

**Artistic Objectivity:
From Ruskin’s ‘Pathetic Fallacy’ to Creative Receptivity**

(British Journal of Aesthetics / DOI: [10.1093/aesthj/ayaa041](https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayaa041))

Eli I. Lichtenstein †

Abstract: While the idea of art as self-expression can sound old-fashioned, it remains widespread—especially if the relevant ‘selves’ can be social collectives, not just individual artists. But self-expression can collapse into individualistic or anthropocentric self-involvement. And compelling successor ideals for artists are not obvious. In this light, I develop a counter-ideal of creative receptivity to basic features of the external world, or *artistic objectivity*. Objective artists are not trying to express themselves or reach collective self-knowledge. However, they are also not disinterested or emotionless. They can be unmoved by personal feelings and human concerns, but they are still receptive—just attuned to the more elemental forces that creatively inspire them. I elaborate this ideal in dialogue with John Ruskin’s influential critique of the pathetic fallacy. By contextualizing Ruskin’s view vis-à-vis Romantic and Modernist poetics, post-Kantian aesthetics, modern environmental art, and contemporary theories of expressiveness, I show how it indirectly motivates my account.

1. Beyond Self-Expression?

The idea of art as self-expression can seem old-fashioned, if not justifiably obsolete. At the very least, it no longer has the explicit pride of place that it did for the Romantic tradition which rose to prominence in the early 19th century, giving new priority to the ‘expressive’ artist.¹ For us now, rather, the idea of self-expression has apparently been “collecting dust for some decades,” as one recent commentator puts it—in art and aesthetics, as elsewhere.² Still, it may have been right to say, forty years ago, that “the assumption that art is an important mode of self-expression and that it is justified on this account” is “ubiquitous” in the art literature of the 20th century.³ But this assumption has arguably been steadily losing steam ever since.

On the other hand, the idea of art as creative self-expression clearly still has a firm hold on many parts of the public imagination. To begin with, it is still ubiquitous outside the cutting edge of aesthetics and art criticism. In pedagogical contexts, for instance, it remains common to view arts and crafts education as cultivating a capacity for “self-

† University of Michigan, Department of Philosophy; elicht@umich.edu

1 See e.g. Abrams 1953.

2 Green 2007, 3.

3 Osborne 1977, 296–297.

expression” in children, and to value it as such.⁴ But the idea still exerts a strong influence within recent aesthetics and art criticism, too. Here there are still some self-conscious defenses of “the Romantic idea of artistic expression,” albeit fewer than in earlier eras.⁵ But ideals of self-expression are often invoked more casually, as well, as in Nick Riggle’s recent account of street art: “The street facilitates self-expression and public interaction in a relatively constraint-free way[...]It is a place where we can express ourselves in public, present our style, declare our commitments, allegiances, and values—where we can be seen for who we are or aspire to be.”⁶

The idea of art as self-expression has even broader scope if one allows that the ‘self’ in question can be a collective, not just an individual artist. In this broader sense, for instance, the paradigm of self-expression plausibly underlies focus on ‘relatability’ in popular art and its reception: a social collective may value ‘expressing itself’ in mass art, by recapitulating common feelings or experiences. In historical context, the basic vision of art as collective self-expression can likewise encompass more nuanced Hegelian accounts of art as distilling shared values or ideological tensions distinctive of a given culture or epoch—such that art is a ‘sensuous expression’ of historically-evolving ‘Spiritual’ freedom.⁷ Finally, the same basic idea can also extend to broadly Kantian accounts of aesthetic experience as involving a more trans-historical expression of universal human capacities—as in Schiller’s claim that aesthetic ‘play’ is the “disposition which comprises in itself the wholeness of humanity,” wherein we are “masters in equal degree” of our sense and reason.⁸ Art can thus be the “*most complete possible expression*” of “mankind” or shared humanity, by the artist acting on behalf of us all.⁹ So, while the idea of art as self-expression is old hat, in a sense, it may still be central to the current cultural fabric.

But even if the idea of art as individual or collective self-expression is just outdated, what—if anything—has replaced it? Or, to the extent that this idea is actually still widespread and apparently compelling, even within aesthetic theory and art criticism, why seek to replace it? What should an artist now aspire towards, if not expressing herself or human ‘Spirit’? Back to beauty or truth, as in still-older views?¹⁰ To political consciousness-raising and social change?¹¹ To keep “question[ing] the nature of art” itself, as the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth claimed was the only remaining role of the

4 E.g. Pöllänen, 2011; Lynch, 2012; Karppinen, 2008, p. 87; cf. Meeson, 1991.

5 Robinson, 2015, 250. Robinson’s focus is on how the world appears “to the artist or his/her persona” when in emotional states, not on other kinds of individual or collective self-expression. See also Robinson 2005.

6 Riggle 2016, 192. Likewise, Baldini (2016, 188) argues that street art “reclaim[s] a right for individuals to express themselves visually in public space.”

7 Hegel 1975.

8 Schiller 2014, 81–82.

9 Schiller 1966, 111.

10 On challenges to beauty as an ideal in modern art, see e.g. Steiner 2002; Pippin 2013. For a representative sample of ongoing debates about the role of beauty in contemporary art, see Charlesworth and Harbison 2016.

11 On the famously controversial Whitney 1993 Biennial Exhibition, e.g., see Danto 2003, 103–124.

artist, in 1969?¹² Or maybe just to create work that is “intentionally, but playfully, repellent”—as a bemused *New York Times* critic described a 2018 exhibition by the Vienna-based art collective Gelitin, featuring ‘un-monumental’ massive realistic sculptures of “giant turds,” placed on Persian rugs “like welcome-home gifts left by a huge, vengeful dog?”¹³

Here I will develop a different alternative to the idea of art as self-expression: an ideal of creative receptivity to basic features of the external world, which I will call *artistic objectivity*. This differs from traditional notions of scientific objectivity, in crucial ways.¹⁴ And it also differs from standard accounts of the objectivity (or subjectivity) of aesthetic judgments, as in judging a given painting beautiful, insofar as these accounts often prioritize the standpoint of the artistic audience or spectator of natural beauty.¹⁵ Artistic objectivity is instead an ideal for artistic practice itself, which thus prioritizes the standpoint of the artist or creator. This shift in focus, from audience to artist, is arguably a broadly warranted corrective. For instance, Nietzsche claims that Kant deeply misunderstands beauty precisely because he (“like all philosophers”) unduly privileges the aesthetic experience of the “spectator” over “the point of view of the artist (the creator).”¹⁶ Regardless, inquiry into the point of view of the artist is a worthy subject in its own right, both for artists developing their own practice and for critical audiences interested in artistic creativity and its relation to artworks.

