the Prince. These swoons call into question the validity of the ordinary world of experience. In them Ida seems "a hollow show" (Part III, l. 169) and the speaker "the shadow of a dream, / For all things were and were not" (Part III, ll. 172-73). Just why Tennyson added these lines has been the subject of considerable discussion. Gerhard Joseph argues that they describe "the curse of an enfeebled sensibility in a world requiring strenuous action" (p. 424), emblems of the hero's own "emotional imbalance and metaphysical anxiety...."¹³ They all occur at moments of weakness, and for this Prince seeking to find and win over the authoritarian and independent Princess, such weakness is consistently identified with sexual humiliation. The seizure just cited hits him as he observes her from a distance:



Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1870-1874).
Port Sunlight, The Lady Lever Art Gallery.

She stood
 Among her maidens, higher by a head,
 Her back against a pillar, her foot on one
 Of those tame leopards. Kitten like he rolled
 And pawed about her sandal. I drew near;
 I gazed. On a sudden my strange seizure came....
 (Part III, ll. 162-67)

Unconsciously identifying with the leopard, the Prince finds he cannot endure his own subservience. The psychological release mechanism of the seizure—an escape into the world of the dream—protects him. But only at the cost of standing at the border of death. In his letter praising Tennyson, however, Burne-Jones, himself, delights in what Tennyson considers a dangerous and potentially destructive condition, just as the protagonist of Burne-Jones's first story not only gives way to enfeebling swoons, but finally crosses the threshold into the world of dream, madness and death from which Tennyson's hero flees.

Not surprising, therefore, is the attraction of Burne-Jones to *Maud*—whose appearance predated “The Cousins” by only three months—or the way in which Tennyson's plot provided the artist with a framework for articulating his own private feelings.¹⁴ In both *Maud* and “The Cousins,” a relatively weak young man's desire for personal freedom and sexual fulfillment, already thwarted by the barriers of class and poverty, finds itself blocked by the death of a respected parent and the rejection of a desired woman. Frustrated by an inability to repay the dead father or to win back the disdainful beloved, these protagonists turn upon themselves, self-hate and longing for death taking the form of an escape from the cursed native land to the alien world of insanity. In *Maud*, the speaker sees himself surrounded by madmen and at the same time pursued by a single, relentless figure.

she is standing here at my head;
 Not beautiful now, not even kind;
 He may take her now; for she never speaks her mind,
 But is ever the one thing silent here. (Part II, ll. 303-06)

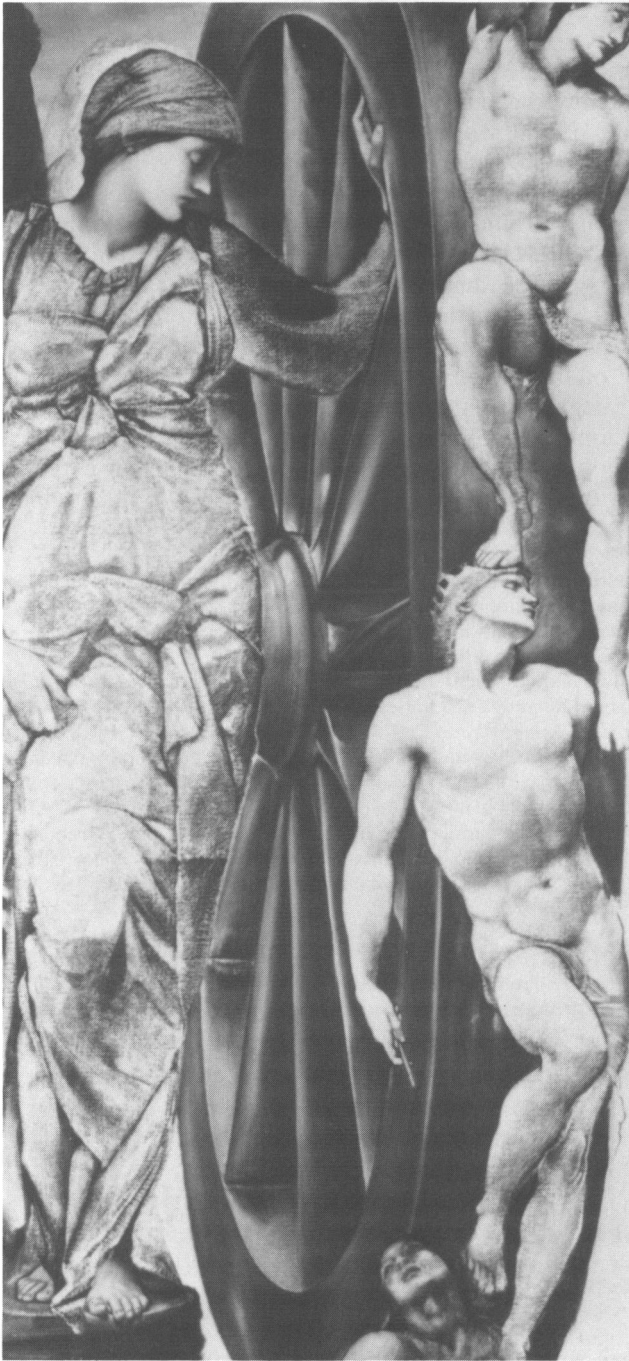
The consequence of his flight from reality is this fatal woman, sister to the lovely, merciless ladies of Tennyson's youthful lyrics and Poe's stories, and the most direct inspiration for Burne-Jones's *Onore*.

