

VII*—THE AESTHETICS OF NATURE

by Malcolm Budd

ABSTRACT I begin by demonstrating the inadequacy of the idea that the aesthetic appreciation of nature should be understood as the appreciation of nature as if it were art. This leads to a consideration of three theses: (i) from the aesthetic point of view natural items should be appreciated under concepts of the natural things or phenomena they are, (ii) what aesthetic properties a natural item really possesses is determined by the right categories of nature to experience the item as falling under, and (iii) (the doctrine of positive aesthetics with respect to nature) the natural world untouched by humanity is essentially aesthetically good. I indicate an unclarity in (i) and identify difficulties facing (ii). I distinguish various versions of (iii), reject certain of these, and fault a number of arguments in support of (iii). I conclude that the idea of the aesthetic value of a natural item is such that it endows the aesthetic appreciation of nature with a freedom and relativity denied to the appreciation of art and renders (iii) problematic.

I

Intr^oduction. What, if anything, is distinctive of the aesthetics of nature? That nature is its subject does not in itself distinguish it from the aesthetics of anything else, the aesthetics of art, for example, at least with respect to aesthetic appreciation. For a difference in the kinds of object amenable to aesthetic appreciation might not introduce any corresponding difference into the aesthetics of different domains. For example, the fact that the aesthetics of nature is the aesthetics of *nature* is compatible with the view that there is a unitary notion of aesthetic appreciation according to which aesthetic appreciation abstracts from what kind of thing the object of appreciation is, focusing only on an item's sensible properties and how they are structured to compose the item's perceptual form. It is also compatible with the view that the aesthetics of art is basic and the aesthetics of nature is to be elucidated in terms of it. According to the first view, the aesthetic appreciation of nature and of art are distinguished only by the different natures of their objects, neither having priority over the other. According to the second view, the aesthetic appreciation of nature consists in nature's being regarded as if it were art.

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But neither of these views is correct. The first can be quickly dismissed: it operates with a conception of aesthetic appreciation manifestly inadequate, not just to the appreciation of art, but also to the appreciation of nature. For (leaving nature aside) the aesthetic appreciation of works of art as works of art is appreciation of them under concepts of the kinds of works of art they are, and perceptually indistinguishable works nevertheless possess different aesthetic properties (as with appropriation art that replicates the original). The second view can also be dismissed if, as I believe,¹ just as the aesthetic appreciation of art is the appreciation of art *as art*, so the aesthetic appreciation of nature is the aesthetic appreciation of nature *as nature*. For, given that the natural world is not anyone's artefact, the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature, if it is to be true to what nature actually is, must be the aesthetic appreciation of nature *not* as an intentionally produced object (and so not as art).

But the rejection of the view that the aesthetic appreciation of nature consists in appreciating nature as if it were art does not need to rest on the acceptance of this conception of the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature. For two demands can be made of this view, neither of which can be met. First, the undeniable fact that it is possible to regard a natural object as if it were a work of art does not entail that this is how we do or should regard natural objects when we experience them aesthetically. So an argument is needed to bridge the gap from possibility to actuality or necessity. Second, an account of the aesthetic appreciation of nature must be true to the characteristic phenomenology of the experience of appreciating nature aesthetically.

The impossibility of meeting these two demands can be illustrated by a consideration of the best articulated attempt to construe the aesthetic appreciation of nature on the model of the appreciation of art. Anthony Savile's account (Savile, 1982, ch. 8) is superior to other versions of the view precisely because it takes seriously the implications of the idea of regarding a natural item *as if it were* a work of art, which requires integrating natural beauty into an account of artistic value. One admirable feature of Savile's account is that, although it assimilates the aesthetic

1. See Budd (1996). This conception of the aesthetic appreciation of nature has long been recognised by Allen Carlson and Holmes Rolston III, among others.

appreciation of nature to the appreciation of art, it credits the aesthetics of nature with a distinctive character. For the difference between art and nature, which must figure in any adequate aesthetics, is reflected in a feature—a kind of freedom and a correlative form of relativity—attributed to aesthetic judgements about the beauty of natural items but which is not possessed by judgements about the beauty of art. I believe that judgements of natural beauty are distinguished by a kind of freedom and a form of relativity that does not pertain to judgements of artistic value, but the versions of these ideas I favour are quite different from Savile's.

II

The Beauty of Art and the Beauty of Nature. The analysis that Savile proposes of the beauty of a work of art is based on the idea that, necessarily, every work of art answers to some problem, which means that it is constructed to fit a description indicated by its overall conception, the artist's guiding overall intention, a problem that the artist attempts to resolve within a set of aesthetic constraints that can be called a style. In essence, the idea is that a work of art is beautiful if and only if, when seen as answering to its problem in its style, it evokes the appropriate response, this appropriate response being the feeling of satisfaction we experience when we recognise that the solution a work of art proposes to its problem within its aesthetic constraints is just right.

