

## Grounding Aesthetic Obligations

Robbie Kubala

*Many writers describe a sense of requirement in aesthetic experience: some aesthetic objects seem to demand our attention. In this paper, I consider whether this experienced demand could ever constitute a genuine normative requirement, which I call an aesthetic obligation. I explicate the content, form, and satisfaction conditions of these aesthetic obligations, then argue that they would have to be grounded neither in the special weight of some aesthetic considerations, nor in a normative relation we bear to aesthetic objects as such, but in the connections that certain aesthetic considerations have to our practical identities. On the practical identity approach, aesthetic obligation is best understood as a species of promissory obligation, namely self-promising. But this means that the experienced demand can have, at best, the status of a veridical hallucination: although both have the same content, it is the self-promise, and not the experienced demand, that gives rise to the obligation. While aesthetic obligations concern aesthetic objects, they are not obligations to the aesthetic per se.*

Many writers, notably Kant and Proust, describe a sense of *requirement* in our experience of the aesthetic: some aesthetic objects seem to demand our attention. The term ‘aesthetic objects’ is an expansive one, picking out both artifactual and natural items: I feel drawn to certain artworks and not to others, to certain landscapes and not to others. Furthermore, I experience this pull as normative, and not purely causal. The force of my attraction to certain aesthetic objects is not analogous to gravitational force, or to the force of a tractor beam pulling me against my will. Rather, the demand associated with an aesthetic object is one that it seems I could either succeed at or fail in responding to. This phenomenon raises the question: could this experienced demand ever constitute a genuine normative requirement? If not, then what is the source of aesthetic obligations?

In this paper, I operate on the assumption that there are such normative requirements, which I call *aesthetic obligations*. In §1, I explicate the content, form, and satisfaction conditions of aesthetic obligations as I understand them. The remainder of the paper discusses how such obligations could be *grounded*, i.e., how the normative considerations associated with aesthetic objects could come to have the decisive deliberative force characteristic of an obligation. In §2, I argue that aesthetic obligations would have to be grounded neither in the special weight of some aesthetic considerations, nor in a normative relation we bear to aesthetic objects as such, but in the connections that certain aesthetic considerations have to our practical identities. And in §3, I argue

that on the practical identity approach, aesthetic obligation is best understood as a species of promissory obligation, namely self-promising. But this means that the experienced demand can have, at best, the status of a veridical hallucination: although both have the same content, it is the self-promise, and not the experienced demand, that gives rise to the obligation. While aesthetic obligations concern aesthetic objects, they are not obligations to the aesthetic *per se*.

### *§1 Aesthetic Obligations*

I begin with three examples, from literature and life, that illustrate the sense of requirement connected with aesthetic objects and hint at my favored approach to interpreting that requirement.<sup>1</sup> The first comes from an early passage of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which Proust's narrator, whom we can call Marcel, describes a dramatic encounter:

on the morning of our departure, . . . after looking for me everywhere, my mother found me in tears on the steep little path beside Tansonville, saying good-bye to the hawthorns, putting my arms around the prickly branches . . . “Oh, my poor little hawthorns,” I said, weeping, “you’re not the ones trying to make me unhappy, you aren’t forcing me to leave. You’ve never hurt me! So I will always love you.” And drying my eyes, I promised them that when I was grown up I would not let my life be like the senseless lives of other men and that even in Paris, on spring days, instead of paying calls and listening to silly talk, I would go out into the countryside to see the first hawthorns.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Other examples of experienced aesthetic demands can be found in Rainer Maria Rilke's poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” Thea Kronborg's story in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, John Ashbery's poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” Mary Oliver's poem “Swan,” and Laura Cumming's description of the art lover John Snare in *The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velázquez* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016). Clearly there is a historical genealogy to be given for the idea that aesthetic objects not only have something to *say* to us, but *demand* that we listen to them. But tracing that genealogy would require a different paper. My aim here is to highlight a phenomenon—the widespread sense that certain aesthetic objects require our attention—and to ask whether and how it could be genuinely normative.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2002 [1913]), 148.

