Sentimental Nature, New Media, and the "Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy"

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The "Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy" is a browser-based web application that locates sentences in literary texts in which human beings, natural objects, and emotional experience depend upon one another for full expression. Additionally, the program pairs each sentence with an animated illustration that playfully expands on the interplay between human sentiment and natural environment that the sentence contains. By juxtaposing features of the natural landscape with human emotion, the application reminds us that our inner lives and outer surroundings are fundamentally connected.

The project takes its name from John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century British critic and art historian who coined the term "pathetic fallacy" to describe the practice of ascribing human sentiment or intent to nonhuman entities. For Ruskin, mapping human emotion onto natural objects constitutes an error in judgement and serves as a gauge of moral rectitude (or, rather, its lack): "The temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy, is," he writes, "that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them."[1] In spite of Ruskin's admonishments, this concept deserves our renewed attention. Contemplating the rich interaction between human emotion and the surrounding natural landscape is well worth our time, and not merely as an exercise in literary study. Any instance of the pathetic fallacy, by Ruskin's own definition, complicates distinctions between subjects and objects and blurs perceived boundaries between inner experience and outer environment. As such, it offers a real-world technique for reframing large-scale ecological vulnerability. And if there were an efficient means of locating such moments, not only in poetry but

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1   John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," in *Modern Painters,* vol. 3, p. 73.

in any manner of written text, we might be more fully capable of probing their significance. This project provides some movement towards this capacity.

The Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy is a provocation to consider Ruskin's concept more expansively, by reckoning with its inverse. That is to say, Ruskin only had it half right. If one is sad, it is true that the raining sky and grey rainclouds do not weep in sympathy with one's plight. Invert the causal relation, however, such that it is the inclement weather that causes the sadness, and the fallacy converts into a logical sequence. Put bluntly, while the rain does not care about us, *we* may well affectively respond to the environment we find ourselves in, unconsciously or not, partially or not, mirroring and evoking our surroundings. Human emotions and natural objects cluster in abundance, and their co-occurrences rarely remain confined by the tidy hierarchies of "subjects" and "objects" dictated by grammar. The Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy application helps us reorient the relations between them. It is web-based application – i.e., a computer program – written by the author of this text, and accessible at the following URL: http://not-so-pathetic-fallacy.org/. The program reads any.txt file sentence by sentence, looking for ones in which natural entities – such as trees, mountains, forests, or clouds – motivate an emotional response – such as joy, sorrow, serenity, or rage; or, vice versa, ones in which natural forces disclose emotions of their own. Revisiting Ruskin's concept of the pathetic fallacy allows us to see how it has coevolved in exciting ways with practices within new media and digital art and, additionally, how it might connect such practices to an ancient and enduring past.

The impulse to imbue nonhuman agents with human attributes has persisted as an aesthetic trope from antiquity to the present day. In Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, the bawdy actions of the title character provide the proto-novel's central – and ludicrous – narrative structure. In biblical tradition, fearful waters tremble before their Creator in Psalm 77, while roaring seas, joyful hills, and clapping floods are promised in Psalm 98. In medieval allegory, abstract virtues frequently manifest as human entities, and in chivalric romance animistic nature blends with such abstractions within a variety of folkloric traditions. In the early modern period, Fortuna looms large in the fate of humankind. And so on.

In our own time, the pathetic fallacy has found particularly exciting outlets within new media. In 2009, for example, one of the Great Lakes became the first body of water to hold a Twitter account: @LakeSuperior has attracted over thirty-eight thousand followers, prefers the pronouns she/her/hers, and delights in reminding the public of her prowess via a sassy and strategically pinned tweet (e.g., "I am the Greatest Lake of All Time #GLOAT."). Since her debut, a variety of natural entities have joined her: a red oak tree in Massachusetts (@awitnesstree), a filthy-minded bird in the United Kingdom (@PigeonJon), an escaped snake from the Bronx Zoo (@Bronxzooscobra), and the fog surrounding the San Francisco Bay, who describes himself as "an extremely handsome collection of water droplets" (@KarlTheFog), are but a few members of a growing, nonhuman menagerie on Twitter alone.