Artistic objectivity can provide a fruitful contrast to broadly Romantic artistic ideals of individual or collective self-expression, which are arguably still pervasive, and at least lack clearly compelling successors. Elaborating a counter-ideal of receptivity can also productively interrelate certain historical and ongoing artistic movements and art critical approaches. In particular, here I will examine how it informs John Ruskin’s influential critique of the ‘pathetic fallacy’—that is, “false” perception induced by “violent feeling,”¹⁷ as in a mourning poet’s vision of inhuman objects silenced by grief—and his praise of the “feeling” that instead “loves a stone for a stone’s sake.”¹⁸ Ruskin’s view is related to broader anti-Romantic currents within Victorian and Modernist art, including Imagist poets’ stress on “exteriority” or depicting “things as they really are.”¹⁹ And it also arguably illuminates certain more recent work across a range of media, including Ansel Adams’s landscape photography and Andy Goldsworthy’s site-specific sculpture, alongside other modern environmental and abstract art, as I will elaborate later

12 Kosuth 1991, 18; see also Danto 1997, 13–14.

13 Siegal 2018

14 Cf. Best’s claim that aesthetic and scientific judgments are objective “in precisely the same way” (Best 1980, 126).

15 E.g. see Aldrich and Slatter 1978; Winterbourne 1981; Bonzon 1999; Parsons 2006.

16 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III, §6.

17 Ruskin 2004, 71. Ruskin was “the most influential mid-Victorian aesthetician” (Garratt 2009, 53). On his ongoing relevance to aesthetics, see e.g. Morris 1955; Landow 1971; cf. Bell 1963, 21. See also Logan 1940; Miles 1965; Hewison 1976; Wihl 1985; Teukolsky 2009.

18 Ruskin 1891, 183.

19 Miles 1944. E.g. on ‘exteriority’, see Lowell 1920; on ‘things as they really are’, see Hulme 1960.

below. Finally, it helps to show why self-expression can be worth criticizing, even if not rejecting wholesale: it can easily become individualistic or anthropocentric—i.e. self-involved, whether individually or collectively. This is a general vice, but it can also produce bad art. Receptivity is a general virtue, but also an artistic one that can yield good work, at least in one valuable style.²⁰

As both a guide and foil, Ruskin's view will help to motivate my own account of artistic objectivity. Objective artists avoid both broadly Romantic drives to self-expression and scientific drives to represent things as they are 'in themselves', apart from all 'poetic license' or 'merely figurative' description. Rather, for objective artists, receptivity to the broader world often manifests itself precisely in impassioned figurative description, along with other kinds of artistic creation. Imagine, for instance, that a musician hears a thunderstorm, that a certain quality of sound or rhythm within the thunder and rain catches her ear, and that she then composes a new song using this sonic form, abstracted from nature, as an artistically purified creative foundation. In so doing, she may disregard or exclude those parts of the original storm that had less impact on her. And she may even modify the central sounds or rhythmic forms that she does emphasize. But the artist's "tremendous drive to bring out the main features so that the others disappear in the process," as Nietzsche puts it,²¹ can still give her real artistic understanding of the storm, grounded in genuine creative receptivity to it. Likewise, an artist like Goldsworthy might gather red autumn leaves and shape them into an intensely saturated monochromatic sculptural form, concentrating or intensifying the leaves' red color beyond its naturally-given state, and in this sense falsifying it—yet in a way that can still reflect receptivity to the leaves' aesthetic force.²²

Objective artists are not trying to express themselves or reach self-knowledge through their creative acts. But they are also not disinterested or free of emotion. They can often be calm or unsentimental, however, in the way that mountains are calm and hurricanes are unsentimental: unmoved by personal feelings, if not all human concerns. Still, objective artists are receptive, not insensitive—just attuned to the more elemental forces by which they are impassioned and inspired.

2. Ruskin on Looking Outward to Strong Causes for True Feeling

I will elaborate, contextualize, and motivate this ideal of artistic objectivity in dialogue with Ruskin, by way of several basic questions. First, how can receptivity to the broader world manifest itself precisely in artistic creation, which can seem so idiosyncratic to specific artists or cultures, or at least bound more by human perspective than science, for instance, appears to be? Second, how can artists actually go about being receptive, in practice, or avoid making work that is unintentionally self-expressive?

20 Here one might productively compare recent work in 'virtue aesthetics'—see e.g. Woodruff, 2001.

21 *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Skirmishes of an Untimely Man', §8. Note that Nietzsche's emphasis is on "idealization," and arguably on artistic *expression*, directly by contrast to the kind of *objectivity* I stress.

22 E.g. compare *Red cherry leaf patch, Brough, Cumbria, 4 November 1984* (Goldsworthy 1990, 176).

Third, which parts of the broader world are truly worth being receptive to? Finally, why idealize receptivity, or criticize self-expression, in the first place?

On each issue, Ruskin's critique of the pathetic fallacy offers valuable food for thought—even though his view is unacceptable or demands refinement, in important respects, as it stands. It will thus prove helpful to first review some basic features of his account. I will then approach the first two of the above questions, in this light, before returning to the last two, in later sections.

The term 'pathetic fallacy' is now often taken to refer to any case of personification used as a poetic technique, regardless of its cause.²³ But Ruskin instead uses the term to refer to any misperception of the world induced by overwhelming feeling. 'Feeling' here includes not only 'emotion', but also 'contemplative fancy.'²⁴ In turn, this sort of misperception can take the specific form of anthropomorphic descriptions, as when poets personify natural objects under the influence of strong passions—so that even a stream can seem 'silenced by grief'. But Ruskin's pathetic fallacy is not restricted to this one kind of misperception, at least in principle.²⁵

For Ruskin, in this light, a bad writer's overreliance on pseudo-poetic expression need not simply be an affectation, as it can also indicate authentic sensitivity to passionate feelings and their falsifying effect (he suggests) on perception. This kind of sensitive writer may be further inclined to project feelings onto nature under the influence of a broadly Romantic ethos, like the one that Wordsworth articulates in describing his own poem, 'The White Doe of Rylstone':

Throughout, objects[...]derive their influence not from properties inherent in them, not from what they *are* actually in themselves, but from such as are *bestowed* upon them by the minds of those who are conversant with or affected by those objects. Thus the Poetry, if there be any in the work, proceeds whence it ought to do, from the *soul of man*, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.²⁶

Ruskin prefers accurate poetic description of objects to this putative 'communication' of the poet's own 'energy'. Thus, recall his praise of "feeling" that "loves a stone for a stone's sake."²⁷

But deeper than Ruskin's basic criticism of the pathetic fallacy is his further claim that it can be justified, in a way, when 'false' perceptions reflect 'true' feelings with

23 This usage is apparent in (if not also derived from) common interpretations of Ruskin, as in Josephine Miles's claim that he views the pathetic fallacy as "the attribution of human aspects and emotions to natural objects" (Miles 1944, 210; see also Miles 1965, 1).

24 Ruskin 2004, 70.

25 Ruskin explicitly defines the 'pathetic fallacy' as the "falseness in all our impressions of external things" that "violent feelings" induce (Ruskin, 2004, p. 71). But many of his examples do involve personification.

