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A Life of Louisa Sarah Bevington

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What, with this fenced human mind,
What can I do to help my kind?
I such a stammerer, they so blind!
——“My Little Task”(1882)

Louisa Sarah Bevington stood up for individual human rights as she witnessed British Imperialism expanding its power for the nation's good. Her life changed dramatically in order to help her “kind.” She was not a “stammerer”; she was a poet, essayist, and activist who represented the political as well as the literary scene of the fin de siècle.

She was born to Quaker parents, Alexander Bevington and Louisa De Horne, at St. John's Hill, Battersea in the County of Surrey. The occupation of her father was described as a “gentleman” in her birth certificate, and his ancestor, when he was only a boy of fourteen, was known to have once suffered confinement in Nottingham Gaol with George Fox (1624-91), a founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Louisa Sarah was the eldest of eight children, seven of whom were girls. Her father encouraged her in the observation and love of nature, and, at a very early age, she wrote childish verses about natural objects. She made use of verse for the expression of her own thought and love for science, poetry, music, and metaphysical thinking. Like George Eliot and Constance Naden, Bevington was influenced by Herbert Spencer

(1820-1903), a philosopher and sociologist, and his evolutionist view of the universe and society gradually grew upon her. Bevington sustained the evolutionist view throughout her adulthood, and Spencer's sponsorship led to her recognition among both scientific and literary circles.

Shortly after the publication of her second volume of poems in 1882, she visited Germany, where, in 1883, she married a Munich artist named Ignatz Felix Guggenberger, without registering the marriage in England. The marriage lasted less than eight years; by 1890, she had returned to London and restarted her career under her maiden name, never using "Guggenberger" in public writings. In the years leading up to her death, she became involved with anarchist groups based in London and also associated herself with international movements. This coincided with her contribution of poems and articles to anarchist and socialist journals, forcefully putting forth a case for anarchism as a viable political philosophy.

By the mid-1890s, Bevington was familiar with many London anarchists and was a recognized anarchist poet. Politically, she condoned the use of violence as a final resort against institutionalized injustice and, privately, remained an atheist, refusing any religious ceremony for her funeral. On 28 November 1895, after suffering from mitral disease of the heart for four years and dropsy for six months while dedicating her shortening life to creative as well as political activities, she died at Willesden, Middlesex. Her death was reported a week later in London, not by her husband Ignatz, but by a Helen Glennie, who registered the poet's occupation as "a 'wife' of Ignatz Felix Guggenberger, an artist painter," and her name as Louisa Sarah Guggenberger. Her obituary notice was carried by the 18 December issue of *Torch of Anarchy*.

Bevington's poetic career can be divided into three periods. Up until the 1870s, she wrote naturalistic poems with Christian as well as evolu-

tionist tendencies. Her questions were answered by her faith, scientific observation, and transcendentalist understanding of nature. In the 1880s, as her attention moved toward society, she left Quakerism behind and began writing critical poems and essays while struggling to find a better solution for society's problems. When she came back to England, in the 1890s, she identified herself as an anarchist and wrote against the self-evident injustices and evils of late Victorian England. Her personal evolution, from innocent Quaker to agnostic ideologist and political activist, is expressed in her representative works of each decade: *Key-Notes* (1876), *Poems, Lyrics, and Sonnets* (1882), and *Liberty Lyrics* (1895).

Bevington started her poetic career in 1871 with some poems for private circulation. Her first published verses were "Sonnet" and "A Double Sonnet" which appeared, under her initials only, in one of the earliest numbers of *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, a Quaker journal. "Sonnet" is a religious and romantic poem in which Bevington describes her innocent belief in God on whose Divine intentions she "used to wonder when [she] was a child/And saw a tempest mounting in the sky." She eventually learns that "Lest 'neath a too fair sky man should forget/God sometimes in his life dark clouds doth set." In "A Double Sonnet," likewise, Bevington first admonishes people for impatience with God's holy will and, in the second sonnet stanza, asks them to "do the duty of the hour/Leaving results to time, and God's unfettered power."

