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Private and Public Voices in Victorian Poetry

**STAUFFENBURG
VERLAG**



Fig. 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Arthur's Tomb*, First Version.

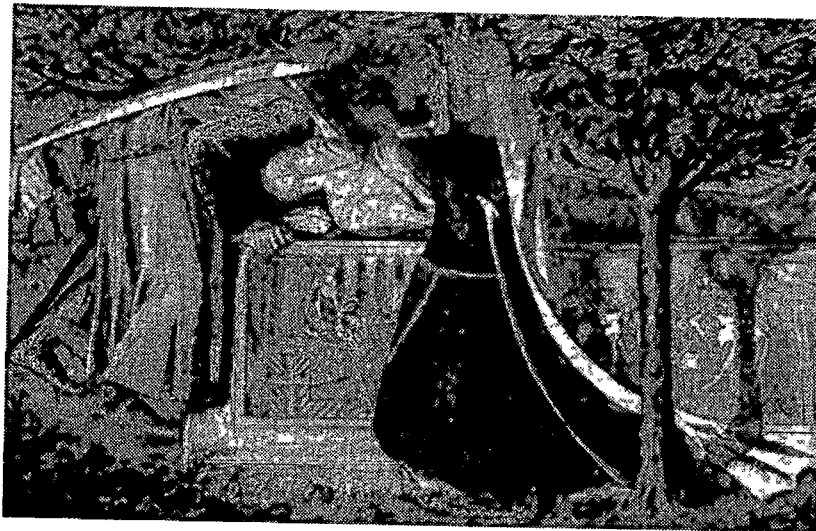


Fig. 2: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Arthur's Tomb*, Second Version.

A Very Private Gesture: William Morris' *A Book of Verse* and its Public Sequel

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Victorian poetry is obsessed with a series of displacements...The problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become central. Teleology is displaced by epistemology and politics because relationships and their representation become the contested area, between self and society, self and labour, self and nature, self and language and above all else self and lover.¹

This preoccupation, even obsession, with love relationships is particularly apparent in the poetry produced by the Pre-Raphaelites. Jan Marsh has noted, for instance, that "the fact that women form such a large, even dominant, component of Pre-Raphaelite subject matter suggests that [their] most compelling concerns lay precisely in this area".² Publicly sanctioned and privately tolerated relationships existed side by side, of course, within this artistic circle; one of the better known instances is perhaps the case of William Morris, his wife Jane, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Morris' gradual realisation that his feelings for Jane were no longer reciprocated, and that Rossetti had replaced him in her affections, became the basis of some of his most transparently autobiographical work. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that much of Morris' poetry "explicitly depicts [...] conflicts in love"³ and that in his "The Defence of Guenevere" he put his own particular gloss on one of the greatest love triangles of all time. In this poem, Guenevere comes to recount her first sighting of Lancelot

It chanced upon a day that Lancelot came
To dwell at Arthur's court: at Christmas-time
This happened; when the heralds sung his name ...⁴

and the unsettling feelings and thoughts he eventually inspired in her:

And in the Summer I grew white with flame
And bowed my head down : Autumn, and the
sick
Sure knowledge things would never be the
same,

While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would crowd,
Belonging to the time ere I was bought
By Arthur's great name and his little love; (pp. 4-6)

For the purposes of this paper, however, we must add another name to the Pre-Raphaelite triangle of Morris, Jane and Rossetti – that of Georgiana Burne-Jones.

The life-long friendship (it is doubtful that they ever had an affair⁵) between Morris and Georgiana, wife of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, is well documented. It has been said that Georgiana was “more than [a] friend and yet that too”⁶ to Morris. This is substantiated by Norman Kelvin’s further comment that: “Morris, [was] sometimes described by acquaintances as incapable of loving women, children, and indeed any individual other than his close male friends and Georgiana Burne-Jones (the one woman excepted)...”⁷ Georgiana herself, in public at least, preferred to foreground the strong friendship between Morris and her husband. In her *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* she asserts that the poet was the painter’s “life’s companion”.⁸ The germ of this bond was fostered during the two men’s time at Oxford and can be discerned in an exuberant letter by Burne-Jones from this period; Morris is perceived as a hero to be worshipped and, *largely*, emulated:

He [Morris] is full of enthusiasm for things holy and beautiful and true, and, what is rarest, of the most exquisite perception of judgement in them. For myself, he has tinged my whole inner being with the beauty of his own, and I know not a single gift for which I owe such gratitude to heaven as his friendship. If it were not for his boisterous mad outbursts and freaks, which break the romance he sheds around him – at least to me – he would be a perfect hero.⁹