26 Wordsworth 1854, 395.

27 Ruskin 1891, 183.

‘strong’ causes:

An inspired writer, in full impetuosity of passion, may speak wisely and truly of ‘raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame’ [Jude 1:13]; but it is only the basest writer who cannot speak of the sea without talking of ‘raging waves’, ‘remorseless floods’, ‘ravenous billows’ etc.; and it is one of the signs of the highest power in a writer to check all such habits of thought, and to keep his eyes fixed firmly on the *pure fact*, out of which if any feeling comes to him or his reader, he knows it must be a true one.²⁸

Hence, Ruskin outlines a hierarchical order of “four classes.”²⁹ First and lowest, there are totally unpoetic people who “feel nothing, and therefore see truly.” Next, a “second order of poets” comprises those who “feel strongly, think weakly, and see untruly.” In turn, “first order” poets “feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly.” Last and highest, there are people “who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly, because what they see is inconceivably above them”—as in “prophetic inspiration.” But even accounting for this kind of inspiration, Ruskin insists that “so far as it is a fallacy,” the pathetic fallacy is “always the sign of a morbid state of mind, and comparatively of a weak one.”³⁰ “Even in the most inspired prophet,” the pathetic fallacy is “a sign of the incapacity of his human sight or thought to bear what has been revealed to it.”³¹

Ruskin is wrong to claim that pathetic fallacies must reflect ‘morbidness’ or ‘incapacity’. And it is fair to be critical of the stark opposition between reason and emotion that underlies his distinction between ‘true sight’ and ‘true feeling’. Emotions can plausibly aid understanding, if not even be necessary for grasping certain truths.³² But one can isolate a deeper ideal of artistic objectivity by reflecting on the link between great poets like Homer who ‘see truly’ and inspired prophets who declaim with ‘false sight’ but ‘true feeling’ under the sway of ‘higher’ powers.

Namely, both Ruskin’s ‘first order poets’ and inspired ‘prophets’ evidently look outward to strong external causes for true inspiration. This is one way to take his advice to ‘keep eyes fixed firmly on the pure fact.’ Admittedly, another interpretation more closely tracks certain of his remarks: ‘Err on the side of purely literal description.’³³ But this is a far less compelling creative ideal. The contrast between figurative and literal uses of language is less artistically salient, and narrower in scope, than is the contrast between ideals of individual or collective self-expression and an outwardly-oriented ideal of creative receptivity to basic features of the world.

28 Ruskin 2004, 75.

29 Ruskin 2004, 73–74.

30 Ruskin 2004, 79.

31 Ruskin 2004, 79.

32 For extended discussion and defense of this basic idea, see e.g. Furtak 2018; Nussbaum 1990. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to stress this point, and for these references.

33 Some commentators seem to read Ruskin this way—e.g. compare Miles 1944, 216.

To begin to delve deeper into this ideal, we may first examine why Ruskin thinks that poetic acts like anthropomorphic description are misperceptions or fallacies, in the first place. In anachronistic terms, of course, one might instead distinguish between literal and figurative truth, or between truth and something like aptness.³⁴ But Ruskin's own analysis is more illuminating, with respect to my aim of motivating an ideal of artistic objectivity and a correlative critique of self-expression. Namely, he characterizes "false appearances" as those which are "entirely unconnected with any real power or character in the object, and only imputed to it by us."³⁵ For example, when the poet Charles Kingsley writes of the sea's "cruel, crawling foam," Ruskin objects that "the foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl."³⁶ Presumably, then, he would deny that Kingsley's metaphor reflects any 'real power or character' located 'in' the ocean.³⁷ By contrast, he observes that a gentian flower "has always the power" to produce sensations of blueness, and concludes that "the gentian and the sky are always verily blue, whatever philosophy may say to the contrary."³⁸ He thus spurns focus on the "objective" properties of things "in themselves," and de-emphasizes Lockean distinctions between primary and secondary qualities.³⁹ Notably, Locke would agree that blueness is 'in' the gentian, even in the absence of perceiving subjects.⁴⁰ But Ruskin still treats the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as aesthetically irrelevant. Color may be neither 'objective' nor a 'primary' quality, but for Ruskin this does not preclude a color's 'true' description by 'first order' poets.

This relates directly to my focus on the contrast between receptivity and self-expression. Ruskin's hostility to figurative descriptions which are 'only imputed to things by us' is by direct contrast to Wordsworth's aforementioned praise of 'the *soul of man*, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.' And Ruskin's preference for focus on 'powers' that are instead truly located 'in' objects is related to his praise of 'loving a stone for a stone's sake'. For Ruskin, evidently, an artist's genuine openness to the broader world must be matched by real powers in the broader world. Artistic objectivity requires both, not just one-sided receptivity.

Ruskin's advice to err on the side of literal description can be more charitably

34 On these distinctions, more broadly, see Hills 1997.

35 Ruskin 2004, 70.

36 Ruskin 2004, 71.

37 Cf. Arsić's claim that Ruskin divides things into "doers and nondoers" *rather than* subjects and objects, and takes a gentian's 'power' to produce blueness sensations as paradigmatic of 'doers', or "generative forces," which are thus neither 'subjects' nor 'objects' (Arsić 2017, 125). But if Ruskin believed in 'generative forces' and inert 'nondoers' instead of 'people' and 'things', as Arsić claims, then he would not think that any attribution of active forces like *cruelty* to impersonal natural objects is "false"—which is precisely his view, however. Arsić plausibly conflates Ruskin's commitment to a broadly Lockean account of secondary qualities as real powers located in objects with a more radical rejection of the basic distinction between subjects and objects.

38 Ruskin 2004, 69.

39 Ruskin naturally read Locke at Oxford (Collingwood 1971, 4). Note that Ruskin's sense of 'objective' is distinct from mine, and closer to traditional notions.

40 See Ch. VIII, Section 10 in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Compare Ruskin 2004, 69.

recast in this light, as a concrete strategy for avoiding projection of one's own feelings onto nature. The feelings that one 'finds' in nature are all too often just one's own, either as an individual or the bearer of a social collective—whether it be a specific culture or humanity quite generally. For those like Wordsworth, this may be a virtue. But for Ruskin, it is a vice. And he proposes avoiding this vice, fairly intuitively, by adopting a posture of defaulting to purely literal poetic descriptions. However, this does not preclude the possibility of some effective poetic use of the pathetic fallacy, on Ruskin's view. He just takes truly inspired or prophetic uses of the pathetic fallacy to be earned, by strong causes overcoming one's real resistance to indulge in it. So, then, if one rejects Ruskin's advice to err on the side of literal truth, what might replace it, for those still compelled by his basic call to look outward to strong causes for true feeling? And why in fact reject his advice to err on the side of narrowly literal truth—as I claim one should?