But if 'beauty' is, as Savile maintains, the most general term of aesthetic praise, univocal, whether predicated of art or nature, the analysis must be extendable to cover cases of natural as well as artistic beauty without importing an ambiguity into the concept of beauty. Now although the notions of problem and style have no place in nature, this does not preclude the possibility of regarding a natural object as if it were a work of art constructed as the solution to a certain problem within a set of stylistic constraints. And if this is the way in which we do or must experience natural beauty, the fact that there is no place in nature for style and problem is no obstacle to a unitary account of beauty. But for any natural object it will always be possible to think of some style and problem which are such that the object can be seen

as a satisfactory solution to that problem within the aesthetic constraints of that style, so that each natural object will be beautiful under one description or another. Accordingly, Savile amends his account of beauty so that a judgement of something's beauty is a judgement of it *under* a description (a problem) and a style, so that the truth value of a judgement of a natural object's beauty is relative to the description and style chosen by the beholder, who is free (unlike the beholder of a work of art) to select whatever description and style he or she likes.

But this is not sufficient to overcome the problem that natural beauty poses for the account. For possibility is not the same as actuality or necessity: the fact that it is possible to regard a natural object as if it were a work of art does not entail that this is how we do or should regard natural objects when we experience them as being beautiful. To bridge the gap between possibility and actuality/necessity, Savile first insists that judging something as if it were a work of art (when it is not) is not a mere possibility, but something that on occasion actually happens (with a detail of a work of art). Then:

To make it plausible that this is what happens in the natural case too we have only to find an explanation of the point of doing so [i.e. of judging a natural object as if it were a work of art]. We have, that is, to explain why we should care that *nature* exhibits beauty (Savile, 1982: 181–2).

Savile suggests (along Kantian lines, although operating with a different conception of beauty) that there is good reason to experience natural things as being beautiful. For in doing so we love them; in loving Nature our integration in the world is encouraged; 'such attachments to the world as are furthered through the appreciation of its beauties encourage reverence for it and a respect for the claims that it makes against ourselves' (Savile, 1982: 182); and so, in loving something disinterestedly that is distinct from ourselves, morality is furthered.

But this explanation of why we should care that nature exhibits beauty, whatever its merits, fails to bridge the gap in the argument. For what is needed is (i) an explanation of the point of judging a natural object as if it were a work of art, and (ii) an argument to the effect that this mode of judgement is mandatory or the only possibility for the judgement of natural beauty. And the suggestion fails to address (ii). Furthermore, the gap in the

argument is, I believe, unbridgeable. For, first, it is not impossible to see the natural world aesthetically except by seeing it as if it were art. Second, it is untrue that, unless nature is seen as if it were art, there is little of aesthetic interest in nature. Third, the Kantian considerations that postulate a link between the experience of natural things as being beautiful and the furtherance of morality are as readily available to the aesthetic appreciation of nature as what nature actually is. Indeed, they are more naturally available to this conception. For only so does nature actually *exhibit* beauty and the question arise as to the importance of our caring that it does. If we regard nature as if it were what we know it not to be, and are free to select problem and style as we choose, so that with enough imagination we can see anything as beautiful (or, instead, as lacking beauty), we have no reason to care what nature is actually like and so no reason to love it for what it is. And, finally, the experience of nature as if it were art offers no benefits substantial enough to outweigh the advantages of the aesthetic experience of nature as what it actually is, so that it would be better to experience it in the first rather than the second manner. Accordingly, it is not mandatory to judge a natural item aesthetically as if it were a work of art; and given that nature is not art, to judge it as if it were art is to misjudge it.

Now any version of the claim that the aesthetic appreciation of nature consists in nature's being regarded as if it were art must, whatever conception of artistic value it embraces, represent the aesthetic appreciation of nature as being informed by concepts integral to artistic appreciation but which are known not to be applicable to nature. It therefore faces the same insuperable obstacle presented to Savile's account of aesthetic judgements of natural beauty. Furthermore, it will be vulnerable to a crucial objection—one that I have not yet brought against Savile's version—namely, that it is untrue to the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience of nature. For the aesthetic experience of nature is not impregnated with those notions essential to the appreciation of art: the satisfaction we experience when we find a tree, a bird, a landscape or skyscape beautiful is not that of seeing an object as an excellent solution to a problem within a set of aesthetic constraints constitutive of a style, nor does it answer to any viable alternative conception of artistic value. On the contrary, the (nontheistic) aesthetic appreciation of nature is saturated with an unbracketed consciousness, clear or dim, of nature's not being art.

