

## REVIEWS

*John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* by David M. Craig. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2006. x, 422 pp. ISBN 978-0-8139-2558-5. \$60.00.

A book on Ruskin by a scholar of religion and ethics is a first, the University of Virginia Press announces; but in charting his turn from moral to cultural criticism, *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption* maps familiar ground. David M. Craig follows Ruskin's inquiry into moral character and the requisite conditions for, as well as the legitimate ends of, "human flourishing," beginning with the contributions to aesthetics in the second volume of *Modern Painters* in 1846. As he moves through *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), *The Political Economy of Art* (1857), *Unto This Last* (1860), *Munera Pulveris* (1862-63), and, occasionally, beyond, he offers an overview of Ruskin's career that sometimes differs from the standard versions (presented by John D. Rosenberg in 1961 and George P. Landow in 1971) merely in its emphasis on morality. But Craig also contributes insightful discussions of lesser known works like "Modern Education" (1853) and "The Work of Iron in Nature, Art, and Policy" (1858). More important, he reads Ruskin's life-work through an idealist's lens. For readers of Ruskin who reside in departments of literature and art history and profess some variant of cultural studies, this may be a challenging view, one that demands the adoption of unfamiliar assumptions about social practice and moral conduct.

According to Craig, character is Ruskin's abiding concern, but its importance has been overlooked for a century. The writings of Raymond Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre exemplify this neglect: while Williams's work absorbed Ruskin's ideas on labour into the history of Marxism, MacIntyre's narrative of the declining importance of morality in western thought placed the nineteenth century "after virtue" and thereby precluded the moralized aesthetics first evident in *Modern Painters II*. And yet, as Craig observes, Ruskin's approach to moral life is teleological: it is shaped by the pursuit of good ends. In this sense, Ruskin's ethics are practical, not primarily emotional. The Kantian tension between subject and object that has figured so prominently in discussions of his early aesthetics was simply not important to Ruskin, Craig notes, so a consideration of the writer's own stated or implied intentions justifies the reader's turn away from expressivist theories to what he calls the "vocabulary of the virtues." This vocabulary reflects the classical concept of the *virtus* – all that is best in the physical and moral nature of human beings and conducive to social excellence. Ruskin's chief virtues include charity, piety (a reverence toward the natural world important to the argument in *Modern Painters II*), honesty (the active capacity for recognizing human worthiness), honour (in *Unto This Last*), and justice (in pricing).