I have already raised one reason to reject Ruskin's advice to err of the side of literal truth, earlier above: the contrast between figurative and literal uses of language is narrower in scope than is the contrast between self-expression and creative receptivity to basic features of the world. It is unclear, for example, how (if at all) Ruskin's point about literal truth might extend to the case of Goldsworthy creating an abstract sculptural form out of red leaves. To achieve a wider scope and broader utility for creative practice, then, an artist might instead defer to a slightly more abstract piece of advice, like *'Focus on the broader world, not on yourself.'*

3. Expressive Qualities in Nature: Anthropomorphism vs. Anthropocentrism

A second basic problem with Ruskin's advice to err on the side of literal truth is that artists' invocation of expressive qualities in impersonal natural objects plausibly can reflect real powers that are genuinely located in these objects. Of course, the sea is an unfeeling object—not an anthropomorphic subject of cruelty, grief, or any other feeling. But why couldn't the inhuman ocean still have a perfectly real power to elicit a figurative description of 'cruel foam', in poets like Kingsley? More broadly, could it not be that at least some 'pathetic fallacies' in fact reflect the impact of real causal powers, located 'in' objects just as much as their colors are 'in' them? In other words, one might distinguish (in a way that Ruskin does not) between feelings merely projected onto nature and feelings that are immanent in nature in some truer sense—i.e. more *objective* feelings. Ruskin's advice to err on the side of literal description is thus oversimplified.

Analyses of expressiveness in more recent aesthetic theory seem to provide a natural way to motivate this basic idea of expressive qualities truly located in impersonal natural objects. Many modern aesthetic theorists who emphasize the expressive character of art now disassociate it from *self*-expressive acts by artists, in a way that more traditional expression theories of art did not.⁴¹ For instance, according to an 'arousal'

41 E.g. Tolstoy 1995; Dewey 1934; Collingwood 1938. For defenses of Collingwood's theory of expression, see e.g. Ridley 1998; Robinson 2005, 244–250; Hopkins 2017. Cf. Hospers 1955; Tormey 1971.

theory of musical expressiveness, the emotional expressiveness of a musical work or passage consists in its power to induce corresponding emotions in a receptive listener.⁴² Hence an arousal theorist could, in principle, agree with Ruskin's claim that great poets "watch" their feelings as if "from afar off," even if their audiences do not.⁴³ Likewise, an advocate of a modern 'resemblance' or 'contour' theory, who claims that music's expressiveness consists in relations of resemblance between the contour of a given melody and the contour of typical behavioral manifestations or phenomenological features of a corresponding emotion, could allow that even the most highly expressive musical works are created by apparently "impassive" artists.⁴⁴ In this light, then, even inhuman natural objects can genuinely possess expressive qualities. That is, even if Susanne Langer is right that works of art are "expressive forms,"⁴⁵ or "images of feeling" which "mak[e] it visible or audible or in some way perceivable,"⁴⁶ this alone would not distinguish art from all natural beauty or sublimity. Of course, howling winds are not "created for our perception," in the way that Langer takes art to be.⁴⁷ But the wind need not be made by or for us, let alone be able to feel, in order to be able to make feelings perceivable or sensibly apparent to a receptive listener. For example, the ocean foam might have a contour truly resembling that of cruelty, despite Ruskin's claim that Kingsley's 'cruel foam' is a fallacy.

But modern aesthetic theories of expressiveness still cannot fully capture the distinction between receptivity and self-expression. If one just invokes similarity in contour, for instance, then there is an overabundance of expressive qualities in nature—the sad weeping willow, the playful burbling brook, and so on ad infinitum. It is thus necessary to invoke a further distinction, between objective and subjective principles for artistically highlighting (or exaggerating) certain expressive qualities in nature and not others. In other words, even granting that there are many expressive qualities in natural objects, e.g. in the sense of contour theories of expressiveness, we can ask: why does an artist notice the expressive qualities in nature that she does? In turn, some reasons for noticing expressive qualities are self-expressive. For instance, a mourning poet might notice a relation of genuine resemblance between the contour of a willow and that of his grief *because* he is grieving. The identification of real expressive qualities in nature can thus still be a way of expressing one's own feelings. Nor is this point restricted to individual rather than collective self-expression. In a society that has suffered a civil war, for example, a poet might give expression to shared feelings of anger or loss, even without viscerally experiencing them herself, by noticing just those contours in nature which correspond to these shared feelings.

42 See e.g. Matravers 1998.

43 Compare Ruskin 2004, 75.

44 For defenses of a 'contour' theory, see e.g. Kivy 1989; cf. e.g. Levinson 1996, 90–125. See also Budd 1985; Budd 2011; Davies 2011; Levinson 1982; Robinson 2005.

45 Langer 1957, 15; compare Langer 1953.

46 Langer 1957, 25.

47 Langer 1957, 15.

Similarly, identifying expressive qualities in nature can be a collective expression of human feeling more broadly—hence, a more abstract joint projection of ourselves onto nature. In this light, recall Langer’s view that artworks are ‘expressive forms,’ or ‘images of feeling.’ Notably, she here takes ‘feeling’ to include “*everything that can be felt*, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life.”⁴⁸ This broad notion of feeling is helpfully compared to Kant’s claim that taste is “a faculty for the judging of *the sensible rendering of moral ideas*.”⁴⁹ While moral ideas are not emotions, perhaps we can nevertheless feel and not merely think them, at least in aesthetic experience. Indeed, the sensuous presentation of ideas, whether in artworks or in beautiful natural phenomena, is perhaps precisely a way of allowing us to feel ideas, in this sense. Hegel’s claim that “the sensuous in the work of art is itself something ideal, but which, not being ideal as thought is ideal, is still at the same time there externally as a thing”⁵⁰ is productively interpreted in this light, as broadly Kantian. So too, one should interpret Schiller’s less famous but earlier suggestion that “in our pleasure in Beauty[...]reflection is so completely intermingled with feeling that we believe ourselves to perceive form immediately.”⁵¹ Of course, not just any concrete particular counts as the successful ‘sensuous presentation’ of a corresponding universal or idea, in the relevant sense. Good art makes it seem as if the universal or idea itself, not just a mere instance or partial reflection thereof, is fully and viscerally present.

But why take the artistic creation of ‘images of feeling’ to be valuable? Again, we may distinguish objective and subjective motivations. Subjectively, creating images of feeling can be a way to value our own capacity for the range of emotion, sensation, and intellectual activity which Langer outlines. As a “symbolic presentation of subjective reality for contemplation,”⁵² art can thus be a way of valuing generic human subjectivity. In this light, recall Schiller’s claim that art is “the most complete possible expression of mankind,” which induces states of ‘play’ or ‘freedom’ involving full reciprocal activation of our powers of sensibility and rational form.⁵³ For Hegel, similarly, art is the sensuous presentation of freedom. In art, material forms somehow still breathe with our shared ‘spiritual’ essence—freedom, ideas, feeling. And this encapsulates the human condition: our nature is to be ‘embodied spirit’, conditioned as sensible beings and yet still free. In short, then, artistic images of feeling can be a collective self-expression of *humanity*.

For Hegel, however, collective self-expression through art also has a culturally specific dimension. On his account of classical Greek tragedy, for example, the chorus is “the actual substance of the moral life and action” of heroic individuals, or “the people as

48 Langer 1957, 15.

49 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* §60.