Herbert Spencer read her poems and, in 1876, asked her for four more to be reprinted in the American journal, *Popular Science Monthly*. "Morning," "Afternoon," "Twilight," and "Midnight" appeared in January 1878 as sequence poems under the title "Teachings of a Day." Dividing a day into four periods of progress, the poem adopts an evolutionary view of creation. From time, when "There is effort all the morning/Through the windy sea and sky, until midnight when "There is

action in the stillness,/[and] There is progress in the dark,” she finds;

So we sing of evolution,
And step strongly on our ways;
And we live through nights in patience
And we learn the worth of days.

The evolutionary lesson she learns is optimistic: “Nothing hinders, all enables/Nature’s vast awakening.”

Bevington’s first major collection of poems, *Key-Notes*, was published in 1876 under the Barrett Browningsque pseudonym of “Arbor Leigh” (alluding to Aurora Leigh). All the privately printed poems were reprinted, together with others, including four poems of “Teachings of a Day.” *Key-Notes* contained verses philosophically based on the theories of Darwinian evolutionism and Emersonian transcendentalism.

The title of this volume was, as cited in the epigraph, taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s comment on a poet’s role: “Melodious poets shall be hoarse as street ballads when once the penetrating Key-Note of nature and spirit is sounded — earth-beat, sea-beat, heart-beat, which makes the tune to which the sun rolls, and the globule of blood, and the sap of trees.” Writing an elegiac dedication to Aimee W., to whom Bevington promises to “send some key-notes of life’s journeying moods,” she divides the volume of forty-eight poems into twelve months. The collection is that of a nature poet who expresses her passion to the changing climates and, by transcending them, finds metaphoric meanings of the universe, but it is also that of an evolutionist who observes cycles and progress. In the opening January section, four poems of “Teachings of a Day” are included as they indicate not only the evolution of a day but of the year. In the June section, “The stammerer” and “Summer Song” are included. The former is an invocation of a young poet who manages a stricter form of Italian verse, a villanelle. In the latter poem, the poet celebrates the

coming of the season; "Sing! sing me a song that fit for to-day" that is "Full of the scent, and the glow, and the passion of June." Her evolutionist observation of nature concludes, "While you sing me a song of the summer that's ancient and new." Bevington also wrote about woman and her situation. "For Woman's Sake" in August introduces the poet's dilemma between her feminist stance and her religious faith, in which she asks Christ, or "my brother," to "Teach her well" because "Thy code is writ in her belief in thee." "Love and Pride" and "Unfulfilled," in September and October respectively, present the poet's patience and sorrow over the unfulfilled love for the lover and God.

The last poem of the volume, "Listening," brings up her own religious questionings as well as those of society. Her conclusion is that of positivism, a literary adoption of the Darwinian theory, and an evolutionary meliorism:

Let them not sob themselves to sleep again
Till each has felt the universal Heart
Waking within him, and the great "worth while"
Of Time and Nature claiming his least deed
To weave in fabric of a new world-blessedness.

The volume found favor in intellectual and scientific rather than literary circles. According to Alfred H. Miles, "Professor Ray Lankester brought it under the notice of Darwin, who read it after not having opened a volume of verse for fifteen years," and Miles concludes that it "is not surprising that Mrs. Guggenberger should have broken the spell which for fifteen years had confined Darwin to the world of prose, for her part is emphatically that of the poetess of evolutionary science." Miles evaluates Bevington's first volume of poetry:

She has discerned more accurately than many contemporaries, the immense poetical development which the acceptance of the evolutionary view has made possible for science, and

her best poems are attempts, by no means feeble or unskillful, to bring out the poetic significance of scientific principles. She also has abundance of human feeling and passion, which find expression in poems having other than a scientific basis, and though the structure of her verse is artless, her diction is clear and vigorous.

Bevington's first collection was reissued by Kegan Paul under her own name in 1879.

