Shy and reserved in life, as to many matters that lay near his heart, he had all the instinct of the born man of letters for laying himself open in his books, and having no concealments from the widest circle of all. In the verses that frame the stories of ‘The Earthly Paradise’ there is an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must be left to speak for itself.\(^1\)

Thus Mackail discreetly refers to a period in the life of William Morris often called ‘the stormy years’ – a period that, to judge from his letters and poems, was a time of deep unhappiness and which may be seen as a trial from which the later Morris was to emerge changed but strengthened and resolute.

The poems of this period, which spans the years from 1860 to around 1875, have been seen as evidence of Morris’s great sorrow at the loss of his wife’s affections and her subsequent affair with Rossetti. It seems that some time after Morris began writing *The Earthly Paradise* he and his wife drew apart, possibly after 1865 when the family left the Red House and Jane’s health worsened.

The story of Janey and Rossetti is so well known now that biographers have looked no further for the source of the unhappiness so evident in Morris’s writings; but if, without prejudice, one examines these poems, what are the constant themes? Certainly some poems speak of lost love and happiness past, but the most tormented of them (and those addressed to ‘the beloved’) tell another story: one of ‘hopes and fears’, secret meetings, of unspoken longing and unfulfilled sexual desire. The evidence of the poetry does not support the theory of unhappiness caused exclusively by marital infidelity, nor is it in keeping with the accepted view that while Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones drew very close at this time and came to love each other, their relationship was simply one of consolation.

Jack Lindsay cites some of these works as indicative of Morris’s later attachment to Georgie, but he quotes the following poem as Morris’s effort ‘to get inside Janey’s mind and understand her rejection’:\(^2\) I suggest, however, that it is Georgie and not Janey who speaks from line seven onwards:

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Why dost thou struggle, strive for victory
Over my heart that loveth thine so well?
When Death shall one day have its will of thee
And to deaf ears thy triumph thou must tell.
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Unto deaf ears or unto such as know
The hearts of dead and living wilt thou say:
A childish heart there loved me once, and lo
I took his love and cast his love away.

A childish greedy heart! yet still he clung
So close to me that much he pleased my pride
And soothed a sorrow that about me hung
With glimpses of his love unsatisfied –

And soothed my sorrow – but time soothed it too
Though ever did its aching fill my heart
To which the foolish child still closer grew
Thinking in all I was to have a part.

But now my heart grown silent of its grief
Saw more than kindness in his hungry eyes:
But I must wear a mask of false belief
And feign that nought I knew his miseries.

I wore a mask, because though certainly
I loved him not, yet there was something soft
And sweet to have him ever loving me:
Belike it is I well-nigh loved him oft –

Nigh loved him oft, and needs must grant to him
Some kindness out of all he asked of me
And hoped his love would still hang vague and dim
About my life like half-heard melody.

He knew my heart and over-well knew this
And strove, poor soul, to pleasure me herein;
But yet what might he do some doubtful kiss
Some word, some look might give him hope to win.

Poor hope, poor soul, for he again would come
Thinking to gain yet one more golden step
Toward Love's shrine, and lo the kind speech dumb
The kind look gone, no love upon my lip –

Yes gone, yet not my fault, I knew of love
But my love and not his; how could I tell
That such blind passion in him I should move?
Behold I have loved faithfully and well;

Love of my love so deep and measureless
O lords of the new world this too ye know
(pp. 112-13; unfinished)
In the first stanza appears a theme that occurs again and again in Morris’s poems—that death will make the ‘victory’ empty for the beloved. In stanzas three and four the woman speaks of a sorrow that ever ‘fills [her] heart’—her husband’s infidelities with the beautiful Mary Zambaco? In stanza five the woman sees ‘more than kindness in [the poet’s] hungry eyes’ yet she must pretend she doesn’t see his suffering; surely Janey would not be taken aback by the sudden realization that her husband desired her, nor would she feel obliged to deny knowledge of his sorrow if it was caused by her withdrawal.

In stanzas six and seven Morris makes the woman soften towards him and in the following stanzas it is clear he will accept any sign of affection from her no matter how slight. He seeks ‘Love’s shrine’ and the sense is clearly that this love has not been consummated—this is hardly likely to apply to his wife and the mother of his two children. In the final lines Morris seems to make the ‘mistake’ of eulogizing Georgie’s love for her husband and, having painted himself into this painful corner, cannot complete the poem. In the tenth stanza the woman declares ‘I have loved faithfully and well’—this could not describe Janey’s love for either her husband or Rossetti; it could only mean Georgie’s notable devotion to the erring Ned.