50 Hegel 1975, 38.

51 Schiller 2014, 96–97.

52 Langer 1957, 24.

53 Schiller 1966, 111.

the fruitful soil” out of which these heroes grow.⁵⁴ This is particularly “appropriate,” he adds, for an ancient Greek culture in which “moral complications cannot yet be met by specific valid and just laws and firm religious dogmas,” but instead “the ethical order appears only in its direct and living actuality.”⁵⁵ The “essence of tragedy” then consists in an “*opposition*” of heroic individuals, each of whom is “justified in their action,” but who nevertheless encapsulate “the battle between the essential powers that rule human life and between the gods that dominate the human heart.”⁵⁶ For instance, Antigone “ought to pay obedience to the royal command,” on Hegel’s view, but “Creon too, as father and husband, should have respected the sacred tie of blood” and observed proper burial rites for Polynices.⁵⁷ Hence, Sophocles’s drama is a kind of sensuous expression of ancient Greek culture, which focalizes its institutionally-unresolved ethical tensions between familial love and patriotic duty.⁵⁸ Art can thus be a collective expression, not just of universal humanity, but also of specific historical cultures or subcultures.⁵⁹ This is not objectionable, in itself. But when it descends into ethnocentric myopia, it is. So too, insofar as human self-expression stems from our reactive desire to display our moral status as essentially free or autonomous beings, ultimately above and beyond any ‘mere’ natural forces—a kind of anthropocentric interiority that closes us off to real determination by basic sources of value in the broader natural world—it is criticizable.

But more objective modes of identifying expressive qualities are possible. And Ruskin’s basic invocation of ‘powers’ is illuminating, here, although his specific account of the kind of powers that are ‘in’ natural objects is overly restrictive. An identification of expressive qualities is objective insofar as it reflects the artist having been genuinely impacted and determined from without, not just external contours being occasions for individual or collective self-expression. For instance, whereas a subjective poet might see the rising sun as ‘joyous’ because he has recently fallen in love, a more objective poet might feel or contemplate joy because he is moved by the sun’s awesome force. The sun can thus more truly inspire his poetry—whether about joy or human sorrow by contrast to the sun’s joy. The crucial point is the sun’s power to elicit his art.

When I invoke real powers in natural objects to elicit creative acts by artists, note that I am not associating this artistic receptivity with any conceptually-determinate features of external things. That is, broadly like Kant claims that one cannot prove that a given thing is beautiful simply by describing it in generic terms—rather, one always has to “submit the object to his own eyes”⁶⁰—I claim that artistic objectivity does not involve

54 Hegel 1975, 1211.

55 Hegel 1975, 1211.

56 Hegel 1975, 1206 and 1210.

57 Hegel 1975, 1217.

58 For a modern ‘structuralist’ account of myth, with similar focus on laying bare culturally-specific tensions, see Lévi-Strauss 1955.

59 For a structuralist-inspired account of genre film, including the “conflict between civilization and savagery” in Western genre film, vis-à-vis a distinctively American frontier mythos, see also Schatz 1981.

60 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §8.

receptivity to the kind of empirical fact that is amenable to objective scientific description. What the objective musician hears in the thunder, or what the objective sculptor sees in the red leaves, eludes non-artistic or non-aesthetic perception. As elaborated below, this view is not mystical or supernatural, just anti-scientistic. Note also that this is not a description of Ruskin's view. It is a view that I am advancing, in dialogue with Ruskin—who, again, explicitly denies that the ocean has this kind of real power.

In this light, then, we may tease apart several threads of Ruskin's appeal to "the ordinary, proper, and true appearances of things to us."⁶¹ In particular, it will prove helpful to reflect on why he takes the 'ordinary, proper, and true' to exclude phenomena like Kingsley's 'cruel foam.' First, Ruskin could deny that the ocean has *any* real power to produce feelings (ideas, etc.) of cruelty in Kingsley, as the sky produces sensations of blueness in us. But this is questionable. For instance, recall my earlier example of a musician composing a song, inspired by a certain sound or rhythm in a thunderstorm that she hears: why deny the storm its real power, here? Moreover, in cases of prophetic inspiration, Ruskin⁶² himself acknowledges that pathetic fallacies can stem from overwhelming religious feeling—and hence, presumably, from the real power of God. Ruskin's emphasis on creative inspiration by God helps to intuitively motivate my own wider notion of creative receptivity to real powers located in external things, even though Ruskin himself evidently rejects this extension of 'real powers' to things like the ocean.

Second, Ruskin could distinguish the intersubjective validity of sensations of blueness when looking at the sky from the personal or idiosyncratic quality of Kingsley's poetic response to the ocean. A serious problem with invoking intersubjective validity in this context, however, is that the highest poetic experiences of expressive qualities in nature are not 'ordinary'. And they arguably are not available—even in principle—to all normally-functioning people, in the way that the sky's blueness is. Not everyone is a great poet, after all. One might object that a poetic description of expressive qualities in nature is as intersubjectively valid (or not) as any aesthetic judgment, or at least any claim about the aptness of a given metaphor. And people can evidently evaluate the aptness of a given metaphor without having the creative capacity to produce it. But here it is helpful to distinguish between real powers in natural objects to elicit figurative descriptions in poets and (on the other hand) real powers in these figurative descriptions to elicit aesthetic experiences in audiences who read or hear them. Even supposing that aesthetic judgments are intersubjectively valid, this validity is presumably related to the second kind of power, not the first. But one should focus on the first kind of power, to elicit creative responses in artists, when assessing whether or not a given pathetic fallacy constitutes a 'true appearance'.

Finally, Ruskin elsewhere distinguishes between fire itself being "ravenous and pitiless" and "something *in* this fire" that "rages," before relating this 'something' to the

61 Ruskin 2004, 70.

62 Ruskin 2004, 79.

Greek gods:

It seems to me that the Greek had exactly the same instinctive feeling about the elements that we have ourselves; that to Homer, as much as to Casimir de la Vigne, fire seemed ravenous and pitiless; to Homer, as much as to Keats, the sea-wave appeared wayward or idle, or whatever else it may be to the poetical passion. But then the Greek reasoned upon this sensation, saying to himself: "I can light the fire, and put it out; I can dry this water up, or drink it. It cannot be the fire or the water that rages, or that is wayward. But it must be something *i n* this fire and *i n* the water, which I cannot destroy by extinguishing the one, or evaporating the other, any more than I destroy myself by cutting off my finger[...] So there may be a power in the water which is not water, but to which the water is as a body[...] This something, this Great Water Spirit, I must not confuse with the waves, which are only its body. *They* may flow hither and thither, increase or diminish. *That* must be indivisible—imperishable—a god."⁶³

Paganism is blasphemous, for Ruskin, as a devout Christian. However, it is "not the materialism, but the vice, which degrades the [Greek] conception [of deities]." Because "there is always some sense of exaltation in the spiritual and immortal body" here, "the materialism itself is never positive, or complete."⁶⁴ Ruskin therefore sees Greek myths as deeply, albeit only partly, true. Namely, for Ruskin, the basic truth underlying the pagan's appeal to a Great Water Spirit, located in the sea as a "spirit" occupies its "body,"⁶⁵ is the reality of a higher spiritual domain.

