

RECREATING ROMANTIC STYLE:
AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS WORDSWORTH'S POETICS IN
JOHN RUSKIN'S *MODERN PAINTERS*

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John Ruskin was heavily influenced by Romanticism, and his art criticism, as many critics have noted, makes numerous references to the works of Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Scott. *Modern Painters*, in particular, owes much to Wordsworth's poetics. However, the influence of Romantic writing on Ruskin is complex, as Ruskin also criticized Romantic poets for their use of what he called the "pathetic fallacy." His notion of the "pathetic fallacy" attacks the weaker side of the Romantic imagination, stressing the egotism and sentimentalism that obstructs a faithful representation of the poet's perception: "The temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy, is ... that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them; borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion" (*Works* 5:208). However, the criticism of the "pathetic fallacy" reflects a complex attitude because it expresses Ruskin's concern about the literature of the day but also the bias of his own sensibilities as influenced by his reading of works of the Romantic period. For instance, Ruskin praises Scott as the most accomplished poet of landscape description, placing Scott among those not guilty of falling victim to the "pathetic fallacy": "Observe, therefore, this is not *pathetic* fallacy; for there is no passion in *Scott* which alters nature" (5:341). The term may be interpreted as Ruskin's reaction to what Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence," as Ruskin may be debunking emotional poetry to distance himself from the subjective idealism of the Romantic poets in an effort to reconcile his idealism with the objective realism of the mid-nineteenth-century mind.

In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin's ambivalent attitude towards the Romantics is evident in his comments on Wordsworth's writings: on the one hand, he speaks with admiration of *The Excursion* but, at the same time, he is puzzlingly silent about the poet's prose works. For example, Ruskin describes Turner's painting of "the high clouds" by stressing how faithfully it reproduces