The following poem has the same feel about it, only the rejection of the lover seems more final; perhaps Georgie had indicated that further protestations of love must cease:

‘Song’

Twas one little word that wrought it,
One sweet pang of pleasure bought it;
Long ’twixt heart and lips it hung
Till too sore the heart was wrung,
Till no more the lips might bear
To be parted, yet so near—
Then the darkness closed around me
And the bitter waking found me
Half forgotten, unforgiven and alone.

Hearken: nigher still and nigher
Had we grown, methought my fire
Woke in her some hidden flame
And the rags of pride and shame
She seemed casting from her heart,
And the dull days seemed to part;
Then I cried out, Ah, I move thee
And thou knowest that I love thee—
—Half forgotten, unforgiven and alone.

Yea, it pleased her to behold me
Mocked by tales that love had told me
Mocked by tales and mocked by eyes,
Wells of loving mysteries;
Mocked by eyes and mocked by speech
Till I deemed I might beseech
For one word, that scarcely speaking
She would snatch from me that waking,
Half forgotten, unforgiven and alone.

All is done — no other greeting,
No more sweet tormenting meeting,
No more sight of smile or tear,
No more bliss shall draw anear
Hand in hand with sister pain —
Scarce a longing vague and vain —
No more speech till all is over
Twixt the well-beloved and lover
Half forgotten, unforgiven and alone.

(pp.111-2)

The poem begins with a dream in which the lovers are on the brink of a kiss long withheld — the dreamer wakes to the reality of his situation, but it is in the second stanza that the true reason for the poet’s sorrow and hopelessness is given: he thought his ‘fire/Woke in her some hidden flame/And the rags of pride and shame/She seemed casting from her heart.’ In context this cannot refer to Jane; Georgie though, by rejecting Morris — probably on her own moral grounds, and to protect her family’s reputation — could well fit this description. By being both noble and selfless, while causing him the pain of rejection, Georgie must have represented an enigma to Morris. Once again sexual fulfillment is seen as the poet’s objective, and in the fourth stanza he feels his rejection and loneliness to be absolute.

Another poem, ‘Near but far away’, is offered by Jack Lindsay as evidence that Morris and Georgie consolled one another ‘for the griefs through which they were passing,’ but it seems to me that the trouble Morris faces in this poem is his failure to gain Georgie’s love:

She wavered, stopped and turned, methought her eyes,
The deep grey windows of her heart, were wet,
Methought they softened with a near regret
To note in mine unspoken miseries:
And as a prayer from out my heart did rise
And struggle on my lips in shame’s strong net,
She stayed me, and cried ‘Brother!’ Our lips met.
Her hands drew me into Paradise.
Sweet seemed that kiss till thence her feet were gone,
Sweet seemed the word she spake, while it might be
As wordless music — But truth fell on me
And kiss and word I knew, and, left alone,
Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone,
While at my back there beat a boundless sea.
Again Morris struggles to express his feelings, and at the crucial moment the beloved says 'Brother!' – the implications of this dash his hopes, and despair follows; Lindsay points out that in using this word 'Georgie revives the taboo over which there is no appeal, making his exclusion final', but note that they are still on 'touching and kissing' terms, and perhaps in naming Morris 'Brother' Georgie is trying to persuade herself that their shared intimacy is not a betrayal of her own high standards. If this was the case perhaps Morris's confusion about her attitude to him reflects Georgie's own dilemma.

To me January is the most revealing poem in the month series in the sense that it clearly identifies Georgie as the beloved; and also that perhaps in spite of her 'rejections' Georgie was in fact responding, and Morris, sensing this, continued to feel that they might yet become lovers:

'January'

From this dull rainy undersky and low,
This murky ending of a leaden day,
That never knew the sun, this half-thawed snow,
These tossing black boughs faint against the grey
Of gathering night, thou turnest, dear, away
Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile
Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.

There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without!
And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed –
O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt
Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!
O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed
On mine a moment! O come back again
Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain!

Nay, nay gone by! though there she sitteth still,
With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless –
Be patient, heart, thy days they yet shall fill
With utter rest – Yea, now thy pain they bless,
And feed thy last hope of the world's redress –
O unseen hurrying rack! O wailing wind!
What rest and where go ye this night to find?

