

LOOKING IN AND SPEAKING OUT:
THE GAZE AND ITS BURDEN IN THE PAINTINGS OF
EDWARD BURNE-JONES

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Although the gaze of no painting can be reduced to the actual gaze of any of the painted figures within its material borders, Edward Burne-Jones's paintings always privilege the looks of its female figures as paradigmatic emblems of his pictures' strikingly uniform gaze. Interestingly, given their symbolic prominence, the looks of these women, save for less than a handful of isolated examples that prove the rule, never actually meet either the spectator's eyes or those of any of the other figures who share their visual field. Burne-Jones's languishing ladies almost always possess a look that critics have identified as an "inward gaze" (Wildman and Christian 35-38), which yearns for something not within the frame of the picture or the viewer's perceptual frame. The spectator is not simply invited to look at the spectacle of a wan feminine body but also to look at it "looking within itself."

This unexplainable "concentration of expression," which unsettled William Morris with its disconcerting strangeness (Fitzgerald 93), still flummoxes critics who view the introspective look either as a representation of an imaginary psychology or as an English species of *fin de siècle* narcissism. A proponent of the former view, Elizabeth Prettejohn observes that Burne-Jones's figures are erotic objects like both Dante Rossetti's and Simeon Solomon's figures, which she views as possessing "an interiority with which the viewer, again either male or female, may imaginatively engage" (222). Laurence des Cars also characterizes Burne-Jones's women as obsessive representations of an inwardly fixated, specifically feminine psychology: "The representation of withdrawal into the self, of the hidden, inner world, the world of dreams and sleep, recurs like a leitmotiv in the work of Burne-Jones" (35-36). Moreover, he argues that these dreamy figures exemplify "Woman absorbed in the narcissistic contemplation of her double" (36), a visual conceit central to much of the art produced during the Aesthetic and Decadent movements in England