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Gary Wihl, *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, 234 pp., illus., $24.50 (cloth)

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sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business." I have always taken Christ's physical aloofness from his Mother in this painting to be purely one of impatience.

Although the chapter devoted to Whistler is interesting for the background it provides to his work, I found the analysis of the portrait of the painter's mother disappointing. Whistler never made any secret of the fact that the subject matter was of secondary importance to him, and therefore his work should be viewed with that consideration in mind. His paramount preoccupation was with the translation of the subject into colour and form. He regarded a portrait as he would have a still-life, an arrangement, as his titles so aptly convey. The fact that this particular painting is one of the world's most popular is interesting in itself. In spite of Whistler's posturings, a certain emotion occasionally escapes; I find this portrait a most sensitive one. Bernard Sickert remarked that it is "the only one [portrait] that has a compelling individuality, except perhaps the Carlyle whose weary hopeless face looks out with a sad intensity." He goes on to say, "a human being was to Whistler just like an old barge or a falling rocket, the stimulus to certain ideas as to colour and form aroused by the contemplation of its aspect." More could have been said about Whistler's interest in Japan and Aestheticism, and of his profound influence on the Scottish painters of the Glasgow School: Lavery, Guthrie, and E. A. Walton.

The literary style of the book is a little diffuse and indigestible, but that is a minor quibble. Professor Bendiner has amassed a wonderful selection of illustrations to accompany his main work in each chapter. It is a pity that more could not have been in colour as the vivid nature of Victorian art is often lost in monochrome illustrations. The colour plates are of a superb quality rarely seen this side of the Atlantic. He has compiled an invaluable bibliography though the absence of William Gaunt's classic trilogy is strange. The notes, however, are full of useful sources and references.

In the end, the importance of this work is this: Kenneth Bendiner traces the renewed interest in Victorian painting which endured a long period of virtual ignominy.

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GARY WIHL. *Ruskin and the Rhetoric of Infallibility*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, 234 pp., illus., $24.50 (cloth).

In this thought-provoking analysis of the shifting grounds on which Ruskin purported to be building his defence of Turner in *Modern Painters* and of his interpretation of the Greek imagination in *Aratra Pentelici*, Professor Wihl encounters numerous inconsistencies in Ruskin's positions and frequent contradictions between his theory and practice as a critic. It is thus not surprising that while he considers Ruskin "the most important epistemological critic in English," many of Wihl's own statements cast doubt upon that claim. Among other Ruskinian sins catalogued here are his "inability to separate human distortion from true perception or conceptualization" and his facility for "confusing linguistic structures with actual substance." In Wihl's judgment, Ruskin's "failure derives from his continual inability to master his own brilliant rhetorical inventiveness," for he "idolatrously interposed metaphor before all that he perceived." If Wihl justly describes its most important epistemological critic, English criticism must be in a bad way indeed.

However, just as in reading Ruskin one is wise to ignore his broad generalizations and concentrate on what he has to say under narrower focus of eye or argument, so the reader who pays close attention to Wihl's analysis of specific attempts by Ruskin to define or explicate "truthfulness" in art will be richly rewarded. Wihl's penetrating study of the quasi-Lockean formulations of *Modern Painters I* demonstrates that, far from failing to understand Locke (as is sometimes supposed), Ruskin apprehended the crux of Locke's epistemology: "the perpetual disposition of mankind to suppose that they *see* what they *know*." Despite this insight, Wihl argues, Ruskin's treatment of individual paintings often confuses perception with imaginative conception. While constant shifting back and forth between signs and tropes gives Ruskin's prose great suggestiveness, it is dangerous to read his metaphors as if they denoted descriptive truths.

In discussing *Modern Painters II*, Wihl's main concern is to show how Ruskin's pontifical tone conceals various epistemological cruxes in a work filled with uncertainties of theory. Ruskin had many theories of proportion, for example; but Wihl singles out the notion of proportion as "metaphorical structure, one which intensifies cognition" as a decisive advance in epistemology. He then shows that Ruskin often, nonetheless—as in his ranking of beauty in animals according to degree of vitality and gentleness expressed by the eye—fell prey to "a confusion of linguistic metaphor with either substance or appearance." While he was aware of the danger of "substituting himself in the place of the signifier," Ruskin consistently ignored the disruption such substitution created in his own texts.

Ruskin's treatment of allegorical landscape in *Modern Painters III-V* is largely vitiated, in Wihl's opinion, by his interpretation of allegory as an assertion of "fact in a nonbelievable form" rather than as a trope. Heedless of the danger of reading allegory as if it were empirically based assertion, Ruskin often made serious mistakes in generalizing about the Greek and medieval mind.

This leads Wihl into the most interesting section of the book, a discussion of "Idolatry in Ruskin and Proust." Wihl's is the first concerted attempt in English criticism to come to terms with Proust's complex reaction to what he considered Ruskin's dishonest substitution of morally significant but empirically valueless religious images for his "sincere" love of physical beauty. While Wihl himself uses the term to cover a bewildering range of meanings, his definition of idolatry as "belief in the literal existence of . . . allegorical figures" is applied with interesting results to Ruskin's later writings, in which he turned increasingly to forms of art, such as Byzantine mosaics or Greek coins, which "emphasize the importance of cognition over sensation." In *Aratra Pentelici*, for example, Ruskin fell into idolatry in his treatment of

Athena: though she is a figure of the imagination, Ruskin saw her as a "literal, natural yet divine, power."