The weather 'framing' his verse always echoes Morris's emotional state, and here, when all is cold, barren and alienating, the beloved turns away, but sending a kindly, beguiling smile. In the moment of change from dark to light the poet sees the truth – that his love is returned; but in another moment her feelings are once again masked and in the despair of this realization his fierce emotion overwhelms him. Note that for Morris 'rest' is the response to love, that seems so near and yet so far. In News From Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest the clear grey eyes of Ellen are frank and
fathomless and beguile the longing of the Guest/Morris. In *Time Was* Graham Robertson writes:

eyes like those of Georgiana Burne-Jones I have never seen before or since, and, through all our long friendship, their direct gaze always cost me little subconscious heart-searchings, not from fear of criticism or censure, but lest those eyes in their grave wisdom, their crystal purity, should rest upon anything unworthy.6

From the distress at his inability to speak to Georgie openly of his love Morris wrought one of his best short poems, in which death will unite the lovers, and speech, or its lack, cannot come between them:

`Rhyme Slayeth Shame`

If as I come unto her she might hear,
If words might reach her when from her I go,
Then speech a little of my heart might show,
Because indeed nor joy nor grief nor fear
Silence my love; but her gray eyes and clear,
Truer than truth, pierce through my weal and woe;
The world fades with its words, and naught I know
But that my changed life to My Life is near.

Go, then, poor rhymes, who know my heart indeed,
And sing to her the words I cannot say, –
That Love has slain Time, and knows no today
And no tomorrow; tell her of my need,
And how I follow where her footsteps lead,
Until the veil of speech death draws away.

(p.110)

I am unable to place the poems in sequence, but it seems to me that there is an air of resignation about the following work; Morris no longer expects the fulfillment of his hopes; the tormented urgency of the previous poems is gone, and in its place there is a gentle and even wistful expression of love – which now exists for the poet only in his dreams:

`Sad-Eyed and Soft and Grey`

Sad-eyed and soft and grey thou art, O morn!
Across the long grass of the marshy plain
Thy west wind whispers of the coming rain,
Thy lark forgets that May is grown forlorn
Above the lush blades of the springing corn,
Thy thrush within the high elms strives in vain
To store up tales of spring for summer’s pain –
Vain day, why wert thou from the dark night born?
O many-voiced strange morn, why must thou break
With vain desire the softness of my dream
Where she and I alone on earth did seem?
How hadst thou heart from me that land to take
Wherein she wandered softy for my sake
And I and she no harm of love might deem?

Now Georgie, the ‘sad-soft-grey-eyed’ is become the awakening dawn which signifies the lost dream; May though ‘lush’ is grown forlorn, and the poet is identified with the lark who ‘strives in vain’ and, like Morris in The Earthly Paradise, ‘store[s] up tales of spring for summer’s pain.’ The lover wakes from a dream to ‘vain desire’ and longs to return to that world wherein, significantly, ‘[he] and she no harm of love might deem’. There is an extract of a letter to Georgie which ties in with the withdrawn melancholic mood of this poem, as if, though the world is still seen to be beautiful, Morris would turn his back on it, no longer feeling part of it:

I have been feeling chastened by many thoughts, and the beauty and quietness of the surroundings, which latter, as I hinted, I am, as it were, beginning to take leave of. That leave-taking will, I confess, though you may think it fantastic, seem a long step towards saying goodnight to the world.?

It has been suggested that the poem ‘Thunder in the garden’ may be evidence that the love was consummated. The woman in this poem actively pursues love with ‘caresses unquiet’ like the women of the later prose romances – and like the prose romances I feel this poem is an idealized creation; like an incantation it is ‘sung’ to try and charm his hopes into reality, yet sharing the imagery of his other poems – the dark brooding sky and cool moonlight that overhang his hopelessness. The following lines quoted in Lindsay’s biography seem more likely to be the record of actual experience:

But I now clinging to thy skirt pass through
The dangerous pleasant place with halfshut eyes
And with new names I name old miseries
And turned to hopes are many fears I knew
And things I spoke as lies are coming true
Since thou hast shown me where the high heaven lies.?

