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THE CORRECT AND THE APPROPRIATE IN THE APPRECIATION OF NATURE

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I AM walking along a country road and come across a cluster of lady's slippers—one of my favourite wild flowers—in the adjacent woods. I admire their unusual bulbous shape, their brilliant yellow. I enjoy the sight of them more because they are fairly rare among wildflowers in my parts. I enjoy them in their setting, from which I would not think of removing them (quite apart from the illegality of such a removal). However, my enjoyment is focused on them, and is not so different from the pleasure I took in the cut orchids I used to buy every Sunday in a Singapore wet market. Those orchids could not be found 'in nature'. They were the product of what once would have been called the horticulturalist's art. Still, I admired them as flowers possessed of beautiful shapes and colours.

Further down the road is a backwater of a river, a swampy place that unfortunately has been used as a dump. Admixed among the grasses and water are old tyres, something that might once have been a stove, and other identifiable and unidentifiable junk. Beyond the backwater one can glimpse the river's main channel and houses on the opposite bank. I can sometimes look on the whole scene and find beauty in it including the junk. It is not the breathtaking beauty of autumn vistas seen from New England hillsides, or of lakes and mountains seen from atop a ridge, but it is a lesser instance of the same type of thing.

My most satisfying appreciation of nature has come when the different bits of nature that I enjoy fit together with each other and with my routines: the trout I see is the trout I have caught and will clean, whose inside is as beautiful as its outside, which I will eat with fiddleheads or morels I have picked near the stream where the trout lived, in the woods where one can also see trillium and marsh marigolds, above which is a field and then a road and then a house. It helps to bring some knowledge to all this, e.g. the names of the flowers, plants, trees, birds, fish one encounters, but it is especially good to discover things: in which part of the spring or summer a flower or bird will first appear, what things co-exist, when something new happens.

On the face of it, all these experiences are perfectly proper appreciations of their objects. There is nothing illegitimate or incorrect about them. They are not

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inappropriate ways of appreciating nature. I do not say they are correct ways of appreciating nature, for it is not clear that there is a standard of correctness to bring to bear here. However, a view that ruled them out as inappropriate or incorrect, would, in the absence of powerful arguments, be implausible. Some have proposed such views, and my purpose here is to see if they have mustered convincing arguments to overcome the initial implausibility of their position. My focus here is on arguments offered by Alan Carlson. I argue that these, at least, do not succeed.

I. IN DEFENCE OF THE OBJECT AND LANDSCAPE MODELS

Carlson has claimed that certain models for the appreciation of nature are unpromising and inappropriate, while another model is the appropriate one in so far as it tells us what to appreciate in nature and which are the aesthetically relevant properties (aspect) of those things.¹

Carlson is motivated to make these claims, in part, by comparing the aesthetic appreciation of nature with that of art. With art, according to Carlson, we know what are the objects of appreciation and which aspects of those objects are aesthetically relevant. Let us assume this is so leaving aside the fact that there are many who would disagree. Shouldn't the appreciation of nature be like art in this respect: that, with nature too, we know what to appreciate and which are its aesthetically relevant aspects? Carlson is driven by the intuition that the appreciation of nature should be like the appreciation of art in this way. Yet Carlson recognizes that the basis of this knowledge is different for art and nature. We have the relevant knowledge of art because we are its makers; we understand the intentions and conventions under which it is made. Though there is now little in nature that is not in some way altered by human activity, we are not the makers of natural things; they are not the products of intentional cum conventional acts. So if we have a knowledge of the appropriate objects of appreciation in nature parallel to our (purported) knowledge for art, it has a different basis. The point of Carlson's claim cited in the previous paragraph is to reject certain bases, and advance what he takes to be the correct one.

One model that Carlson rejects is the object model. According to this model, the object of appreciation is an isolated natural object such as a stone, flower or piece of driftwood, and the aesthetically relevant properties (aspects) of these objects are their surface perceptual properties: colour, shape, texture, sheen and those 'aesthetic qualities' such as grace and delicacy that may or may not supervene on those just mentioned. Carlson recognizes that the object model defines one way in which nature, or rather natural objects are often aesthetically appreciated. This is certainly the case since aesthetic appreciation often consists in the enjoyment for its own sake of what is presented to the senses, and we have a tendency to focus our perceptual attention on discreet objects especially if they

present a striking appearance. An objection to the object model is that it fails to provide a general model for the appreciation of nature. We appreciate nature in larger chunks: interrelated objects, vistas, environments. Hence if the claim of the object model is that it provides an all encompassing model for the appreciation of nature, it is certainly incorrect. However, taken simply as *a* model it remains unclear to me why it is not harmlessly acceptable.

