

Michael Wheeler: *Ruskin's God* (Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xviii + 302. £ 40.00.

Michael Wheeler contends that there are frequent misreadings of Ruskin's complex work by 20th-century readers, who ignore religion when they select aspects of Ruskin's texts, and misunderstand Ruskin's deconversion from Evangelical Protestantism as an example of European secularization. He concedes that Ruskin was involved in the debates on the truth of the Bible in the face of historical and biological research but maintains that Ruskin never lost his "belief in divine wisdom and a God of peace" (xv). In order to adequately assess Ruskin's relationship to his contemporaries and to ourselves,

Wheeler argues that we have to take into account his faith. In contrast to other notable works on Ruskin's religious belief, Wheeler considers King Solomon's wisdom in the Old Testament as fundamental to Ruskin's life and work. He identifies two major problems in Ruskin's complex and changing theological thinking: (1) the tension between the visual and the spiritual eye, i.e. Ruskin's delight in aesthetic perception and his Evangelical understanding of the eye as an instrument of spiritual insight but also as a risk to temptation and idolatry, (2) the question whether faith or work lead to salvation.

Wheeler expertly guides us through the maze of Ruskin's arguments. He reveals the network of relationships between Ruskin's autobiographical writings and his reflections on art and architecture, natural science and theology, society and economics in the context of religious Victorian discourses. Meticulously, he presents close readings of quotes from Ruskin's major writings and their intertextual references to the Bible. Wheeler analyzes Ruskin's development in two parts: in his earlier books on art and architecture Ruskin wanted to teach people how to see, and in his later books on society and economics how to live.

At first, Wheeler traces the changes in Ruskin's religious aesthetics in *Modern Painters*, the multi-volume art critique written between 1843 and 1860: Ruskin's focus shifts from the representation of nature as God's culture to that of the human body as God's temple. Ruskin's interpretations of Turner reflect his own change of concepts and interests: "Ruskin moves from seeing Turner as the true prophet of divine wisdom, truth and love as manifested in nature, to regarding him as a genius who was 'without hope', the product of an irreligious England whose national Church had failed him and his generation" (30). At the beginning of his career, Ruskin tried to combine his aesthetic pleasure and his Evangelical creed in Christian aesthetics, that contemplated the beautiful as a divine gift (57). However, his Protestant point of view limited his aesthetic appreciation of Catholic art. But Ruskin left his early Protestant denigration of Catholic art as idolatry behind in favour of a system of Christian types of beauty that enabled the Protestant to appreciate Italian Catholic art and architecture in *Modern Painters III*. Ruskin likened St. Mark's in Venice to the Book of Common Prayer, and maintained that this temple serves as a text which warns mankind of God's judgement. Ruskin's critique of architecture in *The Stones of Venice* established a parallel between the decline of Venice in the 15th-century and that of Great Britain in the 19th-century due to the neglect of essential religion in society and in the state. Ruskin's crisis of faith in 1858 marked the turning point from the art critic to the Victorian Solomon. Wheeler convincingly argues that Ruskin did not deconvert, but rather discarded narrow-minded sectarianism in favour of a broadminded inclusive religion, which expanded his insight into art and accompanied his change towards an ethics of practice. Ruskin's question had been how Christian artists could be less inspired and perfect than secular artists. His answer was that things done rightly and delightfully were always done with the help of God. Veronese's painting *The Presentation of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon* was sacred art that celebrated the beauty of the body and the material world (141).

Solomon became Ruskin's alter ego, whose wisdom and whose roles as a teacher and prophet informed his writings on socio-economic culture. Ruskin rejected the reductive mechanical explanations of human beings in natural science and political economy and in the 1860s put forth his ethics of wise life within the framework of a religion of humanity. In the 1870s, Ruskin became a "Catholic" in the sense of the literal or spiritual wandering of Israel, leaving behind the distinction between Roman-Catholic and

Evangelical Protestant. He regarded the saints as guides to heavenly wisdom against hellish folly, and expected help from the warrior-martyr St George and the ascetic St Francis. Ruskin put his utopian visionary idealism into practice in his St George's Guild, which demanded from its members faith in God and mankind, labour, obedience to Christian ethics, the authorities of the Guild, and the laws of the state unless they contradicted the law of God. Wheeler maintains that in the late Victorian era Ruskin's life was dominated by the conflict between his desire for beauty, order, and unity against the chaos of his attacks of insanity and the chaos of the modern world. For Ruskin, *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* signified the corruption of creation in an environmental and a moral sense. Ruskin hoped for divine blessing and Christ's second coming in order to terminate prevailing evil.

Michael Wheeler suggests that Ruskin's "whole project seems even more relevant today than it did in the industrial age" (xv). He warns the readers not to mistake Ruskin for a "proto-ecologist, or the first 'green man'" (278), but considers Ruskin's reconnection of faith, morals, aesthetics, and life as promising. Wheeler claims that Ruskin's applied "belief in wisdom and in a God of peace" (278) could be helpful in the face of postmodern discontent with the culture of materialism and its fleeting gratifications, with the church's failure to preach and live the gospel, with "the crisis of choice in the cultural hypermarket" (278), with the loss of spiritual guidance, and with the flooding of individuals with dispersed information that is not integrated into knowledge and not seen as subservient to wisdom. Whereas Wheeler's rehistoricizing of Ruskin's writings within the context of Victorian religion is completely convincing, he mentions, but does not explain the use of Ruskin's religion for our contemporary world, taking into consideration that the prophet never lost his faith, whereas many people today never had any in the first place. Wheeler foregrounds Ruskin's attempts at connecting fields of knowledge and ethics but plays down how digressive and chaotic some of Ruskin's writings are. Whereas Ruskin's collateral and complex form of writing is certainly pre-modern, his obtrusive Christian didacticism may alienate today's readers. Ruskin's problems of combining ethics and aesthetics, and of building networks of knowledge between different disciplines are as important to contemporary readers as the solutions he offered. Wheeler very knowledgeably researches the development and meanderings of Ruskin's faith. His valuable historical study does not displace, but complements the selective contemporary readings that exploit Ruskin for present use.

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