In addition to publishing poems, Herbert Spencer also asked Bevington to write articles on evolutionary theory. Her first two articles, "The Personal Aspects of Responsibility" and "Modern Atheism and Mr. Mallock," appeared in *Mind* and *Nineteenth Century* respectively in 1879, the latter of which refutes, from a scientific standpoint, the cynical pessimism of W. H. Mallock's "Is Life Worth Living?" in which the cleric attacked the morality of evolutionary theory. Her article garnered some literary recognition and many literary friends both in England and America.

"Determinism and Duty" appeared in *Mind* in 1881, again at the suggestion of Herbert Spencer. In August of the same year, "The Moral Colour of Rationalism" was in *Fortnightly Review* in response to Goldwin Smith's article on the ethics of evolutionary theory entitled "Data of Ethics." In it, she argues against Smith's perception of evolutionary theory as the political ideology supporting colonial exploitation, such as that of the recent suppression by Governor Eyre of the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica. "Orthodox Conservatism," she declares, "is inclined to keep its theory of world-wide humanity for its wife and children to listen to, duly couched in Jewish phraseology, on Sunday." As a result, she concludes, "one may long for the time when religion shall no longer have the power to paralyse the morality it professes to patronise." Bevington's early Quakerism was being displaced by her personal ideol-

ogy of evolutionism that was to become more political as well as national later in her life.

In 1882, Bevington's second volume of verse appeared under the title *Poems, Lyrics, and Sonnets* and found, this time, less favor in scientific and more in literary circles. Her personal understanding of nature, religion, and people in *Key-Notes* broadened her outlook on various social problems of late Victorian England as her provocative expressions became more polished and literary. In the epigraph, along with Wathen Mark Wilks Call and an anonymous German philosopher, Bevington again quotes Emerson: "You must have eyes of science to see in the seed its nodes; you must have the vivacity of the poet to perceive in the thought its futurities." Her dedication to "C.A.V." takes a form of sonnet, and it declares her role as a literary activist:

Not that the theme is worthy, nor the lay
Such as your heart would have, one time in three;
Yet, battling, I would chaunt of victory
All life's night through: though dubious dream of day
Scarcely suffices me to shed one ray
O'er the fierce field where you must fighting be;
Yet you have brought a little sword to me
Of strange new metal that I would essay.

Thus, Bevington indicates her concern about the poet's literary as well as social roles along with six other poems on the subject of the poet. The whole volume consists of two parts; forty-two poems in "Poems and Lyrics" and twenty-one in "Sonnets." One of Bevington's new literary techniques is the use of companion poems: the pairs, such as "Steel or Gold (A Question)" and "Gold and Steel (The Answer)," "Unperfected" and "Perfected," "Hope deferred" and "Hope Preferred," and "Love's Height" and "Love's Depth," present her ambivalence and meditative process on various subjects. The tone of the collection is more serious

than *Key-Notes* and describes problems of society, home, and individual relationships. Her ideological shift, from a romantic natural poet to a political anarchist, is evident in this volume. As Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds mention, “her verse draws on evolutionary theory to decentre, as do Field, Naden and Blind, the egocentric power of human passion (‘Egoisme a Deux’ and ‘Measurements’). Darwinism, with its large-scale, natural, geological imagery, provided a useful model for the idea of inevitable social change.”

“Egoisme a Deux” and “One More Bruised Heart” are the most discussed poems in this volume. The former refers to a cosmic theory by using such terms as “nebulous,” “chaos-elements,” and “accidents,” and, as Kathleen Hickok mentions in *Victorian Poetry*, is a product of “the metrical experimentation, romantic theme, and the poetic diction”:

The title translates as “Egoism for Two,” “Egoism of Two,” or “Intimate Egoism.” The first two lines of each stanza present scientific descriptions of creation, geologic time, and evolution of species. The second two lines of each stanza raise the possibility that natural forces at work were commanded by a Will, a Thought, a Longing——in short, by some kind of deity who foresaw the intimate two of the title and guided cosmic events so as to arrange and endorse their love.

However, the poem is ended with a question; “Was it divine?” The answer hangs. Hickok analyzes the diction: “Not only is the love, ‘you’ and ‘I,’ probably accidental; the very presence of life on the planet, of human breath, may be accidental as well. The philosophy of the poem is agnostic at best.”

