Georgiana Burne-Jones and William Morris: 
A Subtle Influence

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In her Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Georgiana Burne-Jones revealed her genuine admiration and deep affection for William Morris when she described their first encounter: 'He looked as if he scarcely saw me. He was very handsome, of an unusual type – the statues of medieval kings often remind me of him – and ... the drawing of his mouth, which was his most expressive feature, could be clearly seen. His eyes always seemed to me to take in rather than to give out. His hair waved and curled triumphantly.' In fact the Memorials abound with scattered information about the privileged place Georgie accorded to Morris. It is also obvious that although both volumes of the Memorials are officially devoted to Burne-Jones, Ned is eventually to share the limelight with Morris.

There can be no doubt that, for Georgie, Morris was the friend of a lifetime; they shared similar hopes, similar disappointments and similar commitments. In his introduction to Morris's letters, Norman Kelvin makes precisely this point: 'She was the woman to whom he addressed himself most openly and fully on all occasions, with whom he shared his interests and concerns, and not least his political ones. She was the woman, that is, whom he trusted as a friend before all others.'

Their relationship is unique in the history of Pre-Raphaelitism both for its longevity and constancy. However, little has been said about the way in which both partners enjoyed equal importance in spite of the ideological division between the sexes that characterised the Victorian era. Furthermore, in Georgie's and Morris's case, friendship was accompanied by a feeling of mutual respect, a concept which more accurately defined their relationship than the more conservative paradigms of mentor/disciple or artist/muse which have been applied to them to the exclusion of significant biographical evidence.

Georgiana Burne-Jones became for Morris – the artist, the poet and the writer – a source of inspiration. Her omnipresence is to be traced throughout the pages of The Earthly Paradise and, of course, in A Book of Verse, of which she was not only the recipient, but, in most instances, the addressee.

Georgie can also be recognised in Morris's fiction. In the 1872 Novel on Blue Paper, she is reflected in Clara, the archetypal maiden loved by two brothers. John, who strongly resembles Morris, dutifully chooses self-sacrifice and withdraws so that his younger brother, Arthur, whose sensitivity and frailty recall Burne-Jones's psyche and his peculiar psychosomatic make-up, can pursue her affections. Clara is introduced to the reader in a way which recalls Georgie's own demeanour and personality:

'She had ... large grey eyes set wide apart, fringed with dark lashes. So capable were her eyes of all shades of expression, that they were liable from their expressiveness to be misread... 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.¹

Judging by Graham Robertson’s recollections, these piercing eyes are unmistakably Georgie’s: ‘Eyes like those of Georgiana Burne-Jones I have never seen before or since and, through all our long friendship, their direct gaze would always cost me little subconscious heart-searchings, not from fear of criticism and censure, but lest those eyes in their grave wisdom, their crystal purity, should rest upon anything unworthy’.²

In News from Nowhere, Morris created Ellen, a prototype for the ideal woman and a recognisable ‘avatar’ of Georgie. Ellen’s eyes are grey, the same as Georgie’s, and like Georgie she has strong political and social convictions. Moreover, Ellen is intelligent and perceptive enough to understand, during the trip up the Thames, that the narrator is not a stranger to the area. Indeed, Ellen is the only one who seems capable of grasping his true identity. She alone can reach him and face the reality of his uniqueness and estrangement. Here, the fiction seems directly inspired by Georgie’s actual role as an advisor and a critic of her friend’s work.

Georgie’s place as Morris’s close and long-standing friend gave her the authority and the power of an active participant in his work which she was called upon to read and criticise. This was certainly the case with the Novel on Blue Paper about which Morris wrote to Louisa Baldwin: ‘I found it in the envelope in which I had 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 – So there’s an end of my novel writing, I fancy, unless the world turns top-sides under some day.’³ Penelope Fitzgerald has suggested, in her excellent introduction to the Novel on Blue Paper, that in the case of this particular manuscript Georgie’s opinion was as personal as it was literary.⁴ Whatever Georgie’s motives for discouraging Morris may have been, he abandoned the project as soon as her verdict was rendered.