Carlson objects to this model on subtly different grounds. His objection is that when we appreciate an object on this model, we remove it from its natural setting, and this necessarily distorts the aesthetically relevant properties of the object. This is because a natural object possesses an 'organic unity' with its environment of which it is a part and with the environmental forces out of which the object develops, all of which is relevant to its proper appreciation. Consider a stone on a mantelpiece. There one appreciates its graceful shape, its smoothness and its solidity. In nature, it may be seen as expressive of the forces that shape it, and may appear more malleable than solid.

I find this objection to the object model unconvincing. As with my appreciation of the lady's slippers, which seems to fit well with this model, it does not require one literally to remove an object from its environment. It requires that the focus of one's attention be on the object rather than on relations it bears to other things, and this will make salient certain properties over other ones. But this is always true in aesthetic appreciation and applies to art as well as nature. It is true of different performances of a play or musical work or different viewings of a painting. It is foolish to suppose that there is one way of approaching either an art object or a natural one that will reveal all its aesthetic properties whole and undistorted. When one operates with the object model, one focuses on some of an object's features at the expense of others, but that need not falsify or distort, especially if one realizes that this is not the only manner of appreciation possible. The stone really does possess solidity, even if it is also malleable to natural forces. In fact, it is the stone's solidity that makes nature's ability to mould it more impressive. Hence, appreciation according to the object model does not require one to distort or falsify natural objects, though it makes certain features of objects more likely to be appreciated than others. It also does not require that we remove those objects from their natural setting, though it permits appreciation when those objects are relocated.

Carlson also rejects the landscape model. According to this model, the object of appreciation is a prospect, vista or view, and the properties to be appreciated are those that might be brought out in a landscape painting, although it should be remembered that this would be a very broad and variable group of properties or aspects given the changes in aim, technique, and even subject matter that landscape painting has undergone in the course of its history. Carlson is wrong when he says that the model usually requires a 'grandiose' (grand?) prospect. Fine as those might be (when understood as grand rather than grandiose), the lover of

prospects can learn, both from landscape painting itself in some of its stages and from life in locales with gentler topographies, to appreciate views such as my backwater, or more or less any rise in the land in the flattish part of the country where I live. Carlson's main objection to this model is that, to a far greater extent than the object model, it falsifies the object of appreciation. According to Carlson, it 'reduces' an environment to a static scene, to a representation, to something two-dimensional. One appreciates the environment not as what it is, but under a misconception, for qualities it purportedly does not have. If these charges are correct, appreciation of nature on the landscape model would be inappropriate or 'malfounded',² which is precisely what Carlson claims.

However, it is more true that the landscape model has been misrepresented, that Carlson's criticism of it is malfounded, than that the model promotes an inappropriate way of appreciating nature. A landscape painting may capture something completely fleeting and momentary like light on water, something temporary but recurring like a summer wheatfield, or something fairly permanent like the shape of a ridgeline. In none of those cases does it misrepresent its subject. Similarly, if I look at my backwater as an array of the colours and shapes it happens to present at this moment, I am not misconceiving it, for it does present that array. I am merely conceiving it *in a certain way*, possibly influenced by paintings I have seen. I am not seeing the array as two-dimensional for I do not see a scene in a landscape painting as two-dimensional, but if I did, that too would not be a misconception, because the array does have the property of being *seeable as* two-dimensional. It would not be mere misconception, but madness, to suppose that the backwater is not merely seeable as two-dimensional, but actually *is* two-dimensional. Far from conceiving this array as static, I think of it as most evanescent, as a fleeting impression.

What seems to me most misguided about Carlson's rejection of the landscape model is that it nullifies the extremely fruitful interaction (for the appreciation of both nature and art) between seeing views in which certain visible features become salient and seeing paintings of (usually different) views that make some visible features salient which one can then bring to bear on views (different ones) that one sees. This sort of process permits one to confirm that a painting or (more usually) a style of painting provides a new way of seeing while also enabling one to see the sights around one in these new ways.

It should be added that the landscape model provides *a* model of appreciation. Like the object model, it is not all inclusive. It offers one way to appreciate nature, but not the only way.