III

Appreciating Nature as what Nature actually is. Given the unacceptability of the view that the aesthetic appreciation of natural items should be thought of as the appreciation of them under concepts of art, the obvious alternative is that they should be appreciated under concepts of the natural things or phenomena that they are. And this alternative conception of the aesthetic appreciation of natural items will have a special aesthetic significance insofar as two theses of Kendall Walton (Walton, 1970) about the connection between the aesthetic properties of works of art and the categories of art to which they belong hold equally for the connection between the aesthetic properties of natural items and categories of nature. Applied to nature these theses become: (i) (the psychological thesis) what aesthetic properties a natural item *appears* to possess—what aesthetic properties the item is perceived or experienced as possessing—is a function of the category or categories of nature under which it is experienced (i.e. what sort of natural thing it is perceived as being), and (ii) (the philosophical thesis) what aesthetic properties the item *really* possesses is determined by the right categories of nature to experience the item as falling under—it really possesses those aesthetic properties it appears to possess when perceived in its *correct* categories of nature (by an aesthetically sensitive and properly informed observer who employs the relevant knowledge of what items in that category are standardly like to so perceive it).

But it is compatible with the requirement that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature (as what nature actually is) that natural items should be appreciated aesthetically under no concepts at all (except that of nature itself), that is, not as instances of the kinds they exemplify, but only with respect to their sensible qualities, the way in which they compose their items' perceptual forms, and the aesthetic properties they possess in virtue of these qualities and forms.²

2. As Allen Carlson has argued (Carlson, 1979b), it is only a framed view of the natural environment, not the environment itself, that possesses formal qualities, although I am unpersuaded by the stronger claim he favours, that, *when appreciated aesthetically in the appropriate mode*, it is not possible to see a section of it as having any formal qualities. But in any case, what is true of the aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment is not thereby true of the aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Now although we rarely, if ever, aesthetically appreciate a natural item merely as being natural, and to do so would be to engage in a diminished form of aesthetic appreciation of nature, we often delight aesthetically in natural items that we perceive only under highly general concepts (*flower*), not as instances of the specific kinds they exemplify (*orchid*), or under one concept (*flower*), but not another coextensive concept that expresses a deeper understanding of the nature or function of the kind (*sexual organ of plant*). This brings out an unclarity in the idea of appreciating a natural thing as the natural thing it is, for any natural thing falls under more or less specific concepts of nature, and can be appreciated under concepts that express a greater or lesser understanding of it. And it also brings out a problem for Walton's philosophical thesis transferred to nature.³ The problem is: What determines which concept or concepts of nature are the correct concept or concepts under which a natural item is to be perceived? For what is at issue is not just whether a natural item falls under a certain concept of nature, but which of those concepts it falls under it should be perceived under *from the aesthetic point of view*, where this means that perception under these concepts discloses the aesthetic properties it really possesses and thereby makes possible a proper assessment of its aesthetic value. A non-category-relative interpretation of judgements of the aesthetic properties of natural items requires that a natural thing should not fall under different concepts of nature which are such that, when perceived under these concepts—the correct concepts to perceive it under—it is properly experienced as possessing incompatible aesthetic properties. Since the same natural item falls under a variety of concepts of nature, the successful transference of the non-psychological thesis to nature stands in need of a criterion of correctness that will deliver the required result. And there is an additional difficulty about the aesthetic properties and

3. There is no difficulty in transferring the psychological thesis from art to nature (although I believe that, in virtue of natural items not being the products of artists, it holds only in an impoverished form): just as the perceived aesthetic character of a work is a function of which of its nonaesthetic perceptual features are 'standard', 'variable' or 'contra-standard' for one who perceives the work under a certain category of art, so the perceived aesthetic character of a natural thing is a function of which of its nonaesthetic perceptual features are standard, variable or contra-standard for one who perceives it under a certain category of nature. Carlson (1981) tries to show that both the psychological and the philosophical thesis can be transferred to nature.

aesthetic value of natural things, considered as the kinds of natural things they are, which concerns how they should be appreciated aesthetically and what is relevant to their aesthetic appreciation. For there is an important disanalogy between the constraints imposed on aesthetic appreciation by, on the one hand, the fact that an item is to be appreciated as the work of art it is, and, on the other, by the fact that it is to be appreciated as the natural item it is. This difference assumes crucial significance in an assessment of the doctrine of positive aesthetics with respect to nature.

IV

Positive Aesthetics with respect to Nature. Positive aesthetics with respect to nature maintains that there is the following vital difference between the aesthetic appreciation of virgin nature and the appreciation of art (or nature affected by humanity): whereas the aesthetics of untouched nature is positive, involving only the acceptance and aesthetic appreciation of whatever exists in nature, the aesthetics of art is critical in the sense that it allows for negative aesthetic judgement. And, so positive aesthetics claims, the reason for this difference, the reason that negative aesthetic criticism is out of place in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, is that *the natural world untouched by humanity is essentially aesthetically good.*⁴ But this doctrine needs to be made more precise. First, there is the question of its scope. It could be taken to apply to (i) nature taken as a whole, (ii) the earth's (or any other planet's) biosphere, (iii) each ecosystem, (iv) each kind of natural (or perhaps organic) item, (v) each particular natural (organic) thing, (vi) each natural event (or connected sequence of events). Second, there is the question of its strength. The claim that nature unmodified by humanity is essentially aesthetically good might be understood to allow that pristine nature possesses some negative aesthetic qualities (but qualities that are always 'outweighed' by positive aesthetic qualities), or might be intended to