Marcel's language makes clear that this is a distinctively aesthetic encounter: he has a habit of observing the hawthorns "as you do in front of those masterpieces [of painting]," and the flowers fill him with "the joy we feel when we see a work by our favorite painter."<sup>3</sup> The use of the second-person and first-person plural pronouns suggests that Marcel expects his readers to have shared experiences like this. These heights of aesthetic euphoria lead him to undertake an extraordinary promise, apparently *to* the hawthorns, to return and continue to attend to them. In making that promise, he takes himself to have incurred an aesthetic obligation. He senses that the flowers have a kind of *claim* on him, however obscure, and he commits himself to responding to that claim.

My second example comes from the beginning of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael, the novel's narrator, has come to the Spouter Inn, where he encounters a very large oil painting:

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant.<sup>4</sup>

Here the aesthetic object in question is an artifact, not a natural object, and here as in the first example there is a promise, this time not a promise made to the painting but rather 'an oath with yourself'. As with Proust, the use of the second-person suggests that Melville, or at least Ishmael, takes the phenomenon in question to be available to others as well.

My third example comes from Susan Froemke's recent documentary *The Opera House* (2017). Alfred Hubay, a former box office manager for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, recounts the first time he ever heard opera: the "Liebestod" from

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993 [1851]), 11.

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, played during the final scene of Frank Borzage's 1932 film *A Farewell to Arms*. Hubay "couldn't get the music out of [his] head" but initially had no idea what he had heard, until someone identified the piece for him, prompting this response:

I said, I've got to hear *Tristan*. Now I lived on 72nd Street and York Avenue, then. That's where I grew up. But I didn't even know where the Metropolitan Opera House was. I lived a different...a different lifestyle completely.<sup>5</sup>

Hubay succinctly captures the sense of requirement he felt after hearing the music and learning what it was: "I've got to hear *Tristan*." He goes on to describe the lengths he went to in seeking out the opera, including applying for a job as an usher and, eventually, devoting his entire career to the opera house, this "different lifestyle" sparked by responding to the initial demand he felt in the music.

In order to make sense of these examples, I introduce some terminology. I propose to understand obligation as, in the first instance, a three-place relation between an obligor (*A*), an obligee (*B*), and the content of the obligation (*C*), of the form "*B* owes it to *A* to *C*." Obligations of this form are sometimes called *bipolar* obligation, as distinguished from *monadic* obligation, which is a two-place relation of the form "*B* is obliged to *C*." Monadic obligations are not owed to anyone in particular, whereas bipolar obligations are; they are directed toward a particular obligor. My reason for taking bipolar obligation as my model of obligation is expository: I find it easier to understand an obligation that is owed to a particular obligor. This is because of the *reactive* dimension of obligation: when one fails in one's obligation, one is susceptible to reactive attitudes of blame.<sup>6</sup> And this reactive dimension is most comprehensible when there is a particular obligor who has the standing to blame. These remarks should not be thought to express skepticism about monadic obligation, however, but simply as a gesture in the direction of an order of explanation claim. With that caveat in mind, I can explain the content, form, and satisfaction conditions of a specifically aesthetic obligation.

---

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Susan Froemke for graciously providing me with interview transcripts from the film.

<sup>6</sup> Here I follow David Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapter 3. I am grateful to Errol Lord for urging me to clarify this.

First, what is called for is some kind of response. In these cases, the content of the obligation—what is demanded—is, at minimum, attention to an aesthetic object. Attention is multifaceted and requires various preparatory actions. Marcel promises to go *see* the hawthorns, presumably in order to spend time appreciating their aesthetic qualities. Because of his impoverished background, Hubay has to apply for a job in order to fulfill his experienced requirement, but the most basic demand is that he *hear* the opera, again in order to appreciate it further. Ishmael, on the other hand, conceives the aim of attention in terms of interpretation: he wants to find out what the painting means. In many, perhaps all, cases, the content of the obligation will go beyond attention to something more involved. But attention picks out the most basic content.