Tennyson rejected the “weird seizures” in *The Princess* as a function of inadequately developed personality. At the end of *Maud* the speaker concludes that “we are noble still, / And myself have awakened, as it seems, to the better mind...” (Part III, ll. 55-56). By contrast, “The Cousins” ends with this image: “A wind is somewhere passing in the upper air, driving the thin white clouds in furious whirls across the sky...but where we stand no wind stirs the grasses” (p. 131). While Tennyson's hero returns to a world of change and action, Burne-Jones's protagonist stays in a world of dreams, of absolute stillness.

* * *

It is a world remarkably similar to that found in many of Burne-Jones's celebrated paintings, where a highly stylized landscape is articulated by just a few, repeated motifs—such as flowers—and dominated by one or more young women with rapt, dreamy expressions. The light in these painted scenes is frequently strange and unnatural—the twilight of another realm. Surveying Burne-Jones's achievement as a painter, Harrison and Waters suggest that “His imagery is that of the unconscious mind, and instead of making references to the external sexual snakes or phallic forms, he strikes deeper than the psychology of mass advertising and reaches the vocabulary of the unconscious itself” (p. xiii). In many of the pictures painted at the height of his career Burne-Jones chose to paint subjects illustrating, as does “The Cousins,” the destructive power of sexual desire—pictures in which love destroys. Their central figures (usually men) are asleep, or in swoons and trances, or are dead, while other figures of the opposite gender, who have lured or driven them to this point, watch. In a youthful illustration to MacLaren's *Fairy Family* (ca. 1854) Burne-Jones depicts a feminine, angelic apparition watching a sleeping man, in a manner which hints at her destructive power over him. *The Lament* (1866) gives a variant version of the same relationship: a woman, seated erect, singing, looks directly at a man bowed over, his eyes closed, his hands clasped in supplication. The celebrated *Beguiling of Merlin* is a classic example, with the predatory features of Nimue taken from Jones's obstreperous mistress Maria Zambaco, and its entranced seer an obvious embodiment of the painter. And, it must be asked, will the arriving hero of the *Briar Rose* series ever be able to conquer the overwhelming lassitude of this dream world into which he has stumbled, or will it drag even him into its toils? *Arthur in Avalon* is the culmination of this series, as it is of Burne-Jones's life work. As Harrison and Waters observe, the dead king's features are those of Burne-Jones, who “went as far as unconsciously adopting Arthur's position when he himself slept...” (p. 155). Beautiful young women surround this man who, though he has reached Avalon, still lies unconscious.