Initially, Georgiana was influenced by her husband’s romantic vision of Morris and even adopts his language when writing of her first meeting with this “boisterous” almost “perfect hero”:

He was very handsome, of an unusual type – the statues of mediaeval kings often remind me of him – and at that time he wore no moustache, so that 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 give out. His hair waved and curled triumphantly.¹⁰

William Morris in turn created a memorial of a kind to his friendship with Georgiana when he produced *A Book of Verse* for her birthday on 23 July, 1870. This “decorous, dignified love token”¹¹ was the poet’s first attempt at creating an “illuminated” manuscript (it is actually *painted*, though the headings, titles and pagination are in gold) and stands as a testament to his philosophy of “art as joyful work”.¹² The beauty and delicacy of the volume anticipates as well the rationale behind Morris’ later Kelmscott Press publications, which was “to turn the act of reading into one in which pleasure in the visual beauty of the book becomes part of the autonomous (for Morris) pleasure in reading”.¹³

A Book of Verse was not, however, the first manuscript that Morris created exclusively for Georgiana; he had presented her with the less elaborate handbound copy of his *The Lovers of Gudrun* on 15 April of 1870. It was also during this period that Morris was most fully absorbed in the study of ancient manuscripts, and in transcribing and illuminating various volumes. Thus, *A Book of Verse* needs to be considered in relation to a larger pattern of artistic activity undertaken by Morris at this time. Roy Strong and Joyce Irene Whalley describe the production of the manuscript in the following manner:

Morris had not intended to do all the book work himself, allocating various parts of it to his friends and fellow-workers, as had been done among mediaeval craftsmen. The manuscript contains a portrait of Morris himself on the title-page, painted by Charles Fairfax Murray from the photograph profile of 1870, and it was Fairfax Murray who did all the rest of the pictures, with the exception of the one on page I [illustrating “The Two Sides of the River”] which was by Burne-Jones. As for the pattern work, George Wardle drew all the ornament on the first ten pages, and Morris coloured it; Wardle also did all the coloured letters, but Morris himself executed the rest of the ornament ‘together with all the writing’. It is perhaps fortunate for us that Morris added all this information in the colophon to the manuscript, since stylistically all the artists were very much akin, though a detailed study of the various parts can reveal the individual hands.¹⁴

It is clear from this description that Morris applied the working practices, as well as the skills, of mediaeval craftsmen to the making of Georgiana’s book.

Though *A Book of Verse* was largely inspired by Morris’ work with illuminated manuscripts it may, perhaps, also have been influenced by the tradition of Victorian Gift Books. As Kathryn Ledbetter explains:

Literary annuals became a highly profitable publishing fad of the 1820s and 30s in England as reading audiences grew. The books were anthologies of poetry, fiction, and sketches which appeared every year for the Christmas season, designed to be elaborate gifts much desired by middle-class readers. The annuals were ornamental drawing-room attractions, often covered with brilliant red or green watered-silk, tooled morocco leather, or velvet, featuring engravings by well-known artists such as Turner, Landseer, and Lawrence.¹⁵

These “drawing-room attractions”, often derided as being “gaudy, too commercial, and empty of artistic merit” by the very writers who contributed to them,¹⁶ may seem at first to be odd pieces with which to compare the more upmarket *A Book of Verse*. As the Gift Books were widely published and purchased between the 1820s and the 1860s, however, William Morris would have had an awareness of them and even, perhaps, of their importance as artefacts of popular culture: it is not impossible, then, that he was influenced by their standard format of text and complementary picture. *A Book of Verse* is, after all, a private, ornamental and expensively bound gift book for

Georgiana Burne-Jones; and as with the Gift Books, its "guiding aesthetic" was that it give "voice to the desires of the heart".¹⁷

The desires of Morris' heart (to return once more to the topic of relationships) are voiced continually, as we shall see, in the poems of *A Book of Verse*. Despite this, Jan Marsh has argued that by enlisting the help of several of his colleagues, including Georgiana's very husband, Morris could not have considered the manuscript to be a "private gesture".¹⁸ This belief can be challenged, I think, not only through an analysis of the content of *A Book of Verse*, though this shall prove a valuable exercise; we must also remember that Morris rejected the printing press for a much more intimate mode of production when he made his gift book for Georgiana Burne-Jones. This brings to mind Eric Griffiths' comment, in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, that: "In literature shaped by the printing press, writer and reader do not 'properly' face each other."¹⁹ Griffiths goes on to say that:

