

JOHN RUSKIN & THE PATHETIC FALLACY: A CRITIQUE

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The Pathetic Fallacy has had some currency in modern literary criticism and it is interesting to see where the discussion originated. John Ruskin, 19th century writer and art critic, introduced the concept in a self-contained essay, "Of The Pathetic Fallacy" in his Modern Painters, vol. iii, pt. IV (1856). The essay begins in a typically rancorous fashion:

German dulness and English affectation have of late multiplied among us the use of two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians -- namely, 'Objective' and 'Subjective'.

This one-two to the jaw of Anglo-Saxon thought may seem at first to have Kant as its target, but, as we shall see, British empiricism is not meant to go unscathed. The contrast between objective and subjective had been made in the Middle Ages and was made in new ways since the 17th century, with a very complex subsequent history.¹ This initial distinction, though it seems to lead into a philosophical by-way, is really to the point: the pathetic fallacy, according to Ruskin, is very much a failure in distinguishing between out-there and in-here.

The subjective-objective problem is, to be sure, one of the cruxes of Western metaphysics. Ruskin takes the "realist" position, launching an attack on "idealism", which in the most succinct form, might be summarized as "To be is to be perceived". He distinguishes between subjective and objective qualities of things, following the scheme of primary and secondary qualities established by John Locke. Like most realists, Ruskin supposes it an easy matter to dispose of idealism by simply denying its validity. He assumes an objective reality which idealists since Plato have taken pains to call into question. One of the most ingenious exponents of this position, George Berkeley, argues that a tree crashing in a distant forest makes no sound at all if there is no one near enough to hear it fall, which to realists seems fantastic. What Berkeley means, if I understand him correctly, is that "sound" means precisely physical vibrations producing a sensation in a hearer. The world and its objects, then, exist only if they are perceived. Though this argument was ridiculed and parodied, it was never, so far as I know, seriously refuted.

Ruskin contributes very little to the argument. He makes two statements; first, that a blue flower "does not procure the sensation of blueness if you don't look at it" (thus far agreeing with Berkeley), and, second, that the flower is always blue because it "has always the power" of producing a blue sensation. This seems to me so imprecise as to dodge the issue. Is the flower really blue in itself? Berkeley would say it is in so far as it is perceived by someone as being so, which is just what blueness means. Ruskin's second

statement seems to mean no more than his first, namely that the flower is blue when you look at it, since the power of evincing blueness cannot be known without it being tested, i.e. without perception. Ruskin then contrasts true and false appearances, saying the latter are unconnected with anything in the object itself and are due to difficulties in the perceiver. But, one may object, that also could be true of a "true" appearance. By what means can one distinguish between one and the other? It was Berkeley's great merit to abolish the need for such a distinction since all appearances are by definition subjective. As to what the connection is between the thing itself and its appearance, philosophy would have to wait for Kant, who proposed that objective reality is known only so far as it conforms to the structure of the mind, which he analysed in detail, a position that is essentially idealist.

Ruskin's method in the essay is to proceed by making a statement, followed by an example illustrating his meaning, and concluding with another more refined statement to clinch the argument. The opening statement is typically a dogmatic assertion designed to shock or wake up the reader, like the paragraph that begins the essay, quoted above. Thus, Ruskin, getting into his real subject, says that our favorite poetry is full of what is pleasureable but untrue — which is Plato's position — and furthermore, Ruskin thinks that we like it all the more for being untrue, which he never really demonstrates, at least in this essay. After this salvo, he quotes a line about the sea as the "cruel, crawling foam" and dubs it a pathetic fallacy, since "the foam is not cruel,

neither does it crawl." He thinks an image becomes fallacious or false when it is produced by violent feelings, which must be kept under control. What merely looks like a transferred epithet, a common-place in poetry, thus becomes the pathetic fallacy.

It is Ruskin's intention to shock, he might be said to succeed, since one immediate reaction is that if things are not allowed to have human characteristics transferred to them, as in certain figures of speech, poetic language is in danger. But Ruskin reassures us that the pathetic fallacy is only indulged in by second-rate poets, since "the greatest poets do not often admit this kind of falseness." Evidently, he does not number poets like Keats among the greatest. In any case, the example he uses to prove his point is flawed. He compares Dante's line about spirits falling "as dead leaves flutter from a bough" to Coleridge's "The one red leaf, the last of its clan/That dances as often as dance it can". He pronounces the latter false on the grounds that the poet imagines there is human life in the leaf, when there is not, while Dante's lines are not fallacious because the poet is aware all the time that there are leaves on one hand and souls on the other. Ruskin ignores however, the difference between the two figures: Dante's line is a simile, a figure that calls attention to two unlike terms of comparison, while Coleridge's lines constitute a metaphor, which disguises the difference. Perhaps Ruskin just means that Dante's line is better poetry. This is a view corroborated by a long following footnote in

which Ruskin launches a tirade against the "sin" of bad poetry. Curiously, he seems to think that poets deliberately write badly, or he is unaware that poets often think their poetry good when there is general agreement that it is not. Since most bad verse is probably written through ignorance or incompetence, and will soon be forgotten if it is ever read, it is hardly a case for moral outrage.