The idea that aesthetic objects can be the occasion for a demand of this sort has deep roots in the history of aesthetics, which Kant is in touch with when he writes: “To say, This flower is beautiful, is tantamount to a mere repetition of the flower’s own claim to everyone’s liking.”<sup>7</sup> For Kant, the beauty of a flower generates a claim, an *Anspruch*, to respond to it, in a way that ordinary empirical properties such as color and shape do not.<sup>8</sup> The content of the Kantian judgment of beauty differs from aesthetic obligations in my sense, however, in at least two respects. First, it goes beyond mere attention, all the way to a positive evaluative appraisal that repeats the object’s claim to ‘everyone’s liking’. But my examples concern something weaker, something that need not entail an overall positive judgment, let alone a demand for universal agreement. The Melville painting, for instance, is also described as “thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced.”<sup>9</sup> Its impersonal aesthetic value would, I suppose, be much less than that of the average museum-displayed painting. Second, and relatedly, the objects that occasion aesthetic obligations need not be beautiful. The Melville painting has “sublimity” but not beauty, and though Hubay’s attention is first captured by Wagner, there’s no suggestion that he

---

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), §32, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Moran, “Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012), 298–329 at 304–6.

<sup>9</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 10.

pursues the opera because he believes it to be the aesthetically best sort. The range of aesthetic objects that could occasion demands for attention is in principle unrestricted.<sup>10</sup>

There are at least two other classes of ‘aesthetic’ obligation discussed in the literature that need to be distinguished from obligations of attention to aesthetic objects, namely the rights of artworks and the rights of artists. There has been some debate as to whether artworks have interests that give rise to obligations, and as to the nature of the public’s obligations to artists, but whatever the outcome of such debates, these would be obligations to *preserve* artworks or to *protect* artists’ creativity, not obligations of attention to the aesthetic as such.<sup>11</sup> Assimilating aesthetic obligations in my sense to the rights of artists is clearly a non-starter, given that many of these obligations do not concern objects that were created by artists, and assimilating them to the rights of artworks is similarly infeasible. Even if we extended artwork rights to landscapes, some of the items that give rise to aesthetic obligations are transient, such as the hawthorn flowers, and do not require preservation in the same way that valuable artworks do. In the remainder of this paper, then, I will use the term ‘aesthetic obligations’ to refer to obligations of attention to the aesthetic.<sup>12</sup>

Second, these obligations are non-universal and conditional in form. They can be expressed most simply by statements such as ‘I have to visit the Matisse exhibit’, ‘I must see the new Malick film’, or ‘I’ve got to hear *Tristan*’. Aesthetic obligations are non-universal because it is not the case that everyone must attend to the same aesthetic objects. Later in Proust’s novel, the narrator is riding in a carriage with friends when they pass an intriguing cluster of three trees that he desires to investigate further: “How I

---

<sup>10</sup> I develop this point at the end of §3 below.

<sup>11</sup> For an argument in favor of artwork rights, see Alan Tormey, “Aesthetic Rights,” *JAAC* 32 (1973), 163–70. For an argument against, see David A. Goldblatt, “Do Works of Art Have Rights?” *JAAC* 35 (1976), 69–77. For another argument against, and a discussion of artists’ rights more generally, see Francis Sparshott, “Why Artworks Have No Right to Have Rights,” *JAAC* 42 (1983), 5–15.

<sup>12</sup> To my knowledge, no one else has used the term in precisely the way I do. The closest is perhaps Hilde Hein, “Aesthetic Prescriptions,” *JAAC* 26 (1967), 209–17, but she focuses on obligations to *like* aesthetic objects, which are, as for Kant, stronger (and hence more difficult to defend) than obligations to *attend* to aesthetic objects. For further criticism of Hein, see Anita Silvers, “Aesthetic ‘Akrasia’: On Disliking Good Art,” *JAAC* 31 (1972), 227–34.

wished I could leave the others behind . . . I even had the feeling that I *ought* to do so now.”<sup>13</sup> But his friends do not take themselves to have such a reason. And aesthetic obligations are conditional on the obligee’s having a particular sensibility. ‘Sensibility’ is a placeholder word for the whole complex of evaluative attitudes that characterize a person’s ‘aesthetic set’.<sup>14</sup> It denotes the black box that, in response to aesthetic phenomena, spits out attractions, aversions, feelings, and judgments. We can have obligations only if our sensibilities make us suitably backgrounded; it is difficult to understand how I could have an aesthetic obligation to attend to some object that I have no capacity to appreciate. This last claim admits of weaker and stronger readings: I might have no obligation to attend to an object that I *currently* have no capacity to appreciate, or that I could *ever* have a capacity to appreciate. Whichever reading is preferable, aesthetic obligations cannot be brutally external. Yet because they are genuine obligations, the demand of an aesthetic object must be independent of our *immediate* likes and dislikes.<sup>15</sup> Although at times Marcel prefers listening to silly talk in Paris, he can nonetheless recognize the normative pull of his obligation to the hawthorns.