Two other visual images which repeatedly appear in Burne-Jones's major paintings are closely related. In the first, one lover embraces and entraps another, who is seeking to flee: *Phyllis and Demophoon* (1870), *The Tree of Forgiveness* (1884) and *The Depths of the Sea* (1887). The second image is that of the car of Venus, before which enslaved lovers passively offer their hearts. First sketched as a design for tiles (1861), this image later appears on a tapestry in the equally threatening *Laus Veneris* (1873-75) and finally, in a slightly different form, in *The Passing of Venus* (ca. 1875). Also related are *The Car of Love* (1870) in which naked figures draw love's ponderous chariot, and *The Wheel of Fortune* (ca. 1882), in which a female goddess tortures men strapped by destiny.



Edward Burne-Jones, *Wheel of Fortune* (ca. 1882).
Cardiff, The National Museum of Wales.

The most revealing aspect of all these pictures is that in them repeated acts of cruelty and destruction are frequently depicted as curiously inviting and even beautiful. Merlin is not distraught at the entrapping spell Nimue casts. His bemused glance acknowledges the success of her craft. The siren dragging her prey down into *The Depths of the Sea* smiles in enigmatic invitation to the viewer. Although the artificial, twilight, arrested worlds these people inhabit must be the land of death, in the work of Burne-Jones it is usually lovely and alluring—and that allure has a profoundly erotic content.

The great achievement of these works is that they make so insidious an appeal within what seems such a licit context. Their subversive images tease and entice at a level far deeper than the cruder efforts of some twentieth-century Surrealist painters. As Harrison and Waters put it, they speak “the vocabulary of the unconscious itself.” “The Cousins” too embodies this esthetic strategy and anticipates Burne-Jones’s more thoroughly-wrought pictorial triumphs in its ambitious, albeit youthful, effort to invent a new kind of story, synthesizing previous experiments in narrative by both poets and story writers into a means of expressing a strange and compelling vision.

NOTES

- 1/ Henry James, quoted in Jeremy Maas, *Victorian Painters* (New York, 1969), pp. 142-43. For Burne-Jones’s first appearance at the Grosvenor see Frances Spalding, *Magnificent Dreamers. Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians* (New York, 1978) p. 14. For his first European reception see Philippe Jullian, *The Symbolists* (New York, 1973), p. 12. For his impact on *art nouveau* see Robert Schmutzler, *Art Nouveau* (New York, 1962), p. 64.
- 2/ Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s two stories, as well as the two tales by Burne-Jones, have been reprinted in *The Dream Weavers*, ed. John Weeks (Santa Barbara, 1980). Page references for quotations from Burne-Jones’s “The Cousins” refer to this edition. Because Weeks is not always reliable, I have checked the accuracy of each quotation against a copy of the original publication of the story in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. A brief summary of the lost tale by J. E. Millais appears in John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (London, 1899), I, 67-68. Christina Rossetti’s “Maude” is now available in a carefully prepared modern edition, *Maude: Prose and Verse*, ed. R. W. Crump (Hamden, Conn., 1976).
- 3/ William Sharp, “Sir Edward Burne-Jones,” *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXII (September 1893), 380.
- 4/ Quoted in [Georgiana] [Burne-] [Jones], *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (New York, 1904), I, 116; hereafter abbreviated as *M*, and with all quotations coming from this first volume.
- 5/ See Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York, 1973), p. 4, and John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination* (Lincoln, 1968), p. 233.
- 6/ The story appeared anonymously in *Household Words*, III (29 March 1851), 1-9. The authorial attribution comes from Anne Lohrli, ed., *Household Words* (Toronto, 1973), p. 76.
- 7/ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Edward H. O’Neill (New York, 1967), I, 263.
- 8/ D. H. Lawrence, “Edgar Allan Poe,” from *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), reprinted in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 121.
- 9/ Allen Tate, *The Forlorn Demon* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 84-85.
- 10/ Gerhard J. Joseph, “Poe and Tennyson,” *PMLA*, 88 (May 1973), 423.
- 11/ See Clyde De L. Ryals, “The ‘Fatal Woman’ Symbol in Tennyson,” *PMLA*, LXXIV (September 1959), 438.
- 12/ All Tennyson quotations come from *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1969).
- 13/ Joseph, *Tennysonian Love. The Strange Diagonal* (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 84.
- 14/ On August 26th, 1855, Cornell Price noted that Burne-Jones’s circle already “had much talk about Maud” (*M*, p. 115).