4. In his (1984) Allen Carlson decisively criticises three possible justifications of positive aesthetics before presenting what he takes to be a more plausible justification of the doctrine. This is the first of the arguments I examine below. Stan Godlovitch distinguishes and examines various interpretations of positive aesthetics in his (1998).

rule out this possibility.⁵ Since it would not be enough to claim that every natural item has some aesthetically valuable quality or qualities—a claim that would appear to be almost as plausible for artefacts as for nature—then, leaving nature taken as a whole aside, positive aesthetics must claim that each biosphere, ecosystem, kind of natural item, particular natural thing, or natural occurrence (a) lacks negative and possesses positive aesthetic qualities, (b) has positive aesthetic value *overall* or *on balance*, or (c) has *equal* overall positive aesthetic value.⁶ Third, there is the question of the doctrine's modal status. Is it supposed to be some kind of necessary truth about nature or might nature have been otherwise?

Two arguments put forward by Allen Carlson in support of positive aesthetics, neither of which uses as a premise that any individual natural items have a positive aesthetic value, deserve examination. The first (Carlson, 1984) runs as follows. In order to appreciate what aesthetic qualities and aesthetic value an item has it is necessary to know how it is to be perceived, which requires knowledge of what kind of thing it is. What aesthetic qualities something possesses are those it appears to possess when perceived in its correct category. The correct categories for the aesthetic appreciation of nature—natural objects and landscapes, for example—are those provided and informed by natural science. So positive aesthetics will be established if, and only if, it can be shown that the natural world (unaffected by humanity) must seem aesthetically good when perceived in categories of nature (under which it falls): the aesthetic qualities of nature are those it appears to have when appropriately aesthetically appreciated, i.e. when perceived under its correct categories, categories of nature; and so nature is essentially aesthetically

5. The second alternative is embraced by Eugene Hargrove: 'nature is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities' (Hargrove (1989, p. 177), quoted in Godlovitch (1998a)). Whether or not nature lacks negative aesthetic qualities, it is immune to all the many defects to which art is liable in virtue of being the product of intelligent design.

6. Note that the view that each natural thing (ecosystem, or whatever) has equal positive overall aesthetic value (i) is noncommittal about the *degree* of that value, which, for all it claims, might be rather low, and (ii) denies that issues of the comparative aesthetic values of natural items are ever *indeterminate*—that it is neither true that one of the items has a greater aesthetic value than the other nor that they are precisely equal in value. But it would be charitable to interpret 'equal' as meaning 'roughly equal', in which case indeterminacy is allowed, perhaps inevitable (unless the items are of the same kind and indiscernible).

good if, and only if, this is how it appears when perceived in those categories of nature it belongs to. This will be so if the categories created by science for landscapes and natural objects are such that the correctness of these categories is determined by the criterion of aesthetic goodness, that is, if the correct categories are those that are such that nature seems aesthetically good when perceived in them. But 'aesthetic goodness is certainly not *the* criterion by which scientists determine correctness of descriptions, categories, and theories' (Carlson, 1984: 30). However, the creation of categories of nature and their correctness are in an important sense dependent on aesthetic considerations. For:

a more correct categorization in science is one that over time makes the natural world seem more intelligible, more comprehensible to those whose science it is. Our science appeals to certain kinds of qualities to accomplish this. These qualities are ones such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, conflict, resolution, and so forth. If our science did not discover, uncover, or create such qualities in the natural world and explain that world in terms of them, it would not accomplish its task of making it seem more intelligible to us; rather, it would leave the world incomprehensible, as any of the various world views which we regard as superstition seem to us to leave it. Moreover, these qualities which make the world seem comprehensible to us are also those which we find aesthetically good. Thus, when we experience them in the natural world or experience the natural world in terms of them, we find it aesthetically good. (Carlson, 1984: 30–1)

In short: Since the categories of nature created by science are the correct categories in which to appreciate it, and since these categories are created partly in light of aesthetic goodness and so make the natural world appear aesthetically good when perceived in these categories, the natural world is aesthetically good.

The second argument (Carlson, 1993) maintains that the appreciation of nature should be understood as a form of 'order appreciation'. Order appreciation consists in a selection of objects to be appreciated and a focusing on a certain kind of order that the objects display. The focus is on the order imposed on the selected objects by the various forces, random or otherwise, which produce these objects. 'Order' means 'ordered pattern—a pattern ordered by and revelatory of the forces of

creation or selection responsible for it'. The selection is by reference to a general nonaesthetic and nonartistic account which, by making this order manifest and intelligible, makes the objects appreciable. In the case of nature, (i) the relevant order is the natural order, (ii) the relevant forces are the geological, biological and meteorological forces which produce the natural order, and (iii) the relevant account is that given by natural science—astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology and geology. And because all of nature necessarily reveals the natural order, all natural objects are (more or less) 'equally appreciable', 'equally aesthetically appealing', 'equal in beauty and importance', so that 'selection among all that the natural world offers is not of much ultimate importance'.