Summary cannot do justice to this fascinating book, which no student of Ruskin can afford to ignore. Nonetheless, Wihl makes a number of serious errors. His insistence that "sensation, as such, has no role to play in Ruskin's epistemology" is surely unjustified. The fifth chapter of *Modern Painters I*, to which Wihl devotes considerable attention, begins by claiming that the word "Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind *or senses*, of any fact of nature" (emphasis added); and in the famous penultimate paragraph of his chapter on the Theoretic Faculty in *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin concedes that "sensual pleasure" may be the "basis" of an "idea of beauty." It would be amazing, given the evidence of Ruskin's notebooks, if the satisfaction he derived from the detailed recording of visual phenomena should have been entirely overwhelmed in even the most extreme of the anti-sensualist diatribes of *Modern Painters*.

It is perhaps symptomatic of Wihl's own distaste for close visual study that his few attempts to link Ruskin's writings with analysis of specific works of art should be unsuccessful. His remarks about Ruskin's evocation of Turner's *Slave Ship* contain the amusing assertion that the ship is being "tossed" about in waves that have not yet come into being. Using part of Turner's title, *Typhon Coming On*, in an attempt to discredit Ruskin's accurate perception of the fact that the ship is engulfed in a storm that must already have raged at least long enough to stir up some of the most monstrous waves ever depicted on canvas, Wihl concludes that a "single, very casual mistake has a tendency to call forth associations with all the force of an *idée fixe*." A glance at Turner's work is enough to convince one that it is Wihl, not Ruskin, who is suffering from a fixed idea. Similar carelessness is apparent in Wihl's illustration of one of Ruskin's most emphatic celebrations of the richness of Turner's cloud painting with a hasty pencil sketch that contains not a single stroke even suggestive of a cloud (p. 32 and pl. 5). Again (though this could be the fault of publisher rather than author), the book's cover, which purports to illustrate a detail from Ruskin's "*Grand Canal, Venice*, showing the Casa Grimani," has neatly excised from the drawing precisely the portion which depicts the noble front of that building.

Partial readings of Ruskin give rise to some misleading generalizations. It is not true, for example, that for Ruskin "Byzantine mosaics . . . appeal primarily to the intellect." Even in *The Stones of Venice*, where the mosaics are treated in part as an exercise in reading, Ruskin wrote with special power of the emotional responses they generate. The mosaics are

> vast shadowings forth of scenes to whose realization he [the believer] looked forward, or of spirits whose presence he invoked. And the man must be little capable of receiving a religious impression of any kind, who . . . remains altogether untouched by the majesty of the colossal images of apostles, and of Him who sent apostles, that look down from the darkening gold of the domes (Vol. II, chap. 4, paragraph 63).

Furthermore, though it is true that Ruskin was increasingly concerned with allegorical forms of art in his later works, it is misleading to claim that "the 'ruder the symbol, the deeper its significance' becomes the motto of his analysis." Some of his most moving praise in *St. Mark's Rest* is reserved for mosaics (such as the exquisite Salomé in the Baptistery) which display consummate artistry. The *Vierge Dorée* of Amiens, as treated by Ruskin in a lecture of 1858 (published in *The Two Paths* the following year), is not, as Wihl claims, the "last 'tender' fiction that he allows himself to appreciate."

Wihl's study, concentrating as it does on "the failure of epistemology to overcome rhetoric" in Ruskin's writings (p. 2), might blind the unwary reader to the fact that Ruskin's most valuable writing on art—the contribution that has most to offer the modern art critic—is neither rhetorical nor concerned with epistemology. Many of his verbally restrained studies of individual buildings and paintings set standards of analytical accuracy that are seldom equalled in the best contemporary criticism.

Finally, one cannot discuss this fine book without lamenting Wihl's adherence to Harold Bloom's egregious claim that "all Ruskin's later works (beginning perhaps with the final volume of *Modern Painters* [in a later echo Wihl speculates 'beginning perhaps with *Sesame and Lilies*']) are massive pathetic fallacies" (pp. 2, 131). That the author of *The Elements of Drawing*, *The Laws of Fésole*, *Praeterita*, and large portions of *Fors Clavigera* should still be subjected to such assertions is evidence that the sin of idolatry—the "self imposition" of the critic before the truth (p. 27)—is as rampant in modern criticism of Ruskin as it was in the works of the master himself.

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ELIZABETH JOHNS *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, xx + 207 pp., 124 black-and-white plates, $63.00 (cloth).

We are well informed about the life and work of Thomas Eakins, but any reader at all familiar with the literature on the artist would have to confess that our understanding of his life and work is limited. An abundance of data supports a fundamentally superficial interpretation of the style and content of his works. This new study by Elizabeth Johns is therefore a particularly welcome contribution because it builds up a coherent and sophisticated picture of Eakins's art and thought through the critical analysis of a few selected works in which the full range of traditional art-historical methods is brought to bear. While in her preface Johns acknowledges her debt to Goodrich and others who have laboured to establish the facts of Eakins's life, she makes it quite clear that she is not simply following in their footsteps and attempting to mine new facts or rearrange old ones about the artist's biography or his stylistic development.

The author's broader, more comprehensive approach is indicated by the volume's subtitle, *The Heroism of Modern Life*, which identifies an overarching theme used to link observations and conclusions about paintings with different kinds of subject matter. The theme is not a novel one. Linda Nochlin devotes a chapter of her well-known book on realism to it and notes that concern with the heroism of modern life arose out of a new