Ruskin's view is not narrowly scientific, then, even though he sees descriptions rooted in prophetic inspiration as 'fallacies'. A Biblical invocation of mountains singing and trees clapping before God still involves a pathetic fallacy, for instance, albeit a "noble" one grounded in "true" feeling.⁶⁶ Ruskin sees it as literally true that there are divine powers, which he relates without fail to the singular God of his Christian faith. The Greeks thus avoided the pathetic fallacy by attributing powers to gods, rather than to objects like the sea. This is why there is no 'real power' in the sea, on Ruskin's view, and hence why he always takes figurative descriptions like Kingsley's to be 'false'. I will return to this point shortly below, with an eye towards modifying Ruskin's view so as to reach a more secularized and naturalistic position.

But before doing so, we may first review some central results of the above discussion. First, how can receptivity to the broader world manifest itself precisely in artistic creation? Here the crucial point is that the personal, cultural, or human quality of

63 Ruskin 1859, 175–176.

64 Ruskin 1859, 176.

65 Ruskin 1859, 176.

66 Ruskin 2004, 77.

artistic response is not a barrier, in itself, to receptivity. The presumption that receptivity must track external things' intersubjectively available or conceptually-determine properties is a scientific misconception. Ruskin's notion of 'true' appearances is beholden to this traditional epistemological framework. But more satisfactory accounts of creative receptivity should allow that the relevant kind of 'real power' interacts specifically with artists, not with their audiences, let alone all human beings.

Second, how can artists actually go about being receptive, in practice, or avoid making unintentionally self-expressive work? Ruskin's concrete advice to err on the side of purely literal description should be refined, both because it is narrow in scope and because there plausibly can be expressive qualities genuinely located in impersonal natural objects. But modern theories of expressiveness are still incapable, in themselves, of adequately capturing the distinction which is relevant here, between subjective and objective expressive qualities in nature. Invoking real powers in objects to elicit creative acts by artists is more directly to the point. Anthropomorphic descriptions of nature need not be anthropocentric, insofar as they can be genuinely elicited by real powers in natural objects, more so than emanating from within artists. Still, both artist and nature can play active roles, even if their interaction is thus hierarchical. What practical advice remains, then, for artists aspiring to objectivity? First, focus on the broader world, not yourself. Second, be open to genuine inspiration from without, but do not try to be inspired. This captures the kernel of truth in Ruskin's advice to not try to be moved to use poetic language. Finally, be skeptical if you find yourself 'inspired' by too many things. The scientific person is not open to artistic inspiration; but the Romantic is instead hypersensitive—that is, receptive to too much, in a way that can often reflect an underlying anthropocentric preoccupation with human feeling.

4. Objectivity contra Individualism, Anthropocentrism, and Hypersensitivity

In this light, finally, we may return to the two other questions that I raised earlier above: Which parts of the broader world are worth being receptive to? And why idealize receptivity, or reject self-expression, in the first place? These are interrelated and so best approached at once.

One reason to value receptivity and not self-expression is that we can overlook important features of our surroundings, like aesthetically impactful formal details of natural environments, if we are inwardly rather than outwardly focused. Artists projecting their feelings onto nature can thus be criticizable in broadly the way that spectators are when they misinterpret an artwork by seeing it as more about their own lives than it really is. We often cannot appreciate all that nature or art has to offer, aesthetically and otherwise, without allowing it to draw us out of ourselves.

To reach deeper than this crucial but basic point, however, we must distinguish different senses of the 'broader world' to which an objective artist could be attuned. Depending on what one takes it to be, a stance of creative receptivity can have further

value in different ways. One might view the ‘broader world’ as comprising everything beyond the horizons of one’s own individual experience or personal concerns. But one might also view it from a more collective standpoint, as comprising everything beyond the human or artificial. Finally, following Ruskin, one might instead view the ‘broader world’ as comprising only its ‘strongest’ forces, like God.⁶⁷

If one focuses on a contrast between the (subjective) individual and (objective) collective, then stressing an ideal of objectivity in art can be part of a broader critique of hyper-individualistic tendencies in contemporary liberal societies. By contrast, one might value artistic self-expression in line with a broader praise of individuality and self-determination in liberal political philosophy and ethics. This is one way to contextualize Riggle’s implicit view that it is *valuable* to “express ourselves in public” and “be seen for who we are or aspire to be,” as he takes street art to allow.⁶⁸

But my own focus here has been more on the contrast between the human or artificial and the inhuman or natural. One reason for this is that I take ideals of collective self-expression, like broadly Hegelian views of art as the sensuous self-representation of Spirit or historical cultural feeling, to now be more common in aesthetics and art criticism than are individualistic ideals. A major problem with the paradigm of art as collective human or cultural self-expression, however, is that it runs the risk of anthropocentrism. By contrast, then, objectivity can be valuable insofar as it is part of a broader anti-anthropocentric ethos. This might be connected, for instance, to the tradition of ‘deep ecology’ in environmental ethics, which treats ecological systems as inherently valuable.⁶⁹ Regardless, it is worth envisioning forms of art which respect nature, without sentimentalizing it.

One might object to this, of course. Is it not also bad to be self-effacing, for instance? And why not value ourselves, either as individuals or collectively as human? First, however, note that an ideal of receptivity need not be self-effacing. Indeed, a broadly Ruskin-style appeal to ‘strong’ causes is one way to ensure that it is not: if we only idealize receptivity to certain especially important features of the world beyond ourselves, then the result is not self-effacing in any pejorative sense. Moreover, as I acknowledged earlier, both an artist and any external powers to which he is receptive have active (not just passive) roles to play, in the interactions that yield objective art. It is just that the artist’s highest creative activity is rooted in his ability to respond to powers beyond himself. One also need not treat a given power in the natural world—say, a thunderstorm or the ocean—as ‘above’ oneself in all contexts, in order to do so in certain

67 Compare especially Ruskin 2004, 74–75. However, Ruskin does also sometimes intimate the first or second notions—e.g. he says that a “great” man is not “in any wise shaken” by “that which immediately affects him,” but attuned to “the past and future, and[...]all things beside and around” (Ruskin 2004, 74). This suggests a quite traditional notion of objectivity—as a ‘view from nowhere’ or universally-valid standpoint, independent of subjects’ idiosyncratic capacities or personal experiences (Nagel 1986).

68 Ruskin 2016, 192.

69 See e.g. Naess, 1973; Naess, 1984; cf. Watson, 1983; see also Lynch, 1996.

acts of artistic creation. Finally, note that it is possible to value ourselves, either as individuals or jointly as human, without treating ourselves as the center of reality, or the most valuable thing. We can value ourselves appropriately without treating humanity as a kind of secularized God.

But even if we should not deify humanity, why place any part of nature above ourselves? One reason is just that this offers another rich source of artistic inspiration; so, why close oneself off to it unnecessarily? More deeply, however, it helps to frame this issue in somewhat broader context. For Ruskin, as a pious Christian, the paradigmatic ‘strong’ cause of ‘true’ feeling is clearly God. Hence, his notion of ‘strength’ evidently combines moral and physical senses, although his dominant emphasis is arguably on the former, moralized sense.⁷⁰ In turn, Ruskin’s talent for close description should be viewed in this light. He values only “detail referred to a great end,” not “detail sought for its own sake”⁷¹—where again ‘greatness’ is religiously inflected. He thus takes the painter John Constable’s “morbid preference of subjects of a low order” to reflect “want of veneration.”⁷² (One can only imagine what he might say about Gelitin.)