In “One More Bruised Heart,” nearly a century after Blake’s accusation of societal child abuse, Bevington exposes what’s happening at home:

One more bruised heart laid bare! One victim more!
One more wail heard! Oh, is there never end
Of all these passionate agonies, that rend

Young hopes to tatters through enslavements sore?

The angry and helpless poet indicates that this is not the only case of child abuse nor is it the first time. In fact, the abuse has been repeated as “your patient spirit bore/Its wrong in secret.” Bevington suggests that the abuse is not merely verbal and physical, but quite possibly sexual abuse on a young girl. Bevington’s literary expression of the hymen indicates the violation of virginity: “what love of mine can ever mend/ Again for you the veil your tyrant tore?” The subject can be wife abuse as well: the tyrannizing husband enslaves the young wife as he symbolically tears an image of romantic marriage, the “veil” worn by the bride. Bevington’s choice of using the traditionally courtly sonnet form, therefore, may be an ironical statement about unpredictable domestic relationships. Aesthetically, it is also ironic, as Bevington confesses in “The poet’s Tear,” that human suffering is the source of art, but she can at least take *a little sword of strange new metal* in order to express its agonies in the form of art: “I cannot cure; I may in part express.”

Bevington’s accusation of personal and social injustices are vehemently repeated in such poems as “The Unpardonable Sin” and “Hated.” Like “How Do I Know?” in which Bevington ironically describes a marital discord where the husband holds all the power over the wife, “Bees in Clover” is another poem Bevington addresses to “a wife-shriek” in order to “Help the woman bear her fetter” so that “the woman shall be free.” An allegorical expression of this poem is Bevington’s new aesthetic technique and continues to develop in her next publication. Her philosophical poems, such as “The Valley of Remorse” and “The Pessimist” and “Three,” also deserve attention. Soon after the publication of this volume, she left England and married in Germany in 1883. Too little is known about her marriage, but her attitudes toward marriage and man in her poems and essays are so dark that they may have reflected her

private life.

Meanwhile, in the 1880s and 90s, London was in the midst of socialist and trade union movements, and anarchism was also drawing attention from the public for its utopian goal. Women were also involved: Edith Nesbit helped Beatrice and Sidney Webb found the Fabian Society in 1884, and Charlotte Wilson was elected to be the only woman of the first executive committee of the Fabians. In 1886, Wilson also cofounded an anarchist journal *Freedom*, which she continued to edit until 1901. In 1894, William Michael Rossetti's children, or nieces and nephews of Christina, started *Torch*, that was continued as *Torch of Anarchy* after 1895. Returning to London's literary stage in about 1890, Bevington met Wilson and became a vocal activist, leaning her ideology more strongly toward anarchism. Her personal experiences and ideologies befitted what the anarchists justified as their cause of many social ills of British Imperialism. She started publishing a series of articles in various anarchist journals, as well as lecturing at the Autonomie club on atheism and Christianity.

In 1893, her inflammatory article "Dynamitism" ridiculed a Christian lady's accusation that anarchism may well be called Dynamitism. This article ultimately proved that Bevington herself had become a strong advocate of an anarchist terrorism: "Dynamitism is the bringing 'not of peace but a sword as a reply to the 'scribes, pharisees, and hypocrites' who prate of 'peace, peace,' when there is no peace." Bevington concludes, "Meanwhile, dynamite is a last and very valuable resource, and as such not to be wasted on side issues." In May 1894, "Why I Am an Expropriationist" was issued as a pamphlet, in a series which included William Morris's "Why I Am a Communist" in the same issue and George Bernard Shaw's "Why I Am a Social Democrat" in the other. The article reveals her sympathies with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's attack on

property-ownership, as Leighton and Reynolds explain:

Here Bevington takes a straightforwardly Proudhonian line that 'property holding is an abuse in itself' and argues for a society in which government has been banished and all goods are held in common. Characteristically, the romantic and primitivist ideals of anarchism overwhelm the practical realities of social organization. The self-evident injustices and evils of late Victorian England, regularly exposed in all the anarchist journals, provided sufficient justification for an extremist, utopian goal.