While Georgie had enough influence to convince Morris to give up his novel, she tried later, with less success, to convince him to return to poetry, which he had come to neglect as a result of his political activities. In 1879 he offered what seemed to be a justification for his loss of interest: ‘As to poetry, I don’t know, and I don’t know. The verse would come easy enough if I had only a subject which would fill my heart and mind: but to write verse for the sake of writing is a crime in a man of my years and experience.’⁵ Evidently, Georgie was not willing to accept this explanation, as in August 1883, Morris answered another of her letters:

I am touched by your kind anxiety about my poetry; but you see, my dear ... though I admit that I am a conceited man, yet I really don’t think anything I have done ... of any value except to myself ... Poetry goes with the hand-arts I think, and like them has now become unreal; the arts have got to die ... before they can be born again. You know my views on the matter; I apply them to myself as to others.⁶

There can be no doubt that Morris respected Georgie’s opinions in matters of literature.
and that he eventually came to consider her critical evaluation of his work highly important. As he explained to Louisa Baldwin: 'If you only knew what I expect of my friends that I can get hold of in such a matter! Such close attention, such anxiety on their parts such sincerity withal – O the cross-questioning of them after a reading! only ask Georgie.' The last comment clearly indicates that Georgie had become Morris's appointed critic, a task she seemed to fulfil brilliantly. In the same letter, Morris stressed his admiration for his friend's impeccable judgement in literary matters.

Nevertheless, it would be hasty to conclude that Georgie's emergence as a woman of strong intellect and strong political views owed nothing to Morris. When she decided to join the ranks of the well-to-do Victorian philanthropists, she chose to do so in the context of the South London Gallery, created by William Rossiter, one of F. D. Maurice's followers. Georgie spent five years of her life tirelessly working to turn this into the first free municipal art gallery open to the public on Sundays. With her commitment to this project, Georgie put into action one of Morris's most eloquent claims: 'I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.'

In fact, the whole essence of Georgie's political philosophy can be found in Morris's lecture, 'The Lesser Arts'. It was as a student of Morris – and of Ruskin – that she approached her political involvement in the life of Rottingdean, the Sussex village where she lived and where she sought to get elected as a Parish Councillor in 1894, the year the Local Government Act was passed. According to the terms of this Act, villages of 300 inhabitants or more were allowed to elect a Parish Council which would manage all local issues outside the Church's jurisdiction. Moreover, the Act stipulated that there should be one vote per household, which meant that, for the first time in the history of the franchise, women could vote and, more significantly, run for office. Jan Marsh explains the importance of this Act 'which freed local administration from direct control by landowner and church':

... in some country districts this was regarded as almost equivalent to revolution. In the 1880s and 1890s the rural areas of southern England were often places of severe and intractable deprivation. The labouring class endured poor housing, poor health, low wages and a low level of education; their children went into service at a young age. The pastoral vision of the happy swain seldom corresponded to reality, and poverty, inequality and lack of beauty were problems in Sussex as well as in the suburbs of South London... The rural establishment of farmers and landowners did not welcome the challenge to their authority posed by the new councils and the secret ballot. Rural employers were accustomed to direct their labourers' votes as well as their own.

Georgie understood the political and social importance of this Act and seized the opportunity to act upon her beliefs. Although she never used the word 'socialism' and only referred to 'those who think as I do', Georgie undertook to write her Open Letter to the Electors of Rottingdean to explain to the villagers that casting their vote would allow them to become truly independent: 'A choice is placed before all the country Parishes ... as to whether they will go on in the old way ... or, on the other hand accept the responsibility of this new Act, which makes them accountable themselves for the condition of their villages.' She proposed the creation of public
baths, wash-houses and a village hall ‘where Meetings and Entertainment can be
held’.\textsuperscript{14} She summarised her position in one concise paragraph: ‘One real
improvement, however, we may look for soon; for if all the people in a village take
a personal interest in the way that it is kept, and know about those who are placed
over them, because they have put them there themselves, they will begin to feel and
to be both happier and brighter.’\textsuperscript{15}

Georgie was the only woman to be elected in a ten-seat council.\textsuperscript{16} In What We
Have Done, her second pamphlet, printed for her re-election campaign, she evaluated
her tenure as a Parish Councillor and mentioned notable improvements to the village
footpaths, fire house and street lighting. She also assessed the importance of the
creation of a reading room and the work of the various committees in charge of the
overall maintenance of the village. Moreover, she significantly deemed the Parish
Council’s achievements insufficient as far as accommodation and hygiene issues were
concerned, and she made a commitment to do better in both areas should she be re·
elected. Such an evaluation cannot but bring to mind the following passage from ‘The
Lesser Arts’:

Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste, that is, a love for sweet and lofty
things, is of all matters most necessary for the birth of the new and better art we
 crave for; simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage.

