

EDWARD BURNE-JONES
AND PRE-RAPHAELITE MELANCHOLY¹

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In Edward Burne-Jones's *Portrait of Caroline Fitzgerald* (1884),² the clue to the young model's oddly candid yet withdrawn gaze appears to lie in the undisclosed subject of her book. As a classical and Sanskrit scholar and a member of the American Oriental Society, Caroline may have been poring over a volume of linguistics. Given its embellished lettering, however, it is more likely that the future author of *Venetia Victrix and Other Poems*, a volume which she dedicates to Robert Browning in 1889, has been reading a work of literature – the kind of book that Burne-Jones himself would illustrate for the Kelmscott Press. If we knew the book's title, we might unlock the secret of the model's mysteriously abstracted gaze. But Caroline's melancholy countenance is both masked and unmasked. And the content of her book, like the object of her tear-filled thoughts, is undisclosed.

The admiration of this young and aspiring scholar-poet for Browning is sadly prophetic. Like Browning's Pompilia and his Duke of Ferrara's last Duchess, Caroline is the victim of a domestic tragedy that would make the subject of a dark but fascinating dramatic monologue. In the year she publishes her poems, she marries Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, who refuses to consummate their union. Though she receives an annulment five years later, she never appears to have recovered from the trauma of this tragedy: there is no evidence that she ever remarried or had a family of her own.

According to Douglas Schoenherr, in his catalogue entry for the Pre-Raphaelite holdings in Canadian collections, the open book in Caroline's hand refers "to her accomplishments as a scholar and linguist and to her own very impressive library. The laurel leaves in the background are a conventional tribute to her talents as a poet" (103). Despite such clues, however, the Burne-Jones portrait is not a genre painting of a young intellectual. Instead, it strenuously resists such labelling by inviting us to concentrate on a beautiful aesthetic surface. As a fine example of purist art, the portrait blocks off any escape route from the picture space into a world outside the