II. THE ENVIRONMENTAL MODEL

Carlson's own favoured model is the environmental model. This model has two major features, as Carlson himself points out. First, what one appreciates on this

model is not confined to a discreet object. The object of appreciation is an object-in-an-environment or a collection of objects that form (part of) an environment. Second, the properties of these objects that are appreciated are founded on knowledge of the environment, hence are not mal-founded. Carlson variously characterizes this knowledge as scientific knowledge, scientific/common-sense knowledge, and naturalist's knowledge.

I do not see this model as a rival to the object and landscape models but, basically, as a welcome addition, a third way of appreciating nature. Perhaps those experiences of nature I described above as most satisfying can be said to fall under the environmental model, though I use 'perhaps' because of an uncertainty about what the model requires.

The uncertainty concerns both of the main features of the model. When are we appreciating a natural *environment* and when are we not? Does my appreciation of the lady's slippers, which I took to exemplify the object model, also exemplify the environmental model since I appreciate them in their natural setting? Or, does it fail to satisfy this model because my appreciation is focused on the surface properties of a single (clump of) object(s)? I am not sure.

It is tempting to think of the environmental model as more all encompassing than the two models discussed earlier because everything in nature is part of the environment, whether it be an individual natural object, a hillside (that might constitute a view) or a set of natural things understood as ecologically related or as the products of underlying causes. Unfortunately, this conception of the environmental model stands in tension with Carlson's criticism and rejection of the object and landscape model. For if these two models fall under a more encompassing model which he endorses, his criticism should be the far more mild one (already mentioned) that these models provide only a partial characterization of what there is to appreciate in nature. If 'natural environment' means something other than 'nature' then it too will provide a partial model of what there is to appreciate in nature. If it is synonymous with 'nature' it will then indeed be all encompassing, but unfortunately rather uninformative since it ranges over everything natural in all its aspects.

Carlson would reply that it is the second feature of his model, knowledge of the natural environment, that guides us in discovering what to appreciate in nature. 'To aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and elements within those environments.'³

There are several reasons to think that this reply is still insufficiently informative. First, Carlson appeals to three different, though not sharply different, kinds of knowledge: common sense, scientific, and the naturalist's. One wonders if one kind is as good as another in Carlson's mind, if it is a matter of indifference from which of these perspectives one approaches natural environments, as long as one approaches them with *knowledge*. My own guess is that it is the naturalist's

knowledge, or rather their observations, that would be most relevant to the appreciation of environments, because, as I conceive that type, the naturalist is one who combines some degree of scientific knowledge of nature with an interest in discovering and describing its aesthetic appeal. More broadly, the naturalist is concerned not just to understand nature, but to find value in it. This may include aesthetic value but needn't be confined to it. Some naturalists think they find ethical value in nature.⁴ Having said this, however, it is perhaps evident how unhelpful it is to pick out this type if one is trying to pick out knowledge relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. For it is not helpful to say that it is knowledge given to us by those with an interest in such appreciation. Further, there is no uniform way naturalists approach, or succeed in, their task, no 'method' corresponding to the scientist's.

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Second, and more important, the range and variety of knowledge we might have of the environment is indefinitely large. Unless we can discriminate knowledge of nature relevant to its aesthetic appreciation from knowledge not so relevant, an appeal to knowledge is not very helpful. Would knowledge of the chemical composition of the cell walls of lady's slippers be relevant to their appreciation? For most people, I suspect not.⁵ So what knowledge is relevant? The object and landscape models give partial answers precisely because they point out aesthetic properties of things found in nature. I do not doubt that, by focusing on environments, we can discover further aesthetic features, but a blanket appeal to knowledge of environments is not very helpful.

To illustrate this point, consider an example used by Carlson.⁶ The shore of a tidal basin is sometimes above water and is then (part of) a beach, and is sometimes below water and is then (part of) a sea-bed. Here are (initially) three ways one can appreciate this bit of land: as beach, as sea-bed, as sometimes beach-sometimes sea-bed. None of these ways is mal-founded. The last is more 'complete' than the first two since it comprehends each of these. Is there some reason to prefer the more complete conception? There might be if it would enhance one's appreciation, but whether this fortunate result would occur might vary from person to person. The more partial appreciations of the tidal basin are not inadequate. The more complete conception can still be supplemented indefinitely with knowledge of the physics of tides, the ecosystems of the basin, and additional facts from biology, chemistry and geology. Different naturalists would latch on to different sets of facts to give aesthetic, ethical or other sorts of significance to the basin. Nature does not guide us in selecting among this possible information, since encompassing all these facts, it is indifferent about which we mine in pursuit of aesthetic enjoyment.