Third, aesthetic obligations have satisfaction conditions. We can fail to live up to them, as when Marcel does not in fact stop to study the three trees: “I was as sad as though I had just lost a friend or felt something die in myself, as though I had broken a promise to a dead man or failed to recognize a god.”<sup>16</sup> There is a question, which I address shortly, as to who is being let down by this flouted obligation, but in any case it should be clear that we are capable of failures as well as triumphs of aesthetic responsiveness. Importantly, the locus of my disappointment can be in *myself*, rather than in the object. There is a phenomenological difference between feeling that my attention is not equal to an aesthetic object and feeling that the object itself is not worth my attention,

---

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 297. Emphasis original.

<sup>14</sup> Compare here the notion of a ‘motivational set’, in Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101–13.

<sup>15</sup> Moran, “Kant,” 322.

<sup>16</sup> Proust, *In the Shadow*, 299.

just as there is a phenomenological difference between feeling satisfied in my attention and feeling that I was distracted.

Some may be skeptical of the existence of aesthetic obligations from the outset. While everyone in these debates agrees that there are aesthetic *reasons*—that aesthetic objects can give rise to reasons for certain actions and attitudes—obligation has a distinct normative status, and it would be easy to adduce various disanalogies between the aesthetic domain and some paradigmatic domain of obligation, such as the legal or the moral. For instance, to pick a few that have been proposed, aesthetic problems do not seem pressing or urgent in the way that moral problems do, and aesthetic choices do not appear to require justification in the way that moral choices do.<sup>17</sup> But it is unclear how decisive this strategy would be for ruling out the possibility of aesthetic obligation, since one could always respond that whichever properties of other domains render those domains suitable to house obligations, those properties are not essential properties of obligation *per se*; at the limit, one could argue that aesthetic obligations are *sui generis*. Furthermore, even if, as I will argue, the authority of aesthetic obligations does not ultimately derive from aesthetic objects, that fact alone could not establish that there is no interesting category of aesthetic obligations that could explain the phenomenon with which I began. As Andrew McGonigal notes, “it isn’t helpful to type duties solely in terms of their ultimate source of rational authority or binding force.”<sup>18</sup> To borrow McGonigal’s example, the Kantian proposal that the authority of duties of citizenship is ultimately derived from the value of individual rational agency does not entail that there is no interesting explanatory category of political duty. Similarly, the rights of artworks and the rights of artists are plausibly grounded in the claims and interests of others and thus, ultimately, moral, but this does not mean they are not aesthetic in their content. Aesthetic

---

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Stuart Hampshire, “Logic and Appreciation,” in *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. William Elton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 161–9, and, for helpful discussion, Marcia Mulder Eaton, “Aesthetic Obligations,” *JAAC* 66 (2008), 1–9. Although I do not believe that either of these disanalogies is ultimately convincing, this is not the place to argue that question.

<sup>18</sup> “Aesthetic Reasons,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing me to this paper and for encouraging me to discuss it in this context.

obligations in *my* sense, however, are not owed to other persons. So what could ultimately ground them?

## §2 *Grounding Obligations*

In a recent paper, Jay Wallace describes three general strategies for grounding obligations, that is, three explanations for why a normative consideration has the kind of preemptory or decisive force characteristic of an obligation.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the reactive dimension of obligation discussed above, Wallace characterizes obligation in terms of its semantic and deliberative dimensions. Semantically, obligations are signaled by expressions about what an agent *must* do, or *has* to do, rather than what she merely *should* do or *has a reason* to do. These deontic expressions in turn capture the deliberative force of obligations, which is, as Wallace puts it, ‘presumptively decisive’. The normative considerations that have obligatory force are not simply weighed or balanced alongside other, non-obligatory considerations. Instead, they block the force of other kinds of considerations. For example, if I must go to your piano recital, because I promised you that I would, then the fact that I hate music, which would normally count as a reason not to attend a piano recital, has no normative force for me; the obligatory force of my promise excludes it as a reason.

