

ROBERT M. RYAN. **Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth**. Pp. viii + 210. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. £55.

This book is not really about Charles Darwin. And it is not specifically about Darwinian evolution either. While Robert M. Ryan's title seems to promise a study of the links between Darwin's theories and Wordsworth's poetry, Darwin is in fact a relatively minor presence in the book. His sustained reading of Wordsworth in the 1830s and 40s is discussed in a few paragraphs in the introduction, and the second chapter opens with a consideration of the reception of *On the Origin of Species*, but Darwin and the theory of natural selection fade from view after this. The second half of the book's title is more apposite: this is an important and original study of the 'church' (or cult) of Wordsworth in Victorian Britain. Ryan is a specialist in Romanticism and religion, and in this book he sets out a persuasive argument for the importance of Wordsworth in Victorian debates about religion and science: responding not just to Darwin or Darwinian evolution, but to scientific naturalism more generally, various Victorian writers identified Wordsworth's poetry as a foundation on which new kinds of religious sentiment might be constructed and communicated. Ryan does not succeed in justifying his claim that 'more than any literary critic, Charles Darwin contributed to Wordsworth's continuing cultural eminence in the decades after his death' (p.11), but he makes a convincing (and broader) case for the connection between Wordsworth's popularity and his presence in Victorian discussions about the relation between scientific knowledge and religious faith.

Ryan's case is founded on diligent and comprehensive research. Sharing the approach of Stephen Gill's *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998), to which it is an invaluable complement, his book maps the pervasiveness and diversity of responses to Wordsworth in Victorian culture. It brings to light a wide range of nineteenth and early twentieth-century

considerations of Wordsworth's poetry in religious magazines, sermons, literary criticism, and scientific writing. Ryan's evidence demonstrates that the church of Wordsworth was inclusive and non-denominational: his poetry was cited in defence of religious feeling by Catholics, Anglicans, dissenters, and (perhaps surprisingly) agnostics. Even the physicist John Tyndall, a pugnacious champion of scientific naturalism and opponent of obscurantist theology, was happy to identify Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' as 'a forecast and religious vitalization of the latest and deepest scientific truths' (p.94). These diverse responses were enabled, Ryan argues, by the ambiguity of Wordsworth's poetic language: his expressions of an 'elusive, protean faith' (p.93) helped Victorians of various theological persuasions to articulate a mode of religious sentiment that was flexible enough to survive the intellectual danger posed by scientific naturalism.

The central argument of the book is that those Victorians 'who accepted Darwinian theory found in Wordsworth a way to integrate religious belief with the new science, the poetry serving as a bridge allowing communication between the two realms of inquiry' (pp.8-9). This makes a large claim for Wordsworth's poems, but it is a claim that is brilliantly supported, in several chapters, by Ryan's nuanced and incisive readings of his evidence. Chapter 2, for example, argues that Wordsworth's poetry contributed to a Victorian rejection of natural theology in favour of a kind of 'scientific pantheism' (p.78). Theologians and science writers, Ryan shows, embraced pantheism 'in an effort to see the force that drove evolution as in some sense divine'; this 'emphasis on a divinity immanent in creation became the dominant movement in theology in the second half of the nineteenth century' (p.69), and the ambiguous spirituality of Wordsworth's writing, incorporating both heterodox pantheism and orthodox Anglicanism, represented one of the most valuable sources of support for this reconciliation of theology with science.

Other chapters of the book are less successful in their efforts to identify Wordsworth's poetry as a bridge between religion and science. Chapter 4, for instance, is repetitive, too long, and not really about science, focusing instead on the offshoot of utilitarian political economy that was sometimes termed 'social Darwinism'. Wordsworth's concern for the poor and for people on the margins of society was often cited in criticisms of this way of thinking, but, as Ryan acknowledges, social Darwinism had relatively little to do with Darwin's theory of biological evolution. This chapter also exemplifies a recurring problem in the book: the one-sided partiality of Ryan's appreciation of Wordsworth. Ryan often highlights the 'extravagant claims' of Wordsworth's Victorian disciples (p.181): the historian John Robert Seeley identified him as 'the saint of the religion of nature' (p.90); and the Unitarian minister Richard Armstrong described his poems as 'the Bible of a new and larger faith which was to destroy the narrow creeds of the established Christianity; they constitute, perhaps, the mightiest single intellectual influence of the nineteenth century' (p.4). However, some of Ryan's own arguments are phrased in unhelpfully partisan ways: for example, he appears to dismiss criticisms of the older Wordsworth's religious and political conservatism, which were first voiced by later Romantic poets, as a recent academic fad: 'Literary scholars in recent years have followed one another in reprobating Wordsworth's "apostasy"' (p.138). And in chapter 4 Ryan uncritically endorses Wordsworth's attacks on utilitarianism and industrialization, without fully considering the other side of this contentious nineteenth-century debate.

Ryan is more measured and scrupulous in his close readings of Wordsworth's poetry; his analyses of particular poems show him to be an astute reader of the epistemological and syntactic ambiguities that characterize Wordsworth's verse. Sadly, there are few sustained discussions of specific poems until the book's fifth and final chapter. This is, however, not entirely surprising, because the focus of the book is first and foremost on Wordsworth's

position in Victorian culture rather than on his poetry itself. Readers who expect a detailed consideration of Darwin's writing or of evolutionary theory may find this book frustrating, but it is an informative and valuable study of the critical, cultural, and religious reception of Wordsworth in Victorian Britain.

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