For current adherents of Christianity and similar religions, this may all seem appropriate. After all, as Feuerbach observes, “religious sentiment” evidently “looks at all things through the medium of religion, it sees all in God,[...]sees all in images and as an image.”⁷³ But in light of long-standing processes of secularization within modern Western societies, it is also productive to think about where ‘divine’ strength has been culturally reinvested since Ruskin wrote on the pathetic fallacy in 1856, to the extent that the ‘death of God’ has not just left behind a nihilistic void. Some traits previously attributed to God have arguably been displaced onto humanity—or, as Feuerbach and Marx would say, reclaimed for humanity after a period of religious alienation in which we mistook human self-consciousness for consciousness of God. The ultimate result of this process, according to Marx, is thus “the doctrine that *man is the supreme being for man*.”⁷⁴ But secularization might also (or instead) involve reinvesting ‘divine’ strength into nature. Basic natural entities like the ocean, or primal phenomena like time, cycles of seasonal change, or life and death, are fair candidates for powers beyond and stronger than ourselves, in certain ways that merit deep respect. In turn, this basic respect can be given distinctively artistic modes of outlet.

Modern or contemporary examples of art that is informed by this sort of secularized but profound respect for nature plausibly include Ansel Adams’s large-scale landscape photography and Andy Goldsworthy’s site-specific sculptures constructed

70 E.g. compare Ruskin’s discussion of pathetic fallacies in two Biblical passages (Ruskin, 2004, p. 77), as well as his subsequent discussion of a pathetic fallacy from the poet Edward Young, describing (in Ruskin’s words) “the character of a truly good and holy man” (Ruskin, 2004, p. 78).

71 Ruskin 1858, xxx.

72 Ruskin 1858, 92.

73 Feuerbach 1957, 95.

74 Tucker 1978, 60.

from natural materials and without tools.⁷⁵ Notably, in this light, Goldsworthy is often self-consciously working to “understand” natural materials like a certain kind of stone or yellow shade in autumn leaves.⁷⁶ Or consider the California poet Robinson Jeffers’s depiction of a devastating wildfire, in a 1932 poem: “The deer were bounding like blown leaves/ Under the smoke in front of the roaring wave of the brush-fire;/ I thought of the smaller lives that were caught./ Beauty is not always lovely; the fire was beautiful, the terror/ Of the deer was beautiful.”⁷⁷ Jeffers’s description is clearly respectful, even as it is also strikingly unsentimental. This differs from Ruskin’s more moralized view of God’s strength, but also from moralized notions of the sublime in Romantic landscape painting. Like Adams’s epic wilderness and Goldsworthy’s primal colors and biomorphic forms, Jeffers’s nature—from “roaring” fire to the “merciless black” and “merciless blue” of the burnt hills and bright sky in its aftermath⁷⁸—is a far cry from the ‘heavenly’ glowing clouds and gentle herd animals in Albert Bierstadt’s *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868).

An anti-anthropocentric form of creative receptivity to the broader natural world need not manifest itself in art that is so overtly concerned with nature, though.⁷⁹ In close, high-contrast depictions of human body parts like interlocking fingers or crooked elbows resting on crossed legs, for instance, the German-British photographer Bill Brandt achieves a similar effect. Human bodies are reframed as centers of natural form and motion, in their own right—not ‘objectified’, in any standard sense, but rather naturalized or made impersonal, like stones and flooding ocean tides (compare Brandt, 1977). In this light, moreover, note that the relevant sense of the ‘natural world’ beyond the human or artificial may well be quite abstract. Hence, for example, it may even encompass visceral sensory qualities, like the glowing fields of textured color in a Mark Rothko painting; or the ethereal wash of ambient frequencies in Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969/70), a multi-media work in which Lucier records himself narrating a brief text, plays the recording back into a room, and re-records this output, repeatedly, until the original sound of his voice has been transformed into a cadenced ebb and flow of the resonant frequencies of the room itself.⁸⁰

While each of these examples merits further examination, here they function adequately even as suggestive illustrations. Rather than elaborating these cases, then, it will prove more illuminating to conclude by partly spanning the art historical gap between them and Ruskin’s mid-19th-century critique. Ruskin is broadly critical of British Romantic poetry—and of what he sees as the more disingenuous sentimentality of 18th-century poets like Pope.⁸¹ More positively, though, Josephine Miles has argued

75 Compare Adams 1992, Goldsworthy 1990.

76 Riedelsheimer 2003.

77 Jeffers 1938, 359.

78 Jeffers 1938, 359.

79 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to emphasize this point.

80 Lucier 1990.

81 Ruskin 2004, 78.

compellingly that Ruskin's view fits into a broader shift in Victorian poetic use of the pathetic fallacy, away from simple appeal to emotions shared between people and generic natural objects, and towards a "new emphasis on color, atmosphere, texture, 'the thing in itself' with its adjectival discriminations."⁸² (On Miles's telling, this shift was also mediated by younger Romantics like Keats and Shelley, for whom the "world feels apart from man"—e.g. Keats writes of the shore, "Full of calm joy it was, as I of grief"—and sensory qualities like "shape, hue, odour, and sweet sound" become the "new agents of feeling."⁸³ In turn, this new Victorian emphasis on "objectivity" construed as close attention to the individual "thing in itself," using "the qualifying and discriminating adjective," positively influenced currents within Modernist poetics stressing "[t]he quality of the thing, not our feeling about it."⁸⁴

In particular, Miles highlights Imagism's call to "interest in the object 'for its own sake,'" or "stress on the object's own perceivable qualities and textures."⁸⁵ Here the Imagist poet Amy Lowell's own account of the distinctively "modern" poetic virtue of "Externality" is noteworthy:

I do not call it "objectivity" advisedly. I do not mean that this [modern] poetry is objective rather than subjective. I mean that it concerns itself with man in his proper relation to the universe, rather than as the lord and master of it. It is this attitude which leads to so many poems on nature, on effects of trees and sky and water, by themselves, with no hint of the "pathetic fallacy" to heighten interest.⁸⁶

"By 'externality,'" Lowell elaborates elsewhere, "I mean the attitude of being interested in things for themselves and not because of the effect they have upon oneself."⁸⁷ This notion is helpfully compared to Lowell's description of "exteriority" as "the characteristic modern touch":

"Interiority" was the fashion; a poet examined his mental processes under a microscope.[...]Somehow, that fashion worked itself out, and "exteriority," as I have called the characteristic modern touch, came in. By this extremely awkward word, "exteriority," I mean an interest in the world apart from oneself, a contemplation of nature unencumbered by the "pathetic fallacy." It is the reason of the picture-making of the modern poet. Picture-making these other men gave us, but the Modern gives us picture-making without

82 Miles 1944, 214. Compare Miles 1965, 32–44. See also Prettejohn 2007.

83 Miles 1965, 29; see also Miles 1965, 100.

84 Miles 1944, 210. See also Cianci and Nicholls 2001; Feldman 2002; Teukolsky, 2009.

85 Miles 1944, 210.

86 Lowell 1917, 106.

87 Lowell 1916, 124.

comment.⁸⁸

Lowell only meant to be “labeling” and “not condemning” the “internality” or “subjectivity” of “the poets of the late Victorian epoch”⁸⁹—as she saw them, contra Miles’s more subtle analysis. For Lowell, that is, “in the world of the arts [egoism] is perfectly permissible,” and indeed “makes very good and very interesting poetry.” It is just “not the manner of to-day [1916].”