Still more is this necessary, cleanliness and decency everywhere, in the cottage
as well as in the palace: the lack of that is a serious piece of manners for us to
correct: ... and as yet it is only a very few men who have begun to think about a
remedy for it in its widest range; even in its narrower aspect, ... there is nothing
but thoughtlessness and recklessness in the manner; the helplessness of people who
don’t live long enough to do a thing themselves, and have not manliness and
foresight enough to begin the work, and pass it on to those that shall come after
them.\textsuperscript{17}

Georgie was obviously dedicated and ‘manly’ enough to ‘begin the work’ Morris
alluded to. Therefore, she had indeed become one of the ‘very few ... who have begun
to think about a remedy’, and in that respect, she deserved all of Morris’s praise and
admiration.

However, if the genesis of Georgie’s political engagement owed much to Morris,
hers political maturity only occurred when she became capable of distancing herself
from Morris on certain issues. Morris’s correspondence with Georgie in the 1880s
shows that she refused to subscribe to his concept of a popular revolution.
Nevertheless, Morris tried to coax her into rallying to his point of view: ‘Don’t
be afraid of a word my friend’.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, Georgie could not but rebel at the
idea of a violent revolution. Her pacifism, which later prompted her to salute
the relief of Mafeking with a banner stating ‘WE HAVE KILLED AND ALSO
TAKEN POSSESSION’,\textsuperscript{19} prevented her from envisioning such a course for her
activism.

When Morris joined the Democratic Federation an important ideological gap was
created between him and Georgie, who disapproved of his decision to join the socialist
movement. Morris’s comments suggest that they were now in opposition. In
September 1883 he wrote to Georgie: ‘The one thing I want you to be clear about is
that I cannot help acting in the matter, and associating myself with any body which
Whatever hope or life there is in me is staked on the success of the cause: I believe you object to the word...

Meantime take this scrawl which is hasty enough as a token that I don’t intend leaving my friends in the lurch: I shall offend you desperately someday I fear; meantime to think me quarrelsome is a misjudgment, for I commonly hold my tongue when my conscience (I don’t like that ecclesiastical word) bids speak: so when at last I do speak it sounds quarrelsome you know.21

A letter Georgie sent to C. E. Nonon in 1886 eloquently summarises her views about the evolution of Morris’s political thought, while at the same time revealing the network of personal convictions that shaped her own beliefs:

[Morris] is ever good and patient with me in my disagreements – but as time goes on I feel that … [when] we are walking side by side it is in a kind of labyrinth, with a high wall between us. This often makes me unhappy. I take in his paper [the Commonweal], because I want to see what he is doing – saying publicly, but its tone jars and distresses me, and sometimes displeases so much that I don’t think I can read it much longer. How I should like to talk to you about all this.22

When Georgie decided to run for a seat on the Parish Council in Rottingdean, Morris supported her decision out of friendship. However, he failed to show any enthusiasm for her first political battle:

I hope you will come in at the head of the poll… I daresay you think me rather lukewarm about the affair; but I am so depressed with the pettiness and timidity of the bill and the checks and counterchecks with which such an obvious measure has been hedged about, that all I can hope is that people will be able to keep up the excitement about it till they have got it altered somewhat.23

Georgie poured much energy into her Open Letter to the Electors of Rottingdean. In her pamphlet she described the Local Government Act as a chance for complete renewal, if not rebirth: ‘It is like throwing the window open and letting in the fresh air’.24 She concluded her plea for political involvement with a declaration of hope: ‘Many a man goes across the world to find a fresh chance to better his life, and here is one brought to our doors. Shall we take it?’25 This last sentence indicates that Georgie’s position was far removed from that of Morris, who regarded the Local Government Act as ‘timid’ and irrelevant.

A review of her achievements as a Parish Councillor reveals that, for Georgie, political activism could not revolve around theories, however brilliantly expounded they may have been. Her creed was centred around issues such as housing, hygiene, ecology, education, and, above all, around people’s right to govern themselves through the democratic practice of voting, which Georgie heralded as the best way for them to obtain freedom.

Although they remained kindred spirits, Georgie and Morris often strongly disagreed. This is reflected in the famous anecdote recorded by Sara Anderson, Burne-Jones’s secretary. Having heard raised voices, Burne-Jones inquired: “Well were you quarrelling with Georgie?” “No!” came the reply, “Georgie argued very well, but I
Beyond its lively depiction of an endearing friendship, this anecdote suggests that Georgie influenced Morris’s political development. Norman Kelvin points out that ‘whatever signs of change there are at this time [1883], in his surviving correspondence, tend to occur in letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones.’

In fact, Morris’s correspondence reveals the intellectual challenge which Georgie presented to him when she questioned the basis of his thinking. Although Norman Kelvin sees Georgie as ‘a brake to his enthusiasm and a voice of scepticism countering his faith’, Morris’s eagerness to continue his intellectual confrontations with Georgie indicates that he saw himself benefiting from their debates.