With these three features of obligation—the reactive, semantic, and deliberative—in view, the question now is what could make an aesthetic consideration *exclusionary* in a deliberative context, trumping or overriding the force of other considerations. Assume that Wallace’s three-part taxonomy of grounding strategies is exhaustive.<sup>20</sup> I will argue that an aesthetic consideration can ground obligation, when it does, neither in virtue of its special weight, nor in virtue of the normative relation that we bear to an aesthetic

---

<sup>19</sup> “Duties of Love,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 86 (2012), 175–98.

<sup>20</sup> This assumption limits the scope of my argument, since an argument by elimination is successful only when the eliminated possibilities are exhaustive. If there are other ways of grounding obligations, then my argument is silent about those.

object as such, but in virtue of the connection that the aesthetic consideration has to our practical identity.

### 2.1 *The Special Weight Approach*

On the special weight approach, the only fundamental normative considerations are reasons for action of various strengths. Obligations are explained reductively, in terms of the special weight that some of those reasons have: after attaining a certain threshold, reasons are sufficiently weighty to be treated as having obligatory force. As Judith Jarvis Thomson, one of the major proponents of this approach, puts it, the judgments that ‘A should V’ and ‘A must V, like it or not’ “differ only in the gravity of the defect that is in the offing if A fails to V.”<sup>21</sup> On this view, obligations differ only in degree, not in kind, from other normative considerations.

Although this approach might work for grounding other classes of obligation, there are three reasons to believe it will fail here. First, in many cases of aesthetic obligation, other, non-aesthetic considerations tend to be weightier. In order to have the force of an obligation on the special weight approach, aesthetic considerations would have to be “weighty across a wide range of deliberative contexts” and “nearly always dominate the considerations on the other side with which they might compete,” as Wallace puts it.<sup>22</sup> But aesthetic considerations do not nearly always dominate. Marcel has weightier reason, all things considered, to avoid inconveniencing his friends than to stop the carriage and go see the three trees. The gravity of the defect would be greater if he disrupted the whole day than if he failed to attend to the beautiful landscape. And in general, moral considerations will often be weightier, across a wide range of deliberative contexts, than aesthetic considerations. Yet, by hypothesis, we still want to say that the narrator has an aesthetic obligation. Rather than grounding that obligation merely in the weight of his reasons, what we want is a normative relation that will bind him even when there are reasons of other kinds, even weightier reasons of other kinds, to the contrary.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Normativity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 229.

<sup>22</sup> “Duties of Love,” 193.

Even if one disagreed with the first-order reasons claims here, and maintained that Marcel does have most overall reason to stop the carriage, there are two other objections to the special weight approach. One is that it rules out, *a priori*, the possibility of conflicts of obligation. Suppose, in contrast to the previous objection, that the weight of Marcel's aesthetic obligation to attend to the three trees is equivalent to the weight of his obligation to his friends not to disrupt their outing. If this is so, then he stands under two distinct obligations that pull in different directions. But since obligations, on the special weight approach, are by definition grounded in considerations that dominate other competing reasons, then there cannot be conflicts, since in cases of conflicting obligations, by definition neither consideration dominates.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the special weight approach leaves unexplained *why* aesthetic considerations have decisive force when they do. Thomson's view explains the force of obligation in terms of defect and success *qua* human being, which emphasizes our shared obligations and thereby makes moral obligations paramount. But my aesthetic obligations are individual and not tied to a standard of success for human beings generically, or for any kind of general sortal under which an individual falls. So the special weight approach to aesthetic obligations would need to be supplemented with a further normative explanation for why failure is so grave. The identity approach, as I will argue, can readily provide such an explanation.

## 2.2 *The Relational Approach*

On the relational approach, what gives normative considerations the status of obligations is their basis in the normative relations we bear to other persons. Some considerations, such as those that govern interpersonal promise-keeping, are relational, such that the reasons that we have to  $\varphi$  also give another person a claim against us that we  $\varphi$  and a basis for complaint if we fail to  $\varphi$ . And this constitutive connection to the claims of another person is what grounds the preemptory force of an obligation, which is

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

different in kind, and not just degree, from other normative considerations.<sup>24</sup> Even if other reasons are normally weightier, as in the piano recital example, making a promise excludes or overrides their usual force.

