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A. S. Byatt, *Peacock & Vine. On William Morris and Mariano Fortuny*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016. 184 pp. + viii. Illus.

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Fashioning form and figure

Byatt has always painted in words, blocking in texture, colour, shape and pattern precisely. Here she tackles the lives and art of William Morris and Mariano Fortuny. These artists together? "I think fancifully," she proclaims; "...the excitement is the excitement of the neurones in the brain, pushing synapses connecting the web of dendrites, two movements becoming one" (3–6; black and white photographs of the two artists splice this thought). In juxtaposing their art and lives she hopes to deepen her understanding of them. She "can't hear music," she confesses (164), which may explain her lifelong passion for art; certainly her Venice offers a different experience than those to be had with Henry James or Thomas Mann, where sounds and silences jostle equally with light and shadow. It doesn't matter. Byatt, supported by beautiful illustrations, makes vivid the work of Morris and Fortuny. Connections between the two artists, though, are not immediately obvious.

Though the men were both inventive nineteenth-century craftsmen, their lives are separated by a generation, or two, and by place. Morris is still popular today, certainly among the English; Byatt has some of his designs at home on walls and utensils, her lunch tray, for instance. Breaking new ground in his day with his views as well as his art, Morris's designs and patterns are now highly regarded for their structured, traditional forms. Both artists were steeped in legend and classical line. Fortuny was beguiled by light, especially its colourful capture in materials draped to celebrate the female figure. While Morris might be described as working to discipline form, Fortuny sought to set it free. The Englishman favoured strong, subdued, vernal shades; Fortuny embraced the Mediterranean, his Spanish background and life in Venice adding brilliance and passion to his fabrics and inventions.

Peacock and Vine occurred almost by chance. Byatt's writing-life brought her to Venice. While there she visited the Palazzo Pesaro Orfei, once Fortuny's home and workshop, now a museum. Among his fabrics and tools, she became "drunk on aquamarine light" continually seeing "a very English green" (3). The exoticism of Fortuny nudged her to contrast his work with that of Morris, which was more familiar. The resulting book is a pleated text (Richardson, 1), in this case an interplay of words and illustrations that allow readers to discover Morris as well as Fortuny through Byatt's own unfolding delight in Fortuny. In the process, her essay, as she calls it, encourages readers to rethink form, beauty, and imagination. After describing her Venetian encounter with Fortuny, Byatt guides us through their lives and work (inextricable in both men), enabling us to share her enjoyment of their creations.

There was sadness as well as success in Morris's life; more sustained happiness, one would think, in Fortuny's. Morris found little comfort in the artistic communities

he formed. While Fortuny worked contentedly at home with his wife, his chief inspiration and valued collaborator, Morris was always a bit of an outsider among the Pre-Raphaelites, with whom he is linked. Later he drew on his daughter May, who nourished first his art and then his reputation. Stimulated by his English heritage, he also travelled as far afield as Iceland. Seemingly the more isolated of the two, Fortuny found vital stimulus not only at home but also in the classical associations lying just beyond his Venetian doorstep. Morris, Byatt suggests, was the less assured of the two. Friends proved cruel; it was as if in the long run experience taught him to distance himself. None of this is evident in his work, which reassures rather than provokes.

Byatt does provoke, as one has come to expect from her writing. She notes, "As I grow older, ...I have come to understand that my writing—fiction and thinking—starts with a moment of sudden realisation that two things I have been thinking about separately are parts of the same thought, the same work" (3), continuing, "When I began to write this essay, I had a very simplified concept of the contrast of the design of the two artists" (107). Readers are carried along with her thinking through her writing. In the section on fabrics, designs and light (105–22), for example, she describes first seeing, then re-examining for form and order and, finally, relishing being able to observe underlying beauty in Morris's and Fortuny's work. It resides, she found, in order and form (in theme and pattern, for instance) rather than in, as more often supposed, originality. This humble yet profound thought frames two sections on pomegranate and bird motifs (123–59), a common, differently realized fascination with both men. Here is the conclusion to her description of a Fortuny dress, which begins on page 132, which is faced by a full-page colour photograph of the dress in question, before finishing overleaf:

> It is easy to believe that no two Fortuny dresses were the same colour. The pomegranate is in soft gold, and the image covers the whole chest, above a wide, waist-holding belt with gold decorations on a slightly orange ground. At the centre of the image is a substantial floating pomegranate. It took me some time to see that the image is in fact printed on a transparent overdress of a more mulberry gauze. (134)

As Byatt makes readers realize, they have to keep looking to find beauty (168).

Satisfying though this sort of reading is, there is still some question about what Byatt is doing in this book. Both her subjects have been the focus of satisfying biographies already, as she notes. And for *Peacock and Vine* to function satisfactorily as memoir readers would need to be more familiar with her writing, just to appreciate her appreciation of Morris and Fortuny. Without knowing more about her, this book

might be relegated to the coffee table as an elaborate artifice. Byatt is well steeped in nineteenth-century literature and thinking, myth and legend, philosophy, and nature; knowing this, it's worth looking further. I found it amusing to link *Peacock and Vine* to *The Biographer's Tale*, for example, the relation between them seeming less complicated than that between Morris and Fortuny. In *The Biographer's Tale*, Byatt explores the relation between the lives of biographers and what they write about, what they consider to be known, interesting, or important. She herself in that tale is a novelist making the point that the identity (or identities, a troubling question of its own) of a biographer becomes part of the biography whether the biographer intends that or not. Byatt seems totally at ease with this conundrum in *Peacock and Vine*, and this book wouldn't work without her to make the links.

There is always, of course, a challenge in placing two lives together although dual biographies are not unusual: perhaps two queens (Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots); siblings (the assassinated Romanov grand duchesses); or a mother and daughter, in which one may be the biographer of the other (as in *Divided Lives* by Lyndall Gordon). Byatt has written a dual biography of her own, of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their social and literary times. These two poets seem a natural combination, despite personal conflicts in their lives; more so than Morris and Fortuny, who would never have met. But Byatt's oeuvre is full of experiment, all of it folding together in a colossal pleated text wrapping thought around, together with metaphor, in tales within tales, fantasies, biographies, philosophical and literary criticism, and narrative. As a writer Byatt has always posed ideas, sometimes softening them, as in this book, with a comma then an "I think"; in that way alone, she often becomes a subject in her own prose, as she is here. Although *Peacock and Vine* is intended to showcase the lives and work of William Morris and Mariano Fortuny, her own is a necessary metanarrative. Elusive though the glimpses of it may be, it is in passing references and allusions to herself that the book comes together, and that is why she is right to call it an essay, one that in exploring the art of two craftsmen seeks self-enlightenment. Because of this, readers will find the writing reflective and open, there for us to regard, study, and find beauty.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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