Her "utopian goal" may have triggered a terrorist action: a suspected anarchist blew himself up while carrying a bomb towards the Greenwich Observatory in February of the same year, (the incident which inspired Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*). It is not clear how deeply she was involved with the incident, but, as one of her letters was quoted to prove that the culprit had been set up by the police, she was not a mere bystander. Nevertheless, despite the possibility of criminal indictment, she wrote another agitative article for *Torch* in October, concluding "Demos! Where's our Dynamite?"

In 1895, at the age of fifty, the ailing Bevington was still active. She managed to publish two articles on property in James Tochatti's "Liberty" Press and *Chiefly A Dialogue: Concerning Some Difficulties of a Duncie* in Wilson's "Freedom" Office. As a poet, Bevington published the third and last collection of poems from "Liberty" Press. *Liberty Lyrics*, though three of fifteen poems were reprints from previously published anarchist journals, is probably the best balanced volume in terms of her representation of aestheticism and knowledge of religion, evolutionism, and anarchism, all of which led her to the stance of revolutionist. In the first poem "The End of the World," Bevington declares that "the end of the world is here," using a cosmic metaphor to describe

the apocalyptic 1890s: “Our round earth planet? Ah, no;/The planet shall roll, and the great sun stand.” An astronomical fact reflects the political instability of the planet earth. “Looking Dawnwards” is a modernistic poem in which she looks back to the history of anarchists and reconfirms their ideology:

Free to live and have my being ——
Free to choose or deprecate;
Free to keep law or to mend it,
Free to recognize my mate.
Free, by all consent around me;
Free by all consent within;
Free from human rule and precept;
Free from human hurt and sin.
Very gently will I take it,
Very careful will I be,
Lest the crucified and wistful
Miss their chance, in vain, through me.

Toward the end of the poem, Bevington sees the present as “the very Day of Judgment” and concludes mysteriously that “the Letter’s reign is over/And the Spirit waxes fast,” suggesting the end of her literary career and the beginning of her intense involvement as a revolutionist with the anarchist communism.

While her apocalyptic view grows in another of her poems, “Revolution,” Bevington also proposes a progressive political vision of the future. In “Dreamers?,” calling and recognizing Christ as “our comrade of long, long ago,” she says, “That ‘Kingdom’ *is coming*, on earth as ‘within you’.” “In and Out of Church” is also reminiscent of her earlier religious belief that is now politically united with her vision: “the great Hope warms the fighter,/And the broad New Day grows brighter/And more just.” Originally dedicated to her diseased comrades in the 11 November 1893 issue of *Commonweal*, “In Memoriam” explains that the anarchist’s task is to

assail and unmask liberty's plausible foes, "handing the torch as it glows/
To all who may ask."

As in "Bees in Clover" in *Poems, Lyrics, and Sonnets*, Bevington uses, in this new volume, the insect as an appropriate literary image of the people in an ideal community. In "The Secret of the Bees," the poet first wonders the difference between the lives of the insect and human; "Economy, Liberty, Order, and Wealth!— /Say, busy bee, how you reached Social Health?" Reporting that the bees have freedom, no money, and no hypocritical press, the bee answers, "And we got our good habits through sheer Common-Sense." "The Spider and the Bee, A Tale for the Times" is another allegorical poem, but its tone is more meditative than the other. A man, who believes that the "world must be saved by sympathies," finds a bee trapped in the spider's web. The man says, "I wish you may both — survive(?)." Being sympathetic to the bee while understanding that the spider also needs to prey on it to survive, the baffled man sighs and goes home to bed. Then, the poet takes over:

What of the tale? Well, it isn't exact;
Yet it hints at an ugly and pitiful fact.
"Philosophy" severing language from fact —

Sympathy's name is a shibboleth spoken;
Dreams of web-spinners be speedily broken! —
This story one tiny superfluous token.

This can be read as a poem for children, but, in light of her earlier poems, it is also an allegorical poem politically intended. The bee represents a member of a communist society, and the spider stands for the exploiting institution, or government. The confrontation between the two would be inevitable, regardless of the public's sympathy, or wish. Bevington is well aware that the anarchists' issues allow no compromise.