The poetic voice, as any self in utterance, will have, in Eliot's phrase, a 'mid-way reality', such as Valéry delineated when he asked, coyly philosophizing, 'La présence serait-elle oscillatoire?' ['And is presence then an oscillation?']. The scene of that oscillation, for the poet, is the page and what it asks in the way of responsive listening-in from the reader.²⁰

The real significance of Morris' choice to present *A Book of Verse* in manuscript form, not as a printed text, can be understood in relation to what has been said above. The intimacy implicit in a volume produced largely by his own hand allowed Morris more "properly to face" his exclusive reader and thus ensure a more "responsive listening-in" from her. Of further relevance here is what he himself had to say about the aesthetics of a page: "The essential point to remember is that the ornament, whatever it is, whether picture or pattern-work, should form *part of the page*, should be part of the whole scheme of the book".²¹ Morris clearly believed that text and ornament should also 'speak' to one another and that their cohesion was responsible for establishing a volume's integrity. We see this philosophy being applied to *A Book of Verse*.

The relationship between private manuscript and public printed text is, of course, central to the history of at least some of the contents of *A Book of Verse*; ten of the volume's twenty-five poems appeared in Morris's *Poems by the Way* (see appendix). This eclectic collection of ballads and lyrics was personally selected by Morris from pieces he wrote between 1860-1891, and was first published by the Kelmscott Press in 1891. In his recent edition of the volume, David Latham has described its contents in the following manner:

It includes the best-known passage from *The Life and Death of Jason*; the most popular political poems from the penny pamphlet *Chants for Socialists* and the serialized 'Pilgrims of Hope'; the songs of personal love first copied for 'A Book of Verse'; his gift of calligraphy to Georgiana Burne-Jones; the poems and translations celebrating his faith in Icelandic and Gothic mythology; the

delightful verses for tapestries, embroideries, and woven wools; and some of his most haunting medieval ballads.²²

What is immediately apparent about *A Book of Verse* is that, unlike *Poems by the Way* (itself a collection of fifty-five poems), it is a thematically homogenous collection. The poems deal largely with love and relationships and the overall mood is melancholy. Ken Goodwin, in fact, has asserted that this "is the mood that persists in Morris' poetry for over forty years, a deep-seated mood that incorporates particular personal experiences and particular human beings rather than being generated by them."²³ Fiona MacCarthy also finds this to be the pervasive mood of *A Book of Verse*: "The poems to Georgie are - predictably - sad, suffering, full of the strains of disappointment, separation"²⁴ MacCarthy's statement is confirmed by even the briefest glance at the poems contained in this private volume, and their titles are particularly revealing: "The Fears of June", "The Weariness of November", "Lonely Love and Loveless Death", "Love Alone", "Hope Dieth Love Liveth" speak volumes.

Though limitations of space do not, of course, allow for an analysis of the entire contents of *A Book of Verse* (this shall be the subject of another essay) I should like to comment here upon one of the poems, "Hope Dieth Love Liveth". I choose this poem for two reasons; its mood is the pervasive one of melancholy and, of all the poems in the volume, it is perhaps the most interesting to compare with the version which eventually appeared in *Poems by the Way*. As Strong and Whalley have observed, after all:

... the versions [of the poems] which Morris chose to write out for Georgiana Burne-Jones were not always those which appeared in print, and it can be an interesting exercise for the reader to discover the variations in the manuscript and printed texts and analyse the reasons for the changes.²⁵

"Hope Dieth Love Liveth" is the thirteenth poem in *A Book of Verse*. It is comprised of twelve stanzas of four lines each, each quatrain containing the refrain "hope is dead" or a variation of it ("hope was dead", "hope's body dead!", "hope lying dead" and "hope lay dead" in lines 8, 16, 40 and 44 respectively).²⁶ The speaker addresses the Beloved directly and, in a voice full of longing and regret, contrasts throughout the notion of past happiness and (seemingly) present perpetual woe. This *ubi sunt* motif is articulated in such passages as stanza five:

Count o'er and o'er, and one by one
The minutes of the happy sun
That while agone on happy lips shone.
Count on, rest not for hope is dead.

