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William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings, by Caroline Arsco

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ment, then, is the convincing way in which it identifies and charts widespread, prominent, but limited, Victorian representations of tea-drinking that can be usefully engaged with and opened up by scholars working with different archival sources as well as different disciplinary methodologies. That said, Fromer could have strengthened her own analysis if she had pushed harder at times to explore the ways in which the fiction she treated might have aided such endeavour.

As stated, I was convinced by Fromer's thesis that the tea table's metaphoric and metonymic capacity to signify idealised communal relations figures strongly in Victorian novels. I wondered, however, whether this domestic, middle-class, heteronormative paradigm should be held to coordinate the novels to the extent that Fromer suggested, even when her readings emphasised the logic of this ideal was contested. This concern was particularly felt with regard to Fromer's unwillingness to discuss Victorian novels in terms of the global as well as the local, especially since she analyses so adeptly the international and imperial implications of other fictional and nonfictional representations of tea. Leaving aside novels not included in the study (and I'm thinking most obviously here about those associated directly or indirectly with the Raj), the assertion that, in the main, "Victorian novels focus exclusively on the domestic resonances of tea-drinking" (293) needs at the very least to mention Edward Said's work in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) on the way in which the interior spaces and cultures of the nineteenth-century novel can be understood with relation to the exertion of power overseas. More generally, Elaine Freedgood has argued recently in *The Ideas in Things* (2006) that by forestalling an allegorical mode of criticism and "taking things literally" the literary critic can discern "the history the novel secretes" rather than narrates (35). I was reminded of Freedgood's injunction to pursue things beyond the plots and subjects of novels, wandering along "the contiguous connections that are available to us" (21), when Fromer remarks with relation to a passage concerning narrative "meandering" from *David Copperfield* that "tea itself is made possible only by meandering" (185). Given Fromer's detailed knowledge of Victorian tea and Victorian novels, and given the expansive possibilities of both her subject and source material, I would have been fascinated to see *A Necessary Luxury* explore on occasion those fugitive meanings that a more meandering interpretative line might have elicited.

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**William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings**, by Caroline Arscott; pp. 260. New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2008, \$75.00, £40.00.

Caroline Arscott, Senior Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute, offers students of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones an engaging, if eccentrically speculative, study of the aesthetic relationship between the two artists. Arscott opens her introductory chapter by articulating a dialectic between the artists' timeless "lyrical" images and the time-bound textual "narratives" in which those images have their contexts. She posits Morris's and Burne-Jones's fascination with imaginary body morphologies, psychic and

physical spaces, and their troubled utopian desires as crucial to a full understanding of the expressive urgencies coursing through the fine arts, literature, and decorative arts of the second half of the nineteenth century.

This study alternates between chapters devoted to works or clusters of works by each artist. Arscott's first chapter, "Morris: The Gymnasium," seeks to illuminate the convergences between Morris's early wallpaper design and fitness theory, harkening back to his and Burne-Jones's Oxford days when both would frequent the gym of Archibald MacLaren, who was to give Burne-Jones his first commission designing illustrations for a book of fairy ballads. Arscott argues that as Morris grew older, his designs relied increasingly on two-dimensional motifs evacuated largely of negative space. Arscott compares Morris's practice of beefing up the patterns of his designs at the expense of the background to the tearing down and building up of soft tissue to create lean muscle mass in order to escape bodily decay and death, linking both to experiments in Aesthetic art.

In this same vein, chapter 3 examines Burne-Jones's unfinished *Perseus* series (1875-88), undertaken in response to Morris's robust designs. Arscott deploys the under-appreciated Didier Anzieu's psychoanalytic theory of the "skin ego," which, in both pre- and post-Oedipal dispensation, experiences the overwhelming external world of reality effects across its fragile and permeable surface. Whereas the alarmingly stout Morris creates strapping acanthus vines and loud chrysanthemums, the painfully thin Burne-Jones paints a vulnerable, thin-skinned hero who appears to have forgotten his shoes. The armor he creates for Perseus provides a much-needed exoskeleton for his mythological protagonist. Arscott's elaborations on this seeming half-man-half-machine says a lot about Burne-Jones's forlorn and feeble construction of masculinity. But then she overshoots her lovely insight that Perseus is a time traveler (psychic or art-historical, she does not say). Her comparison of Perseus to the Terminator is modestly entertaining, but only just—while her illustrations do intrigue, correlation is not causation. Arscott also fails to provide any convincing evidence that Burne-Jones drew his inspiration for armature from Victorian weapons manufacture. Perseus's metallic skin owes far more to the Hermes of Andrea Mantegna's *Parnassus* (1497) than to a proto-cyborgian vision. Moreover, much of his armor features avian elements, as if the magic of Hermes's slippers had enchanted even his most obsidian of garments. Designed for Arthur Balfour's dining room, this series was to have included, like *The Legend of Briar Rose* series (1870-95), in situ panels encased in wooden frames with gilded gesso ornamentation and set off by text.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue to explore the dialogue between the two artists by analyzing Morris's wallpaper designs from the 1870s onwards alongside Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose* series. Here Arscott explores how and why these artists (Morris more than Burne-Jones) chose to erase the boundary between foreground and background, as well as between fine and decorative arts, in seeming anticipation of modern concerns with space, image, and function. She also examines dead space in Morris's textiles and wallpaper designs, describing how their interlocking patterns, color blocking, and strong vertical repetitions convey the harmonies of the natural world and promote a green vision of a human community, while simultaneously reminding the spectator of his mortality and subjection to the cycles of life and death. Arscott moves forward in this vein with respect to Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose* series. But here nature threatens the

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spectator's faith in community, courtly or otherwise. Returning again to a multimedia work in situ, Arscott elaborates on bodily metaphors she developed earlier, adding to them tropes derived from Victorian horticultural literature. Although Anzieu's paradigm of the skin ego provides provocative depth to her reading of Perseus's hybrid flesh, its use here collapses beneath the weight of Arscott's metaphoric extrapolations. When she suggests that "dermal" briars infiltrate and rip apart the "epidermal" courtly worlds of the castle behind its thorny wall and the armor of the soldiers in front of it (105-06), the reader may want to know exactly what kind of skin disease or garden blight was providing the model for all of these multiple figurative lesions.