Lowell’s notion of ‘Externality’ is closely related both to my own account of artistic objectivity and to Ruskin’s criticism of the pathetic fallacy. This is no accident: I mean to be refining and creatively extending a long-standing counter-Romantic tradition. As I suggested above, this tradition also arguably extends to some modern environmental and abstract art. Part of my original contribution to this counter-Romantic tradition concerns my analysis of the relevant notion of the ‘universe’ to which man should, as Lowell suggests, stand in ‘proper relation.’ Does this universe comprise *everything*? Or everything *holy*, or *natural*, or *powerful*?

Receptivity to everything beyond one’s immediate environment is indiscriminate, if not also unduly self-effacing. Qua indiscriminate, receptivity to everything beyond one’s immediate environment is also ironically similar to the Romantic poet’s hypersensitivity to any and all features of his natural surroundings—such that every flower, insect, and cloud becomes a sign of God or a pantheistic ‘World Soul’. Consider, in this light, the “physical consciousness of a universally infused emotion” in both Blake and Erasmus Darwin,⁹⁰ echoed and even intensified in second-generation Romantics like Keats or Shelley.⁹¹ But this Romantic enthusiasm also has a less sentimental correlate in indiscriminate applications of the kind of close attention to the individual “thing in itself” which Miles⁹² associates with both Victorian poets’ shifting use of the pathetic fallacy and Imagists’ subsequent emphasis on ‘Externality’.

Ruskin instead views the broader world to which the best artists are most receptive as being centered on especially ‘strong’ powers, paradigmatically like God. His notion of strength is thus moralized. But an amoral notion of strength is more plausible, in application to nature.

Nature can be kind—but nature is not kind, as a rule. The ‘divine’ powers located in the ocean or the flame are neither moral nor immoral. They are amoral. Ruskin himself seems close to acknowledging this, when he describes the Greek gods. But he then appears to lose clarity on this point in moments where his Christianity reasserts itself. To truly love a stone for a stone’s sake, as Ruskin claims to advocate, should in part be to frankly acknowledge that a stone’s values are not human values. To value morally is to

88 Lowell 1920, 215.

89 Lowell 1916, 124.

90 Miles 1965, 17.

91 Miles 1965, 27–28.

92 Miles 1944, 216.

treat humanity as an end in itself—to be what Marx called a ‘universal’ or ‘species being’. Hence, to read moral values into nature, even as its purely transcendent cause or ground, is arguably to project ourselves onto it. Or, as Marx says more approvingly, to make man the supreme being for man is ultimately to treat nature as no more than our own “*inorganic* body.”⁹³

This is anathema to artistic objectivity, construed as creative receptivity to basic features of the external world. Humanity is not the center of reality, and artists who treat us as if we were inevitably fail to present the world ‘as it really is’ or nature ‘for its own sake’. Instead, they only ever present us back to ourselves. Like Wordsworth, that is, they only ever show us ‘the soul of man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world.’

5. Conclusion

Ideals of art as self-expression remain more prevalent than they might seem, especially if one allows that the ‘self’ in question can be a human collective, not just an individual artist. These self-expressive ideals run the risk of self-involvement, however—whether it be in the form of individualism or anthropocentrism. In this light, I have worked to develop a counter-ideal of artistic objectivity, or creative receptivity to basic features of the external world. I focused primarily on a version of this ideal which emphasizes the contrast between human beings and the broader natural world, although I pointed out that anti-individualistic and anti-ethnocentric versions are also salient. Rather than deifying human freedom or self-determining ‘Spirit’, an anti-anthropocentric version of the basic ideal of artistic objectivity instead fundamentally values our dynamic relation to the broader natural world—including the possibility of creative determination by impersonal forces.

In this light, I argued that Ruskin’s specific advice to err on the side of literal description is flawed, while defending his basic appeal to look outward to ‘strong’ causes for ‘true’ feeling. Contra Ruskin, there plausibly can be expressive qualities truly located in impersonal natural objects. But modern aesthetic theories of expressiveness are incapable, in themselves, of adequately capturing the distinction between subjective and objective artistic creation. Invoking objects’ real powers to elicit creative acts by artists is more to the point. Anthropomorphic descriptions need not be anthropocentric, then, insofar as they can be elicited by real powers in natural objects, more so than emanating from within artists. Unlike the blueness of the sky, though, the powers that elicit objective art may affect artists but not ‘typical’ people. To accept the existence of powers of this kind, and their real interactions with artists, is not mysticism or supernaturalism. It is to reject scientism, and to see art as a natural phenomenon in its own right.

I used this framework to motivate several pieces of practical advice: focus on the broader world, not yourself; be open to genuine inspiration from without, but do not try

93 Tucker 1978, 75.

to be inspired; and be skeptical if you find yourself ‘inspired’ by too many things. Finally, I suggested that a broad notion of artistic objectivity can illuminate not only Victorian poetry and certain currents within Modernism, like Amy Lowell’s emphasis on ‘exteriority’, but also recent movements in land and environmental art. Ruskin’s moralized notions of ‘strong’ cause and ‘true’ feeling are especially inappropriate in this context, because the natural world is largely inhuman and amoral.

Ruskin is closer to correct when he keeps his own eye fixed firmly on the pure fact. Not the pure empirical fact, but the pure poetic fact—the fact that includes ‘something *in* this fire and *in* the water’ which may rage or be wayward. Ruskin says that it is ‘not the materialism, but the vice,’ which ‘degrades’ the Greek conception of the gods. But the reality of the Greek gods, such as it is, is tied precisely to this ‘vice’. The ravenousness and pitilessness of the wildfire are not just ideas. Nor is the gentleness of the breeze, though, or the life-giving power of the earth—of course.

Objective artists look outward to strong external causes for true inspiration. They are not trying to express themselves or reach collective self-knowledge through their art. But they are also not disinterested or devoid of emotion. They can be broadly calm or unsentimental, in the way that mountains are calm and hurricanes are unsentimental: unmoved by personal feelings, if not all human concerns. Still, objective artists are receptive, not insensitive—just attuned to the more elemental forces by which they are impassioned and creatively inspired.⁹⁴

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⁹⁴ Thanks to Pavel Godfrey, Daniel Herwitz, Ross Martin, Filipa Melo Lopes, and Peter Railton for valuable feedback on earlier versions. I am also grateful to two reviewers for very helpful comments.

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