What is most striking about the *Book of Verse* version of "Hope Dieth Love Liveth", however, is how much more *direct* it is than the one found in *Poems by the Way*. In the *Book of Verse*, for example, line 30 of the poem reads: "I

bless *thy* tremulous lips" whilst the same line in the printed version is a more diluted and generalised "I bless *the* tremulous lips" (emphasis mine in both instances). The much more specific use of "thy" in *A Book of Verse* brings us back to the idea that the volume is an extended private address to a specific reader, Georgiana Burne-Jones. We see Morris "properly facing" his audience of one here through the highly personal medium of a manuscript written in his own hand.

The other noteworthy change from the private to the printed version of "Hope Dieth Love Liveth" is found in the last stanza. In *A Book of Verse* we have:

Behold with lack of happiness
The Master, Love our hearts did bless
Lest we should think of him the less –
Love dieth not though hope is dead! [emphasis mine]

In *Poems by the Way*, the stanza appears as:

"Behold with lack of happiness
The master, Love, our hearts did bless
Lest we should think of him the less:
Love dieth not, though hope is dead!"

The capitalisation of "Master", as well as the slight change in punctuation of this line, allows more easily for a Christian interpretation of the poem at its close, thus making the version for Georgiana somewhat more hopeful than the one Morris offered up to the mass market. It is of some import, also, that following the final stanza of "Hope Dieth Love Liveth" in *A Book of Verse* Morris includes a small, circular picture with explicit religious connotations. A red-winged angel of distinctive Pre-Raphaelite origin amidst a fiery background ascends to heaven whilst a human body, clothed in white, lies prone and lifeless beneath it. This religious glossing of "Hope Dieth Love Liveth" in *A Book of Verse* would no doubt have appealed to Georgiana a devout Christian who often spoke of her faith.

The subtle changes that William Morris made to the ten poems in *A Book of Verse* (changes largely to do with syntax and punctuation) which also appear in *Poems by the Way* helped to make the poems less intimate, less emotionally charged as they went from private manuscript to printed volume many years later. But this is not all, for *Poems by the Way* more generally marks, and is a monument to, the great political change in Morris' life, his conversion to Socialism. Thus, in later life Morris concentrated his energies less on the personal and private (less, in effect, on the concerns which helped to shape *A Book of Verse*) and more on the communal and public. This is a useful way of understanding the shift from the homogenous contents of *A Book of Verse* to the more varied selection of writings found in *Poems by the Way*. As Florence Boos has remarked:

... May Morris [...] recalled her father's wry remark that "A man shouldn't write poetry after fifty". Morris was fifty in 1884, the year he left the Social Democratic Federation to co-found the Socialist League. He continued to write poetry all the same, with a social communal focus, and in more accessible forms. But he also sought to write for a literate "popular" audience, and talk to it about certain recurrent human needs – for social justice ("fellowship"), and for a new aesthetic, one that might express the harmonies of a better social order, and encourage forms of affection wider than individual and familial "love".²⁷

Appendix

A Book of Verse: Table of Contents

(*denotes poems that also appear in *Poems by the Way*)

<i>The Two Sides of the River*</i>	<i>Love Alone</i>
<i>The Shows of May</i>	<i>Meeting in Winter*</i>
<i>The Fears of June</i>	<i>A Garden by the Sea*</i>
<i>The Hopes of October</i>	<i>The Ballad of Christine*□</i>
<i>The Weariness of November</i>	<i>To Grettir Armundson</i>
<i>Love Fulfilled*</i>	<i>The Son's Sorrow*</i>
<i>Rest from Seeking</i>	<i>The Lapse of the Year</i>
<i>Missing**</i>	<i>Sundering Summer</i>
<i>Prologue to the Volsung Tale</i>	<i>To the Muse of the North*</i>
<i>Love and Death</i>	<i>Lonely Love and Loveless Death</i>
<i>Guileful Love</i>	<i>Birth of June*^</i>
<i>Summer Night</i>	<i>Praise of Venus</i>
<i>Hope Dieth Love Liveth*</i>	

** *Error and Loss* in *Poems by the Way*

*□ *The Lay of Christine* in *Poems by the Way*

*^ *The End of May* in *Poems by the Way*

Notes

- 1 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 6-7.
- 2 Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 10.
- 3 Florence S. Boos, "1896-1996: Morris' Poetry and the *Fin de Millénaire*", *Victorian Poetry*, 34 (1996), p. 285.
- 4 William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), pp. 4-6.
- 5 As Peter Stansky has noted in *Victorian Thinkers* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993): "Morris did have a small circle of women friends, most nobably Georgiana Burne-Jones, the