

JOHN RUSKIN'S JUVENILIA
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE PATHETIC FALLACY

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"Know thyself": long enough has that poor "self" of thine tormented thee; thou wilt never get to 'know' it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual: know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules! That will be thy better plan.

– Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*

John Ruskin introduced the term "pathetic fallacy" in *Modern Painters III* (1856), saying that "All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the 'pathetic fallacy'" (*Works* 5:205). The pathetic fallacy is part of a complicated, subtle, and evolving aesthetic theory, and implicitly a social and moral theory as well, and its meanings cannot be reduced to this one statement, though the emphasis on emotional stability and representing things "as they really are" is what makes it a popular Victorian touchstone. As with the theory, its origins cannot be trimmed down to a single factor, but the restrictive, self-moderating practices Ruskin would recommend were set in place when he was writing his poetic juvenilia, warranting a re-examination of the fallacy in that context. By examining the pathetic fallacy in the framework of Ruskin's famously conflicted boyhood – his father's licensing of romantic impulses and his mother's demand for self-effacing restraint – I do not mean to reduce it to Ruskin's familial troubles or any subsequent psychological wound. Rather, the conflict in the Ruskin family is relevant to the genesis of the concept because it is remarkably emblematic of the ideological differences between Romanticism and Victorianism.

Ruskin's early poetry – the poems he wrote between 1826 and 1836, between the ages of seven and seventeen – often reveals the self-conscious