Both Edward Burne-Jones’s biographer Penelope Fitzgerald, and Georgiana’s, Ina Taylor, feel that, given her character and upbringing, Georgie would never have been unfaithful to Ned? – though if Georgie suffered a momentary lapse it would certainly account for the remarkable longevity of Morris’s hopes. Whatever happened must have been fleeting and unsatisfactory in the final analysis – the consistent theme of his poems from this time is disappointment in love.
If we accept that Morris was deeply in love with Georgiana Burne-Jones, perhaps as early as 1868, and not torn between Janey and Georgie – as some writers have concluded – then it would go some way towards explaining the puzzling facts that have led to misguided speculations about Morris’s nature. It has been claimed that, despite his ‘manly bluster’, Morris was unable to face or deal with the reality of his wife’s affair; it is also suggested that he may have been sexually inadequate. It is clear that he condoned the affair, either explicitly or implicitly; Norman Kelvin refers to this in the introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris:

... after 1870 ... some kind of agreement was apparently reached between them, having as its main article that Jane could do as she pleased.

Morris even sought out a country retreat where the two could be together unhindered. Although acquired for this purpose, Kelmscott Manor held no unhappy associations for Morris; but the Red House he could never bear to visit again. Another anomalous fact is that despite Morris’s annoyance at Rossetti’s ‘unsympathetic’ ways they remained friends, at least while the latter’s mental state permitted.

Morris believed that relationships should be bound only by love, not ‘artificially bolstered up’ by legal or any other constraints; but it is another thing for the ‘wronged’ partner then to go out of his way to facilitate the love-making of the other two. What is to be made of this?

Morris was always tenderly solicitous of Janey’s welfare. He wanted her to be happy and he wanted happiness for himself. Personal happiness was to Morris a type of religion, and he extended to Jane the freedom to seek love, which freedom he would like for himself, and later, for the whole of society, as expressed in News from Nowhere. Under these circumstances Georgie, in her rebuttal of Morris, could not point to Jane as his forsaken wife, and Ned was romantically entangled elsewhere – what was there to prevent Morris from becoming her lover save Georgie’s ‘pride and shame’?

How then might this situation have affected his relationship with his dearest friend Ned Burne-Jones? I think it would be a mistake to attribute to Morris the conventional secrecy which is supposed to apply in such cases, then as now. He was not given to concealment, and above all else, disliked the misunderstandings caused by lack of ‘plain speaking’. It was not until Morris became involved with socialists whom Burne-Jones disliked that the latter sadly found there were things he could not discuss with his friend: ‘We are silent about many things and we used to be silent about nothing’, Ned wrote in 1883. In Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair Morris writes of two close friends talking about the love of one for the other’s wife; the friend, David, reveals all and tells of his plans to leave:

‘Friend and fellow, I must now tell thee the very sooth, and then shalt thou suffer me to depart, though the sundering be but sorrow to me. For this it is, that I love thy lady and wife more than meet is, and here I find it hard to thole my desire and my grief; but down in the thicket yonder ... I shall become a man again, and be no more a peevish and grudging fool.’
David leaves to return again and tell his friend he is ‘bound for over-sea to seek adventure’. We think at once of Morris’s voyages to Iceland – usually seen solely as an escape from the troubles at Kelmscott; but another reason for Morris to seek solace in the journey might be found in the poems, for in that waste-land ‘no fair sunlitten lie/Maketh light of sorrow underneath a brazen sky,’16 as would be the case in England that July. If the poems are to be believed, his sorrow stems from his failure to win Georgie. A letter to Janey from Iceland, dated July 16th 1871, tenderly implores her to ‘be happy’ [in a way he cannot be].17

The second misconception about Morris stems from the first, and concerns his sexuality; it has been suggested that he had a ‘distaste’ for sex18 and could not relate to ‘real’ women. Luke Ionides claims, among other demonstrably inaccurate statements, that Morris was ‘not a bit susceptible to the charms of women’19 but the poems and Morris’s other literary works show this to be completely untrue. The fact that Morris did not flirt with ‘society women’ may have lead some observers to think, like Compton-Rickett, that he was ‘independent of sex considerations’20, but it shows only that he was shy and awkward in the company of women – more a result of his keen responsiveness than evidence against it. Morris’s appreciation of the appeal of women is perhaps most evident in his prose works and the later romances, where his heroines, like the author himself, ‘have no mere good will but longing and hot love’.21

Morris’s biographers and other writers are strangely silent when it comes to the erotic aspect of his writings, quite evident even in his earliest poems. It is as if no one takes his sexual nature seriously: I suspect that the archaic language in which Morris couches his poems and stories is the factor that has led to this puzzling oversight. The later prose romances explicitly delight, in a way quite out of keeping with Victorian literary conventions, in the love-making of the hero and heroine. Morris’s sexual attitudes, like his tastes in general, were revolutionary. In contrast to the closeted sensuality of Rossetti, or Ned Burne-Jones’s neurotic guilt, Morris is like a breath of fresh air – sensible and straightforward about sexual matters and, in his attitude to women, free of the prevailing sexism and paternalism.