Now it is unclear exactly which version of positive aesthetics these arguments are intended to establish. If the scope is not just kinds but also instances of them,⁷ and the doctrine is that all natural things have *equal* positive aesthetic value,⁸ the arguments are unconvincing. Consider (the selection of) a single living natural object—a plant or animal, for example. There is nothing in the second argument to prevent the conclusion that each natural object is equally aesthetically appealing from meaning that each organic natural object, *at each moment of its life*, is equally aesthetically appealing. But the fact that a living object's condition, which might be diseased or malformed or indicative of approaching death, is explicable in terms of natural forces and processes does not entail that, when seen as the product of such forces, the object, in that condition, must or should be seen as just as equally aesthetically appealing as any other natural object, or as itself in any of its former or later conditions. On the contrary, living objects decline, are subject to illness or lack of nutrients that affect their appearance, lose their attractive colours and (if they

7. Carlson is inclined to believe that the justification of positive aesthetics offered in the first argument makes the thesis applicable not just to kinds but also to instances of them: 'given the role of aesthetic goodness in scientific description, categorisation, and theorising, I suspect that scientific knowledge as a whole is aesthetically imbued such that our appreciation of particulars is as enhanced as is that of kinds' (Carlson, 1984: 32, fn. 67).

8. That this is Carlson's position in Carlson (1984) is confirmed by endnote 61 of Carlson (1993), which refers the reader to Carlson (1984) for a fuller development of the line of thought leading to the conclusion that 'natural objects all seem equally aesthetically appealing' (Carlson, 1993: 222).

possess the power of locomotion) whatever ease and gracefulness of movement they formerly possessed, and in so doing diminish in aesthetic appeal. Any argument that yields the conclusion that each living natural object is equally aesthetically appealing at each stage of its life and is as aesthetically appealing as any other natural object must be defective. And the two arguments, understood as aimed at the conclusion that each particular natural thing has a roughly equal positive overall aesthetic value, are unsound.

The first argument concludes from the fact that (positive) aesthetic considerations partly determine the categories created by science to render the natural world intelligible, which are the correct categories in which to perceive nature, that the natural world is aesthetically good. But this summary statement blurs an essential feature of the argument, which is that science accomplishes its task of rendering the natural world intelligible by discovering positive aesthetic qualities in nature. Accordingly, 'when we experience them in the natural world or experience the natural world in terms of them, we find it aesthetically good'. These qualities are ones 'such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, conflict, and resolution', which are the kinds of qualities we find good in art. Now it is unclear how the final three qualities contribute to the argument. Neither tension nor conflict are in themselves positive aesthetic qualities and the resolution of tension or conflict, whether in art or nature, might come about in a manner that is not, from the aesthetic point of view, attractive. Furthermore, the aesthetic appreciation of a natural item need not be impregnated with the concepts of tension, conflict and resolution on pain of being shallow or in some other way defective, for it is often the case that a natural thing is not in a state of tension or conflict (in any ordinary sense). Accordingly, appeal to such qualities as these could not bear the weight of the argument. As for the first three qualities, they seem to be little more than reflections of the law-governed character of nature, and it does not follow from the fact that each natural thing, and each part of it, is subject to natural law that all natural objects are equally aesthetically appealing.⁹ Even if some aesthetic appeal

9. Note that simplicity and elegance, for example, which are desired qualities of theories, the second being also an aesthetic quality, are not, at least explicitly, being appealed to in the argument, although they perhaps fall under the 'such as'.

accrues to an item in virtue of being law-governed, natural objects will nevertheless vary in their aesthetic appeal, manifesting different positive aesthetic qualities. Moreover, law-governedness does not preclude possession of negative aesthetic qualities, nor guarantee possession, by any natural object that possesses negative aesthetic qualities, of compensating positive aesthetic qualities such that each natural object has the same overall aesthetic value. And grossly malformed living things will remain grotesque no matter how comprehensible science renders their malformation.

Putting aside the issue whether the correct model for the appreciation of nature is order appreciation, the second argument, which as it stands contains no reference to aesthetic qualities figuring in the determination of categories of nature, fares no better—perhaps worse. It may be true that, from the point of view of the appreciation of nature, there is an enormous, perhaps an infinite, amount to be understood about what composes any natural thing and how it was generated by the forces and materials of nature, but this implies nothing about the *aesthetic* qualities of the item—in particular, that these are essentially positive and equal in value to those of anything else in nature. The fact that the order imposed on any selected natural objects by the various forces that produced them is the natural order, so that ‘all of nature necessarily reveals the natural order’, does not imply that the order manifest in any selection from nature is, from the aesthetic point of view, equally attractive, interesting or valuable. Not all appreciation is aesthetic appreciation, and the argument, as it stands, slides from ‘equally appreciable’, meaning ‘equally displaying the natural order’, to ‘equally appreciable’, meaning ‘equally aesthetically valuable’.