In her last poem of the volume "Dinner," Bevington tells her past

for the first and last time in poetry. Looking back how she was raised to be a “proper” woman, she describes herself;

Perhaps mine is a tenth-rate soul, not worth the while to save;
Perhaps a quite incorrigible soul that can't behave;
But it is mine, and I shall have to wear it to my grave.

In the last four stanzas, she mentions her fellow anarchists who helped her revive and hoist “living Life's red flag for goal.” This poem is not as critical or scornful of society as other poems were. It is rather a poem appreciative of the way she had lived her life. Later that year, Louisa Sarah Bevington, who had been fighting against society and her own heart disease for years, succumbed to mortality.

The following year, in January and November, Bevington's voice echoed in her posthumous article “Anarchism and Violence” and her very last poem “Wishes.” Though the date actually written is unknown, the article maintains Bevington's aggressive view on terrorism: “there are cases where poison becomes medicinal, and there is such a thing as warring against the cause of war.” The poem was, according to the accompanying note, “among the last of the contributions received from our late comrade, L. S. Bevington,” and was most probably written after *Liberty Lyrics*:

Oh, would it could be shared by all,
That vision of the soul,
Whose will, in tune with social due,
Needs but its own control:
For then a brave “new earth” would be
Where all should love, and *all were free*.

Contrary to her militant attitude in the prose, Bevington in this poem appears to step aside and seems unruffled. She may have been suggesting a middle ground, since the anarchists' espousal of violence was alienating the general public. Yet, it is too presumptuous to say that she

changed her political stance at the end. Instead, it would be more appropriate to say that her poetic diction, in contrast to a direct scornful accusation in the prose writing, reached a more meditative as well as a more suggestive tone. Her "Dinner" and allegorical "bee" poems are also written in this manner, and, certainly, this style is as modern as the twentieth-century political poets. Her death a year previously had also ended her evolution as a poet.

Louisa Sarah Bevington's life was as dramatic as it could be, but her literary evaluation is yet to be completed. Bevington's first literary critic was Alfred H. Miles who included her in *The Poets and the Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* in the 1890s, but he introduced her carelessly as "Louisa S. Guggenberger" while admitting she was "better known to the public by her maiden name." He mentioned that her "chief defects are over-facility common to so many poetesses, and a deficient perception of the humorous" and ignored her poetic intention; i.e. "What can I do to help my kind?" Like other women poets, for Bevington, poetry was a means to express her serious concerns, quite different from what Miles expected from women poets. Since Miles, Bevington's poetic achievements have been neglected until the 1980s.

During the last decade, however, the poet has been re-introduced and her works have been reprinted in several anthologies and literary encyclopedias. Yet, the information of her life is still largely dependent on Miles' brief essay, and academic essays on her individual poems are still sparse. Bevington's intense political involvement may have overshadowed her poetic contributions, but Leighton and Reynolds' comparison of Bevington to her contemporary, Christina Rossetti (1830-94), may shed more light on Bevington's literary place: "Bevington's poetry lacks the darker, imaginative recesses of Rossetti's, and often sounds, in spite of its secularist goals, more religious and high-minded than hers."

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This is an original essay of the LSB section, *The Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol.199: Victorian Women Poets* (Detroit: Gale, 1999), which was edited for the commercial reasons when appeared. I believe, however, this original form should be published here because it deserves serious attention for its detailed biographical information. Additional information follows.

LSB Biography

Born: 9 P.M., 14 May, 1845, St. John's Hill, Battersea, County of Surrey.

Died: 28 November, 1895, Lechmere, Willesden, County of Middlesex, currently a part of Greater London since 1965.

Cause of death: Mitral disease of heart for 4 years and dropsy for 6 months.

Daughter of: Alexander Bevington and Louisa (formerly De Horne)

Married: Ignatz Guggenberger, an artist painter of Munich, Germany, 1883.

Wrote under: Arbor Leigh, L. S. Bevington, Louisa S. Guggenberger.

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