In contrast, not everything that can be known of artworks is relevant to their appreciation. There is a 'natural' way to delimit aesthetically (artistically) relevant knowledge of art that we have seen is simply absent with regard to nature. The knowledge of art that we need is knowledge of its point or purpose, its functions

and values, and the characteristic means of achieving these. We discover these things by acquiring knowledge of traditions, conventions, intention and styles among other things. The items just mentioned in the preceding sentence are *obviously* relevant to understanding the purposes or values of art, and the means used to achieve these. But in nature we do not find points and purposes or characteristic means to these. Hence, it is not clear that knowledge of nature can perform the same function as knowledge of art. The mere fact that we have knowledge of both hardly establishes that they can do the same job.

III. ORDER APPRECIATION

Some of Carlson's more recent writings at least flirt with a view that delimits the knowledge relevant to the proper appreciation of nature.⁷ The proposal is that '*the correct model for nature appreciation*' is a species of 'order appreciation'.⁸ In this sort of appreciation, an individual selects objects of appreciation from those around him and focuses on the order imposed on these objects by various forces which produce them. The objects are selected, in part, by means of a 'non-aesthetic story', paradigmatically a scientific one, which helps make the order visible and intelligible.

Notice that appreciation on this model requires thinking about the aetiology of the selected objects in the act of appreciation. I do not deny such thoughts can sometimes contribute to aesthetic appreciation of nature, but to suppose they are necessary for proper appreciation is highly counter-intuitive. It would impoverish our appreciation by ruling out as improper the vast majority of appreciative encounters with nature such as all those licensed by the object and landscape models, along with many other appreciative tacks.⁹ Even the environmental model, more broadly construed, would not make this strict requirement. For example, to appreciate an environment as the site where, at a given time of year, many delightful aspects of nature co-occur is ruled improper if the model of order appreciation is taken as the exclusively correct one. For this reason, it is very hard to take seriously that order appreciation provides the correct model for the appreciation of nature, especially since no argument is offered for its unique correctness.

In fairness to Carlson, it should be pointed out that this implausible position is almost certainly not his considered view. He elsewhere suggests that other models contribute to our understanding of nature appreciation, as do other sorts of knowledge.¹⁰ However, that more realistic position leaves him saddled with the problem of delimiting relevant knowledge of nature on the environmental model.

IV. KNOWLEDGE, NATURE AND ART

Is the appreciation of nature fundamentally different from the appreciation of art?

Does it make sense to talk of appropriate ways, or correct ways, of appreciating it? What is the role of knowledge about nature in this appreciation?

Let us begin to answer these questions by addressing the last one about the role of knowledge. I see three different ways knowledge may enter into our appreciation of nature. The first way is purely negative. Knowledge prevents appreciation from being malfounded, from appreciating a part of nature for properties it does not have. Second, some knowledge can enhance, or 'thicken', one's appreciation of nature, by enabling one to think and perceive nature in more complex ways. One can enjoy a flower simply for its surface qualities, but one can 'thicken' this enjoyment by knowing that it indicates a certain stage of the spring when one can find other things one likes, and one now knows to look for them, or that it indicates things to come, as blossoms indicate fruit, or that it stand in some intricate relation to other things in the environment.

However, we have seen that not all knowledge enhances appreciation of nature. Is there a way of indicating when knowledge does this? One way is when the knowledge gives natural things a 'meaning', i.e. a significance to us. This can consist in making the natural environment part of our environment, something *in* which one lives and feels at home. Or it can consist in the sense of nature as something very other, as overwhelmingly vast, or powerful, or distant from human life, experiences sometimes promoted by viewing the starry night sky, a powerful storm, a harsh, 'unfriendly', place. But knowledge of nature can enhance its appreciation also by enabling us to see in it more complex patterns than we did before we had this knowledge, especially if this complexity is accompanied by other things that please us aesthetically. To me at least, it is a still a mystery when the perception of complex pattern gels with other things to create enhanced appreciation and when it does not, but simply provides distracting details.

The third way knowledge enters into the appreciation of nature is not by bringing knowledge to our perception of nature but acquiring knowledge from it. The knowledge can, though it need not, be of fleeting things such as the precise colour of the sky during a sunset and of the water reflecting the sky. It is satisfying to see a pretty sky, more satisfying to know with some precision what one sees. This is one way landscape painting can enhance one's appreciation of nature, for it can help one acquire this knowledge.