Although the rejection of the view that each natural thing, at each moment of its existence, has overall positive aesthetic value does not imply the rejection of the view that each natural thing, taken as a whole, i.e. considered throughout its duration, has overall positive aesthetic value (roughly equal to that of each natural thing), this weaker position does not recommend itself. Apart from the question how the aesthetic value of a natural item, taken as a whole, should be determined, natural items come in such various guises, biotic and nonbiotic, of short or long duration, and answering to different criteria of identity, as to

preclude the truth of any universal claim about their aesthetic values.

If, as seems clear, there is no hope for the most ambitious version of positive aesthetics, in what form might the doctrine be preserved?

First, its scope must be changed. It would perhaps be more plausible if it were to be a claim, not about particulars, but about kinds. For each kind of living thing is endowed with some aesthetic value in virtue of possessing parts with natural functions they are well suited to perform,¹⁰ their exercise sometimes displaying such attractive aesthetic qualities as gracefulness of movement; and many biotic kinds (all flowers, perhaps) undoubtedly possess a positive overall aesthetic value. There are even kinds of natural object (galaxy, star, ocean) or occurrence (exploding volcano) which are such that, on one understanding of the notion, each instance of them is sublime.¹¹ Nevertheless, on the one hand, there are many kinds of natural item that are not forms of life and whose character appears ill-suited to guarantee a positive overall aesthetic value, and, on the other, perhaps there are forms of life that do not possess a positive overall aesthetic value. In any case, categories of nature exhibit such diversity—a few (*hill*) are basically morphological, some (*rainbow*) collect mere appearances, others (*nest*) are defined by the use made of them, and so on—as to render hazardous a doctrine of positive aesthetics about kinds of natural item.

What about ecosystems? The claim that any ecosystem, taken as a whole, inevitably has a positive overall aesthetic value (roughly comparable to that of any other) raises three issues, one concerning the basis of the claim, one concerning the appreciation of the postulated aesthetic value, and one concerning the relation between the aesthetic appreciation of an ecosystem and

10. Compare Aristotle, *De partibus animalium*, 645a23–25. Burke's well-known counter-examples (Burke, 1958, Part Three, Section VI) to the view that the beauty of natural objects derives from the fitness of their parts to their various purposes—'the wedge-like snout of a swine', 'the great bag hanging to the bill of a pelican', the prickly hide of a hedgehog and 'missile quills' of a porcupine, for instance—were perhaps well-chosen to appeal to the common prejudices of the time, but in fact are not inconsistent even with his own conception of beauty (as that quality or qualities in objects by which they cause love or some similar passion).

11. Compare Holmes Rolston III: 'Like clouds, seashores, and mountains, forests are never ugly, they are only more or less beautiful; the scale runs from zero upward with no negative domain.' (Rolston III, 1998: 164)

the aesthetic appreciation of items in it. If it is indeed true that each ecosystem must have a positive overall aesthetic value, this necessity must stem from the character of such a system. Now an ecosystem, in the sense at issue, is a relatively self-contained segment of nature, an integrated, self-maintaining biological community and its environment, that contains a rich variety of interdependent life-forms, each with its own niche, that is a product of selection pressures, and that involves a multiplicity of circular movements of energy within the system by means of biological processes whereby parts of one life-form are assimilated by others, the parts of which are in turn assimilated by others, with at some point or points a decomposition of organic structure into elements that nourish new life taking place. It is unclear exactly how this essence is supposed to guarantee a positive overall aesthetic value, especially in the light of there being a great deal of killing and suffering in most ecosystems.

Perhaps the most plausible line of thought runs as follows. Although an ecosystem will contain objects and events that, in themselves, possess a negative aesthetic value, when these are seen in the context of the recycling of resources intrinsic to the system, which issues in the perpetual re-creation of life (much of which is beautiful):

the ugly parts do not subtract from but rather enrich the whole. The ugliness is contained, overcome, and integrates into positive, complex beauty. (Rolston III, 1988: 241)

Here there appear to be four ideas: first, that many, perhaps a great majority, of the living forms in an ecosystem are in themselves beautiful, second, that any local ugliness is just a stage in a process that issues in beauty, third, that this local ugliness, when seen as a prelude to the creation of new life, is diminished, and, fourth, that in virtue of the continual creation of life by means of the biological processes at work in the system, the system, considered as the temporal unfolding of those processes, is itself beautiful (or sublime¹²). If the first of these ideas, even when combined with the vital consideration that nature is immune to all defects to which art is liable in virtue of being the product of intelligent design, is not sufficient to guarantee each ecosystem a

12. See Rolston III (1988), pp. 243–5.

positive aesthetic value—as it might not be, given that each living thing sooner or later becomes aesthetically unattractive in itself as it deteriorates, dies and decomposes—the weight must be borne by the last.