In August 1883, Morris and Georgie engaged in a discussion about education. Only Morris’s letters have been published to date, yet they are sufficient to piece together this exchange which lasted for well over a month, forcing Morris to clarify his theories which Georgie questioned. On 26 August 1883, Morris wrote: ‘Education is the word doubtless; but then in comes the commercial system and defends itself against that in a terrible unconscious way with the struggle for bread, and lack of leisure, and squalid housing — and there we go, round and round the circle still.’ In order to counter Georgie’s objections, which stemmed from her undying belief in education, Morris stated in September 1883:

> Everyone who has thought over the matter must feel your dilemma about education; but think of many not uneducated people that you know, and you will I am sure see that education will not cure people of the grossest social selfishness and tyranny unless Socialistic principles form part of it ... and this stirring up is part of the necessary education which must in good truth go before reconstruction of society.

Once more, Georgie questioned Morris’s ready acceptance of social unrest, as indicated in Morris’s subsequent rebuttal: ‘Meantime I am sure it is right, whatever the apparent consequences may be, to stir up the lower classes....’ However, the battle bore its fruit since, three years later, Morris, who seems to have reconciled himself to Georgie’s point of view, wrote in the Commonweal: ‘At the risk of being misunderstood by hot-heads, I say that our business is more than ever in Education.’

A similar disagreement occurred when profit-sharing was discussed. Evidently, Georgie felt that Morris & Co. should function on a profit-sharing basis. Morris rejected this on several grounds. He claimed the exploitation inherent in the commercial system bound the worker to other authorities besides that of his employer. He argued that this ‘partly [explains] why I said that cooperation to be real must be the rule and not the exception.’ After this early attempt at justifying his position he later proceeded to examine the likely consequences of profit-sharing on his own firm. This was obviously a direct response to Georgie’s query, since he prefaced his explanation with an unusually impatient comment: ‘Now to be done with it I will put my own position, which I would not do to the public because it is by no means typical, and would therefore be useless as a matter of principle.’ This exercise in economics, a discipline in which Morris admitted to having difficulties, forced him to crystallise his ideas into a theory in order to dismiss his friend’s constant counter-arguments. As an introduction to this long letter Morris wrote: ‘certain things occurred to me which being written you may pitch into the fire’, which suggests that Georgie’s initial arguments were thought-provoking enough to engage Morris’s
sustained attention. Morris’s defensive comments indicate that Georgie did not hesitate to use extremely personal and confrontational arguments: ‘I am not a capitalist, my friend, I am but a hanger on of that class like all professional men.’

Finally, on several occasions, Morris attempted to reassure Georgie who, judging by the tone of Morris’s replies, did not tire of vehemently warning him against the Democratic Federation. On 3 September 1883, he wrote: ‘As to the D.F., you need not be anxious about me. I went into the affair with my eyes open, and suspecting worse things of it than are likely to happen.’ On 1 June 1884 he started his letter with ‘Don’t be alarmed’, and continued:

And now I want to explain once more this; that if these were ordinary times of peace I might be contented amidst my discontent to settle down into an ascetic hermit of a hanger on ... on the contrary fate or what not has forced me to feel war, and lay hands on me as a recruit... If I am wrong, I am wrong and there is an end of it... Meantime, to carry on the metaphor, to desert the regiment because the sergeants are sometimes drunk, ... or the Captain often swears, would not commend itself to my reason...."

This last letter, with its revealing metaphors, leaves no doubt as to the value of Georgie’s warnings about the Democratic Federation and anticipates Morris’s future disillusionment with the socialist movement. Morris’s final admission – ‘If I am wrong, I am wrong and there is the end of it’ – clearly indicates that Georgie had summoned the courage to challenge her old mentor openly. It also indicates that she had gained the strength of character needed to become his equal. Morris certainly acknowledged this when he paid her the highest compliment possible when he addressed her as ‘old chap’ – much to Thomas Rooke’s astonishment and delight.

NOTES

8 ibid., II, p. 217.
9 ibid., I, p. 150.
13 ibid., p. 7.
ibid., p. 3.
ibid., p. 7.
News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs, op. cit., p. 102.
Victorian Sisters, op. cit., p. 169.
ibid., II, pp. 286-7.
Address to the Electors of Rottingdean, op. cit., p. 7.
ibid., p. 8.
Victorian Sisters, op. cit., p. 130.
ibid., I, p. xli.
ibid., II, p. 219.
ibid., II, p. 222.
ibid., II, p. 222.
News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs, op. cit., p. 148.
ibid., II, p. 283.
ibid., II, p. 286.
ibid., II, p. 222.
ibid., II, pp. 283-86.