In Ruskin's next illustration, he quotes a passage in the Odyssey where Odysseus greets his ex-companion Elpinor in Hades and expresses surprise at the speed with which Elpinor arrived. Ruskin then quotes Pope's translation of this passage, which is considerably less economical than in Homer, and excoriates Pope for being false to the emotion that Odysseus presumably feels. That he has elaborated on Homer's words does not necessarily mean that Pope has falsified the emotional content of the passage. It may mean nothing more than that Homer and Pope are different kinds of poets, or that an 18th century English translation in heroic couplets may well be different from an 8th century B.C. Greek epic in dactylic hexameters. So it is an unjust conclusion, and a false one as well, if we are admirers of Pope's poetry, to say that "No poet of true imaginative power could possibly have written the passage."

An oft-quoted part of Ruskin's essay is that in which he enumerates the three ways of perceiving: a man who perceives rightly but without feeling; a man who perceives wrongly, but with feeling; and a man who perceives rightly "in spite of his feelings". The first is the mode of the unpoetic, the second of bad poets, and the third of true poets. What Ruskin

seems to be doing in the essay is to argue for the kind of poetry that is satisfying to both intellect and emotions. Either the greatest poetry has just that kind of satisfaction, or he is trying to get us to see that good poetry cannot really falsify, whatever its emotional content. He evidently believes that poetry must be factually accurate in the interest of truth and the best kind of poetry occurs when emotions are held in check. If a poet gets emotionally involved with his own poetry, it will be consequently bad, as he may be subject to the pathetic fallacy. But surely what matters is not what the poet is feeling when he writes the poem but how the finished version of the poem turns out, since it is by that, and not the poet's emotional states, that the reader will be directly affected. Ruskin seems to give more importance to the personality of the poet than he should. So the "high creative poet" (his greatest type) is emotionally impassive and stands serenely aside and "watches the feeling, as it were, from far off." Ruskin may be saying here what Eliot would say later about great poetry being impersonal, an escape from personality, but his restrictions seem arbitrary and his categories mere abstractions of his personal tastes.

To contrast the pathetic fallacy with what is a perfectly accurate and adequate poetic description, Ruskin quotes some lines that describe a man desiring that his body be cast into the sea: "Whose changing mound, and foam that passed away/might mock the eye that questioned where I lay". One might suppose that the word "mock" is transferred to the unthinking waves and therefore an example of pathetic fallacy, but Ruskin

assures us that it may mean simply "deceive" and imply no "impersonation". One might ask, however, why that particular word was chosen with its strong associations of human emotion. The expression "passed away", which Ruskin thinks strictly literal, may also have the meaning of "died", something else that cannot happen to waves. The lines may be said to be good, but they are not totally devoid of pathetic content and they do not "limit their expression to the pure fact", Ruskin's rather curious criterion for good poetry.

Ruskin's remarks do reveal, however, what he seems to be driving at: poetry must avoid the "poetic" in the bad sense if it is to have power. But it is hardly a critical revelation to say that for poetry to be good it must avoid being bad. And bad for Ruskin is lack of emotional control:

A poet is great, first in proportion to the strength of his passion, and then, that strength being granted, in proportion to his government of it...

We recognize a truth in this, perhaps the same one Pound is anxious to impart when he tells poets that they must write verse which is at least as good as good prose. Yet Ruskin is not raising a cry for better technique but castigating what he considers false or inadequate feeling. As he could hardly find fault with the technique of a poet as good as Pope, he is content to call him "cold-hearted" and compares him unfavorably to Wordsworth, which is ad hominem and worthless toward making a critical point.

Ruskin says that the pathetic fallacy, which he nowhere

satisfactorily defines, is a sign of weakness. He defines the fallacy by its alleged effects instead of showing just how it brings about those effects. In a final paragraph, however, Ruskin neatly summarizes what he has been saying in the second part of his essay:

... the pathetic fallacy is powerful only so far as it is pathetic; feeble so far as it is fallacious...

The first part of the statement shows that he does find a place for extreme emotions, and he does in fact make a reference or two to the prophetic. He even admits to the attractive power of unrestrained imagery, though he thinks it of an inferior kind to that which is checked by a fidelity to truth. The problem is that his conception of truth is that of a rather prosaic realism.

The second part of the statement, that the pathetic fallacy is feeble so far as it is fallacious, seems to mean that if it is "true" it is powerful. This is a way of saying that the pathetic fallacy is allowable if it is truly pathetic; that is to say, if it works, and not, if it does not. This is saying nothing at all, especially when we remember that what Ruskin has not done in the essay is to show how poetry can be fallacious other than by not being prosaically true. The term "pathetic fallacy" is an amalgamation of a psychological and a logical term, which may be what is wrong with it and why it is difficult to define. Nowadays, it means something like "the application of human feelings to the

inanimate world,"² a device which poetry can hardly do without. Even Homer, one of Ruskin's great impassive poets, has expressions like "ships that joy in the wind."

NOTES

¹Raymond Williams, Keywords - A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (Glasgow: Fontana books, 1976), pp. 256-264.

²Joseph T. Shipley, Editor, Dictionary of World Literature, New Revised edition, (Totowa: Littlefield, Adams, 1972), p. 301.