But even if it could be shown that each ecosystem must have a (roughly equal) positive overall aesthetic value, there would be problems about the appreciation of that value (leaving aside the issue of the temporal and spatial limits of an ecosystem). If an ecosystem's having a positive overall aesthetic value is a matter of how the various events in it are related to one another, either all the events that take place within it are relevant to the determination of that value or only a subset of them is, in which case the distinguishing feature of the subset, if it is to be viable, must square with the concept of an item's aesthetic value. (Perhaps the only requirement imposed by the idea of the aesthetic is that events integral to a system's aesthetic value should be perceptible.) In either case, the fact that an observer will perceive only a small time-slice of an ecosystem, and even then only a small part of what is contained within that time-slice, presents a problem for the appreciation of the aesthetic value of that ecosystem, a problem that cannot be avoided by emphasis on the transformation of perception by knowledge, the ecologically informed observer perceiving events and states within an ecosystem *as* stages in circular movements of energy through different forms of life. For in addition to the difficulty presented to an observer of encompassing the totality of an ecosystem in its spatial extent, the temporal duration of an ecosystem is likely to exceed, often greatly so, the time one might give to observing it, precluding the realistic possibility of one's appreciating that value, no matter how much one's perception of things or events in it might be informed by relevant ecological knowledge or how vividly one might imaginatively realise the biological processes that underlie and are responsible for the visual or other appearance of the system. In the appreciation of a temporal work of art (or a literary work) it is necessary to experience the work from beginning to end, following the way in which part succeeds part as the work unfolds: only in this way is it possible to form a judgement of its artistic success. But myriad events integral to the stability of an ecosystem take place within the system in such a manner—underground, in the dark, within a living thing—as to be normally unobservable, or beyond the limits of observation (as with

the release of nutrients from humus back into the soil). Furthermore, the colours of natural things, as we human beings see them, are not integral to the maintenance and functioning of an ecosystem, yet figure prominently in our aesthetic appreciation of nature; innumerable sounds, some of which do and some of which do not play a functional role in an ecosystem, are too deep or high pitched for us to hear; many of the smells of nature, the scents of animals, for example, escape our detection and yet are of crucial significance in the working of an ecosystem; and in general the smells, tastes, colours, sounds and feels of an ecosystem, as perceived by humans, are different from their appearance to those creatures that inhabit the system and are capable of perceiving them, and mean nothing to those living things that cannot perceive them but form an integral part of the system.

The idea that each ecosystem (or other natural system) has a positive overall aesthetic value implies nothing about the aesthetic values of the natural items it contains considered in themselves—in particular, that these are always positive. But the aesthetic significance of such values not always being positive would be undermined if, from the aesthetic point of view, any natural item in an ecosystem should properly be considered not in itself, but in relation to the ecosystem of which it forms a part¹³ (or the natural environment of its creation).¹⁴ However, there is nothing in the notion of aesthetic appreciation that licenses this requirement: the idea of the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature—as what nature actually is—does not imply that every natural fact about a natural item, and in particular its role in an ecosystem, is relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of that item (as being natural) and so must be taken into account if the aesthetic appreciation of that natural item is not to be defective or shallow. It is true that, just as the appreciation of a work of art requires that its parts be considered aesthetically in the context of the entire work, so the aesthetic appreciation of

13. 'Every item must be seen not in framed isolation but framed by its environment, and this frame in turn becomes part of the bigger picture we have to appreciate—not a "frame" but a dramatic play.' (Rolston III, 1988: 239). As Yuriko Saito points out (Saito, 1998), the natural consequence of this line of thought is that the proper object of aesthetic appreciation is the entire global ecosphere (if not some larger portion of nature).

14. A highly implausible requirement imposed on organic and inorganic items alike by Allen Carlson's natural environment model. (Carlson, 1979a)

an ecosystem requires that any natural item in it be considered aesthetically in the light of its role in that system. But this does not yield the desired conclusion, which is an unconditional, not a conditional, requirement.

V

Freedom and Relativity in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. What, then, is the aesthetic value of nature? I shall restrict myself to natural items, rather than sequences of events, and focus primarily on vision, while recognising that the other senses play a significant role in the aesthetic experience of nature. If the aesthetic appreciation of nature is appreciation of the aesthetic properties and aesthetic value of a natural item *qua* the natural thing it is, the question is what aesthetic properties and value natural items possess. Here I need to make good a claim about the aesthetic properties and values of natural items that I made earlier but did not elaborate.

First it is necessary to clarify Walton's thesis about the relation between the aesthetic properties of a work of art and the categories of art to which it belongs. For it is not accurately represented by the formulation that a work really possesses those aesthetic properties it appears to possess when perceived in its correct categories of art by a duly sensitive observer. This would not be sufficient because, first, the work might not be in its optimal condition, and, second, the conditions of observation might not be appropriate. Accordingly, the thesis is that a work's real aesthetic properties are those manifest to a duly sensitive and well-informed observer who perceives the work in its correct artistic categories under the right conditions at the right time.