Chapter 6 reads Morris's designs through the lens of Burne-Jones's caricatures of the former's ever-ripening form and his fascination with tattooed figures. Arscott's analyses of Maori designs and those of other "primitive" cultures promised to be a tour de force because Morris has so often been seen as reinventing a unified Western art-historical psyche. But in spite of her arresting readings of individual designs and colors, the analyses lack documentation. Although well fleshed out with smart readings and sharp observation, the argument that Morris strives to make the interior life of the body and community present visually and often tangibly in his designs stands as the ground zero of critical discourse on the artist. She reintroduces the surface-depth theme in her discussion of the angling metaphors in *The Glittering Plain* (1891); however, her thematic dialectic, enticingly tidy but relentlessly applied, begins to grate. Unfortunately, Arscott's limited ability to analyze literary work does not equal her formidable skill in assessing the visual.

Arscott ends her vigorous study with an examination of Burne-Jones's designs for stained glass as another expression of the artist's lifelong ambivalence between bodily recuperation and physical ruination in figural representation. She attempts to apply her theoretical paradigm to the series of windows Morris & Company produced for St. Philip's Cathedral in Birmingham. However provocative and immediately obvious such a method for reading appears, especially given the broken-up and stitched-together appearance of the medium, it is a fatal misstep. Arscott treats these windows, which were collaborative products, as fashioned by Burne-Jones's hand only. While Burne-Jones did create the cartoons for these windows, he did not choose the colors of the windows, the location of the comes, nor the designs for the tracery lights. After his early and then later (after the mid-1870s) only occasional forays into designing backgrounds for glass, Burne-Jones most often used Morris's smotheringly pushy acanthus leaves or one of the firm's other stock patterns. These design elements by Morris and, to a lesser degree, other members of the firm contributed as much, if not more, to the sliced-and-diced effects of the stained-glass bodies in these windows as Burne-Jones's cartoons. The garments of the scarlet seraphim fluttering about the adamantine Christ in the triumphal *Last Judgment* (1874-75) of this series are rent to pieces, but not for the paradoxical reasons Arscott imagines. When the firm took up stained-glass production, it did so to rescue color, the kind of modulated, glowing color found in Gothic cathedrals. Stained glass manufacture at the time tended to produce plain grisaille or garishly bright painted glass, neither of which did much to enhance the sacramental effects of light coveted by the artists. As John Ruskin could have pointed out, smashing glass into ever-smaller bits and reassembling them increases the number of a window's apertures, each with its own luminous halo, turning each angel into a shimmering blaze of radiant, undulating color. Rather than breaking against the very

ideal they cannot quite embody, they luminesce into a sublimely material mysticism. Again Arcscott hastens toward the flashy insights and trips over the documented realities of both contemporaneous art-historical scholarship and material manufacture that actually do matter. All too often this study substitutes analogy for causality. As she skims brightly across the glittering surface of so many fascinating “things,” their wonderful haecceity vanishes.

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**Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses**, by William A. Cohen; pp. xvi + 182. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, \$67.50, \$22.50 paper, £42.00, £14.00 paper.

What does subjecthood feel like? According to William Cohen, over the course of the nineteenth century, writers increasingly recognized the impossibility of answering this question. To have a body, Cohen argues, involves an openness to the world that necessarily puts pressure on the idea of the subject. Thus, throughout the century, writers recognized how “the non-alignment of body and subject suggests that the body has the capacity to *unmake* the human” (xvi). But at the same time, they understood the consequences of that recognition in more and more radical ways: while Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë use sensory experience primarily as a way to describe intersubjectivity, by the time we get to Thomas Hardy and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the subject is being imagined as importantly contiguous with and even indistinguishable from the world.

*Embodied* opens with an introduction and first chapter that make a historical and theoretical argument for thinking about the senses on the model of touch rather than the more common model of vision. While sight has been used by critics to underscore the operations of disciplinary power, Cohen claims, the writers he examines transform even the seeing eye into “both an orifice—an opening into the body—and a tactile surface for drawing together the subject and the object of sight” (25). Each of the chapters that follows explores the consequences of this shift in perspective. In his chapter on Dickens and Brontë, Cohen examines these writers’ fantasies of intersubjectivity as a form of bodily penetration. In the next chapter, he argues that Anthony Trollope conceives of racially coded skin in his short story “The Banks of the Jordan” (1861) as both a barrier between self and world and a potential site of contamination. In his chapter on *The Return of the Native* (1878), Cohen shows how Hardy uses sensory perception to undermine distinctions between human and nonhuman. And in his chapter on Hopkins, he discusses the poet’s understanding of the body as registering a natural world linked to both divine perception and debased matter.

Within Victorian studies, Cohen’s project contributes to the recent explosion of interest in Victorian sensation and perception exemplified by such works as Janice Carlisle’s *Common Scents* (2004), John Picker’s *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003), Nancy Armstrong’s *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (2002), and Jonathan Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception* (2000). It also engages with recent work interested in the meaning of embodiment and materiality: Catherine Gallagher’s *The Body Economic* (2006), Daniel Hack’s *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (2005), and Mary Poovey’s *Making a Social Body*

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