Morris’s failure to win Georgie was probably largely due to the fact that she could not share his unconventionality; however, the blame he took upon himself and, with his single-hearted intensity, continued to love her:

... even without any return, [love] is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it – and if you do not feel this, you are not in love, and the desire you have will pass away into something else – into friendship, or into disgust, or hatred – how should I know or care which? What does it matter? All is either love or not love. There is nothing between. Everything else – friendship, kindness, goodness, is a shadow and a lie.22

His love may not have been returned, but for Morris it was enough to love even so – Love is enough. Morris accepted his failure but, characteristically, went on to ‘remake’ himself in the image of the ideals of courage and fortitude expressed in the sagas where

self-restraint is sure to be thought much of ... failure is never reckoned a disgrace, but it is reckoned a disgrace not to bear it with equanimity ...23
Mackail noted that Morris wrote of 'matters ... near his heart' and if there can be any doubt that for Morris, in 1872, Georgie was the beloved, then we need look no further than the following description of Clara, the object of the love of the two brothers in the unfinished novel of that year; with loving accuracy Morris delineates the features of the sixteen-year-old heroine – Georgie was sixteen when Morris first knew her and visited her at 'The Manse':

... beautifully clear of skin, but without much red in her cheeks; dark brown, abundant, silky hair; and a firm, clear-cut, somewhat square jaw and round, well-developed chin; lips a little over-thin, a little too firmly closed together for her youth and happiness; a straight nose with wide nostrils, and perfectly-made, but somewhat short; rather high cheekbones that gave again too much of a plaintive look to the cheeks, a wide forehead, and a beautifully-shaped head above it; and, to light all this up, large grey eyes set wide apart, fringed with dark lashes.

So capable were her eyes of all shades of expression, that ... amidst apparent coldness they would be tender – o, how tender! – with love; amid apparent patience they would burn with passion; amid apparent cheerfulness they would be dull and glassy with anguish. No lie or pretence could ever come near them. They were the index of the love and greatness of heart that wielded the strong will in her, which, in its turn, wrought on those firm lips of hers that serious brow which gave her the air of one who never made a mistake, a look which, without the sanctification of the eyes, might perhaps have given an expression of sourness and narrowness to her face. ... a flimsy, old-fashioned ring ... and a little brooch at her throat ... these were all her ornaments; and even these, perhaps, would have seemed excessive for a workaday to the canons of taste that ruled the system she had been brought up in, which at all events implied (if they did not declare) that all ornament was display. 24

NOTES
All poems not referenced are taken from A Choice of William Morris’s Verse edited by Geoffrey Grigson (London: Faber and Faber, 1969); page numbers are given in brackets.

1 David Latham, ‘Paradise Lost: Morris’s re-writing of The Earthly Paradise’, Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies, 1:1 (part 1) Fall 1987, p.73. (Quoted from Mackail)
3 Lindsay, p.186.
4 Lindsay, p.186.
5 Lindsay, p.188.
6 Lindsay, p.186.
8 Lindsay, p.185.
11 Kelvin, I, Intro. p.xxxi.
12 Kelvin, I, 172; letter to Aglaia Coronio.
13 Lindsay, p.174.
14 Fitzgerald, p.192, quoted from a letter to C.E. Norton, 1883.
16 Grigson, p.113, from ‘Fair Weather and Foul’.
17 Kelvin, I, 142.
18 Henderson, p.328.
20 Lindsay, p.171.
21 Fitzgerald, p.241.
22 William Morris, *The Novel on Blue Paper*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald, (London: Journeyman, 1982), p.73. In a letter of 1872 to Louie Baldwin, Georgie’s sister, Morris reveals that this section was included ‘to try to give it [the novel] life’ and that he sent it to Georgie ‘to see if she could give me any hope: she gave me none, and I have never looked at it since’. Kelvin, I, 162.

The tailpiece to this article shows Georgie’s initials illuminated by Morris on the opening page from *The Story of Hen Thorir*, reproduced in *The Story of Kormak* (1970), Plate VIII. With acknowledgements to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.