Now one issue that a defence of positive aesthetics should engage with is that of the proper level of observation at which a natural item's aesthetic qualities are supposed to appear to the informed observer. A grain of sand, observed with the naked eye, lacks as great an aesthetic appeal as many other natural things; but a microscope enables us, if not 'To see a world in a grain of sand' (William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence'), at least to see its microstructure (at a certain level), and this is likely to have a greater aesthetic appeal than its appearance to the naked eye. Similarly, a drop of water from a lake contains a multitude of

organisms visible under a microscope, which possess aesthetic properties of various kinds and constitute a possible source of aesthetic value. Positive aesthetics with respect to nature would be more plausible if it were to maintain that each natural thing, at some level of observation, has a positive aesthetic value. But level of observation is just one of many factors that affect a natural thing's aesthetic appeal and manifest aesthetic qualities: other relevant factors include the observer's distance from the object, the observer's point of view and the nature of the light that illuminates the object. Furthermore, not only do the appearances of natural things vary under different conditions of observation, but natural things themselves undergo changes that cause them to display different aesthetic qualities at different times and make them more or less aesthetically appealing.¹⁵ So the manifest aesthetic qualities of a natural item are relative both to conditions of observation and time.

The transference to nature of Walton's thesis about the aesthetic properties that works of art really possess must accommodate a crucial difference between the appreciation of art and the aesthetic appreciation of nature, which is linked with a disanalogy between the way in which categories of art and categories of nature function in the determination of the aesthetic properties and value of those items that belong to them. Whereas works of art are either immutable (if they are types), or, if subject to change, standardly have an optimal condition—at least, according to the intention of their creator—in which their aesthetic properties are manifest, not only is nature always changing but it has no optimal condition in which its aesthetic properties are manifest; and whereas certain observational manners and conditions are in general either privileged or ruled out for works of art, this is not so for natural things. Categories of nature do not function to partially determine the real aesthetic properties of natural items as categories of art do those of works of art. That natural items are not designed for the purpose of aesthetic appreciation releases them from the constraints governing the artistic appreciation of works of art: categories of art prescribe the appropriate manner of artistic appreciation as categories of

15. In fact, the transient character of a natural phenomenon or a natural object's power of endurance or its longevity can itself be an aspect of its aesthetic appeal.

nature do not prescribe the appropriate manner of aesthetic appreciation of nature. The aesthetic appreciation of nature is thereby endowed with a freedom denied to artistic appreciation: in a section of the natural world we are free to frame elements as we please, to adopt any position or move in any way, at any time of the day or night, in any atmospheric conditions, and to use any sense modality, without thereby incurring the charge of misunderstanding. No visible aspect, quality or structure of a natural item, of its exterior or interior, perceived from any direction or distance, with or without optical instruments, is deemed irrelevant to the aesthetic appreciation of that item by the requirement that it must be appreciated as the kind of natural item it is. And the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other sense modalities, insofar as the perception of taste, smell, felt texture, movement, pressure and heat falls within the bounds of the aesthetic. The fact that an object is to be appreciated as a painting means that its weight is irrelevant, as is its smell, taste and felt warmth or coldness; but the fact that an object is to be appreciated aesthetically as a river or as a tree in itself rules out no mode of perception nor any perceptual aspect of the object. In short, whereas categories of art disqualify certain sense modalities, internal structure, appearance under various conditions and from various distances, and so on, categories of nature do not.

If appropriate aesthetic appreciation is 'that appreciation of an object which reveals what aesthetic qualities and value it has',¹⁶ then in general there is no such thing as the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature. In the sense in which there is such a thing as *the* aesthetic qualities and value of a work of art, there is no such thing as *the* aesthetic qualities and value of nature. Of course, the truth-value of an aesthetic judgement about a natural item can be understood (as it usually is) as relative to a particular temporal slice of or stage in the item's natural history, a sensory mode, a level and manner of observation and a perceptual aspect. But if not, the idea of the aesthetic value of a natural item is ill-defined. What are the aesthetic qualities and aesthetic value of a particular galaxy *qua* galaxy, a planet *qua* planet, a mountain *qua* mountain, a cloud *qua* cloud, a river *qua*

16. Carlson (1984), p. 25).

river, a mango *qua* mango?¹⁷ Perhaps the only viable conception of the aesthetic value of a natural item *qua* the natural item it represents this value as being a function of the totality of positive and negative aesthetic qualities possessed by the item as an instance of its kind. If so, the multifaceted indefiniteness of this function underscores the problematic character of a positive aesthetics of nature.

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17. Is the appearance of a planet's star at sunrise and sunset an aspect of the aesthetic value of the planet *qua* planet—or perhaps of the star *qua* star? Are the reflections of trees on the bank an aspect of a river's aesthetic value *qua* river?