Are some ways of appreciating nature more appropriate than others? If one asks this question thinking of Carlson's models, my answer is: no. Each model we have discussed provides perfectly good ways of appreciating nature. It may be that the environmental model, *if* I understand it, has the potential to provide a deeper or 'thicker' appreciation, but I suspect most of us are not always in a position to realize this potential in each encounter with nature and can happily 'settle' for pleasures provided by other models. Indeed, not to do so sometimes might

diminish our overall enjoyment of nature, for these other models enable us to have experiences excluded by the environmental model.

However, putting the models discussed here to one side, there are at least minimal conditions that have to be met if an appreciative experience is to be counted one in which nature is aesthetically appreciated. The appreciation must of course be aesthetic, and it must be the enjoyment of nature as nature and not as something else.¹¹ So if one admires a field as a perfect site for a new mall, this is not aesthetic admiration whatever the latter consists in. If one admires a natural object because one mistakenly thinks it a human artifact, this is not enjoyment of nature.

Finally, is the appreciation of nature fundamentally different from the appreciation of art? Of course it is. That much is not controversial. To appreciate art, one must appreciate it under intentional concepts inapplicable to nature. On the other hand, just as with the appreciation of nature, there are many ways of appreciating an artwork. There are many 'partial' appreciations, appreciations of some, but not all of a work's aesthetically relevant properties. Perhaps a full appreciation of a work of art is an ideal we can at most aspire to rather than completely realize, but we have some idea what it would consist in. It would require a correct historical understanding of a work: a knowledge of the kind of work it is, its genre, the traditions from which it springs, the conventions guiding its making, the intentions of its maker, its style, etc. (Others might add to this list a knowledge of the history of a work's reception.) There is nothing comparable in the appreciation of nature. Of course one can get nature wrong. What one cannot do is bring exactly the right knowledge of nature needed fully to appreciate it. The amount of knowledge one could bring is indefinitely large. Much will be of no help. Too much might get in the way. Knowledge that enhances appreciation for one person might do nothing for another. There is no reason to think it should have.

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NOTES

¹ Carlson criticizes the object and landscape models, and puts forward his favoured environmental model in 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 37 (1979), pp. 267-275. This paper is reprinted in Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (eds), *Arguing about Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 127-139. An earlier critique of

Carlson's arguments in this paper is found in Noël Carroll, 'On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History', in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskill (eds), *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), pp. 244-266. This piece is also reprinted in Neill and Ridley. Carlson replies to Carroll in 'Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge', *Journal of*

Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 53 (1995), pp. 393–400. Carroll argues, as I do, that Carlson's favoured model is not the only one appropriate to the appreciation of nature. Unlike me, he does not question Carlson's critique of the object and landscape models. He also does not explore the problem I mention below with the environmental model.

² I borrow this expression from Malcolm Budd, 'The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 36 (1996), pp. 207–222.

³ Neill and Ridley, *Arguing about Art*, p. 137

⁴ As examples of 'naturalists' Carlson mentions such individuals as Audubon, Ruskin, Muir and Leopold, all of whom take an interest in the value of nature. See Carlson's 'Nature, Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 40 (1981), pp. 15–27. This article is one of Carlson's most sustained attempts to argue for the relevance and necessity of bringing knowledge of nature to the appreciation of it. However, it does not attempt to distinguish relevant knowledge of nature from knowledge of nature that is not relevant. An earlier critique of this piece is found in Yuriko Saito, 'Is There a Correct Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature?', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 18 (1984), pp. 35–46. Carlson replies to Saito in 'Saito on the Correct

Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 20 (1986), pp. 87–93.

⁵ There may be exceptions, however, such as Roald Hoffman, a Nobel Prize winning chemist who has written about molecular beauty. See 'Molecular Beauty', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 48 (1990), pp. 191–204.

⁶ Carlson, in 'Nature, Aesthetic Judgment and Objectivity', borrows the example from Ronald Hepburn.

⁷ See 'Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature', in Kemal and Gaskell, *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, pp. 217–222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218, my italics

⁹ For a number of such alternative tacks, see the papers by Diffey, Hepburn and Crawford in Kemal and Gaskell, *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*.

¹⁰ See 'Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature', in Kemal and Gaskell, *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, p. 227 (n. 53) and 'Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation, and Knowledge', p. 399. In both instances, Carlson is commenting on Noël Carroll's 'arousal model' of nature appreciation.

¹¹ Budd, 'The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', explores these points in considerable detail.