While such entities constitute comical efforts to engage popular interest, they also highlight the power of new media to translate nonhuman experience into human-readable terms. New media artists have taken this impulse even further, not merely by taking on the personas of natural objects or entities, but also via the literal coproduction of art. Consider, for example, Jan Baeke and Alfred Marseille's *Channel of the North* (2012), a poem whose shape and size fluctuates in accordance with "the ebb and flow of the tides located in the Westerschelde river at the Dutch-Belgian border";[2] or Reza Safavi and collaborators' *Poseidon's Pull* (2013), a fascinating art project that makes use of oceanic drift and Geographic Information Systems to communicate with the ancient god of the Aegean Sea. More recently, Richard Carter's *Waveform* (2018) has recorded "images of coastal shorelines using an airborne camera drone" and employed "software that maps the outlines of incoming waves. The resulting data is then processed by software that generates text resembling free-verse poetry."[3]

Such works push the limits of the pathetic fallacy to its breaking point. They demonstrate that ascribing power, emotion, and intent to natural forces is not to commit an error in logic or to profess a falsehood but instead to acknowledge how such forces are always already active participants in experience. Their existence puts to rest any lingering doubt we may have had about the capacity of natural forces to motivate – or, indeed, to physically propel – textual production. Consequently, such works demonstrate the porous nature of the subject-object divide and, as such, offer a potential bridge between distinct scholarly pursuits.

For example, in what is alternately called "New Materialism," "Actor-Network Theory," and "Vibrant Materialism," the importance of decentring human experience remains paramount. In the Environmental Humanities, the urgency of human affect or emotion has become increasingly apparent, even as its challenge to human exceptionalism remains intact. The pathetic fallacy attends to both these areas of concern by demonstrating how human sentiment refracts across natural objects, and the Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy expands affective registries even further. By calling attention to the ecological factors that participate in all emotional experience, it invites users to think about the ways in which the environment – so often relegated to "setting" or "background," in both literature and real life – is a fundamental partner in lived experience.

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2   Jan Baeke and Alfred Marseille, *Channel of the North*, in *Electronic Literature*, Vol. 3., Online. URL: https://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=channel-of-the-north (accessed 12/21/2020).

3   Richard Carter, Waveform, in *Arts 7*(4), 70. URL: https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7040070 (accessed 12/21/2020).

Presentation of the App / Project Walkthrough
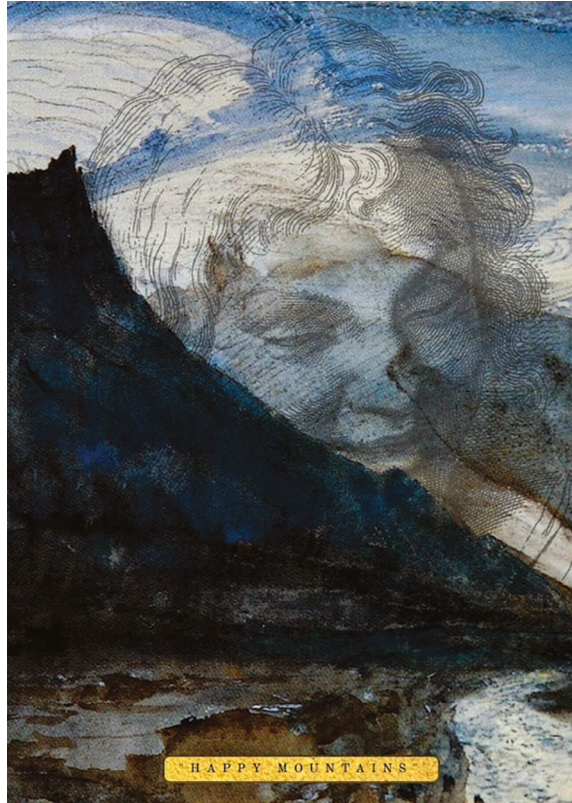
Readers interested in any aspect of the Not-So-Pathetic Fallacy are advised to visit the project website at http://not-so-pathetic-fallacy.org, where they are welcome to try it out for themselves with any .txt file. The site invites visitors to fill in the empty fields and upload the text to the interface (fig. 1). Once uploaded, the text is analysed by a Python script that looks for words associated with sentiment, on the one hand, and naturally occurring features, on the other. These are organized into more specific categories, stored as lists, and arranged into an index page (fig. 2).

The index both organizes the sentences and provides a means of navigating through them. Each sentence listed in the index pairs with an animated illustration that emphasizes the interplay between human sentiment and natural environment that the sentence expresses (fig. 3). In the case of this text – *Modern Painters* Vol. III, which includes "Of the Pathetic Fallacy" – we can see that, in spite of his scepticism, Ruskin was not above employing this technique in his own prose.

1 Video tutorial for the web application

3 "Happy Mountains"

2 Index