Again, this approach might work for grounding other obligations, but not aesthetic obligations. For one thing, the relational approach construes all obligations as bipolar obligations, and in particular as bipolar obligations that relate persons. But aesthetic obligations do not inherently alter our normative relations to other persons: Marcel, Ishmael, and Hubay's various obligations essentially alter only their sense of themselves, although there might be downstream consequences of assuming these obligations that alter their relations to others. More importantly, there are serious difficulties with construing aesthetic objects as obligors, since it is difficult to understand how an entity that is not a person could stand in the right kind of relation to an obligee. As Michael Thompson puts it, bipolar obligation requires that we be able to *wrong* somebody, not just that she is the site of *wrongdoing*, and so bipolar obligation can take place only when it relates a nexus of persons.<sup>25</sup> So we should not be misled by the fact that it is some aesthetic feature of *the object* that elicits an aesthetic obligation into thinking that the obligation is owed *to* that object. When I promise to feed your dog when you are on vacation, my obligation is not owed *to* the dog but to you, *with respect to* the dog. This suggests that when, for example, Marcel makes his promise to the hawthorns, it must be understood as a promise *to* someone else *with respect to* the hawthorns. And the most natural candidate for the obligor, the one to whom he makes the promise, is himself.

### 2.3 *The Identity Approach*

On the identity approach, a normative consideration can attain the status of an obligation when that consideration has a distinctive connection to a person's practical

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>25</sup> "What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice," in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 333–84.

identity, i.e., her sense of what is most important to her in life or what makes her the person she is. Some actions become obligatory when carrying them out is required in order to avoid a threat to the integrity of one's self-conception, that is, where failing to act would in part destroy the self that one takes oneself to be.<sup>26</sup> The *source* of obligations is thus the authority not of weighty reasons as such, or of the claims of others, but of one's practical identity.

Applying this approach here, the considerations that have the decisive force of obligations—the *focus* of aesthetic obligations—would not be features of aesthetic objects by themselves, or features of persons as such, but the connections that features of aesthetic objects bear to the practical identities of persons. We could describe the relevant consideration, in the case of Marcel's obligation, as the-importance-for-his-practical-identity-of-some-aesthetic-feature-of-the-hawthorns, where every component of that consideration contributes to its functioning, as a whole, as the focus of his aesthetic obligation. Marcel may not yet know precisely which features of the hawthorns give them their importance-for-him, but in finding out he will discover more about what he is responding to.

This is the most promising approach for grounding aesthetic obligations. It accounts for the content of the obligation in a relatively unmysterious way: I demand of myself that I respond in a certain way with respect to an aesthetic object.<sup>27</sup> It accounts for the form of the obligation, explaining why it is non-universal and conditional. And it accounts for the satisfaction condition, since I let myself down when I violate an aesthetic obligation. Our practical identities are not *solely* aesthetic, but they are *importantly* aesthetic, because our aesthetic sensibility is an important mode of self-individuation.

---

<sup>26</sup> For two very different ways to develop this approach, see Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Harry Frankfurt, "On Caring," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155–80.

<sup>27</sup> I say 'relatively' in recognition that some find the notion of an obligation to oneself mysterious. Although the next section will offer considerations in support of the coherence of self-promises, I hope everyone would agree with the comparative claim that obligations to oneself are less mysterious than obligations owed directly to aesthetic objects.

Wallace argues, however, that the identity approach cannot make sense of the possibility of flouted duty, in which I recognize something as an obligation but fail to live up to it: “If I do what I recognize will lead to the dissolution of a part of my identity, then the thing in me that is threatened cannot have the significance for my self-conception that it would have to have to ground an obligation.”<sup>28</sup> But the implication does not follow here. When I fail to live up to an obligation, some part of my identity *is* destroyed. Nobody is better than Proust at describing the kind of existential loss we can experience when this happens. When his narrator fails to stop at the three trees, after all, he says, “I was as sad as though I had just lost a friend or felt something die in myself.”<sup>29</sup> In the remainder of this paper, I elaborate on this response to Wallace by introducing the notion of a self-promise.

### *§3 Self-Promises*

As I understand it, the challenge that Wallace poses to attempts to ground obligation in practical identity is that in order to do the normative work required, one’s practical identity would have to be both sufficiently stable and sufficiently ideal. But the possibility of flouted duty suggests that practical identities cannot meet both desiderata at once. If I acknowledge but then choose not to live up to an obligation grounded in my practical identity, then either that identity was not as stable as I thought, because I could so easily do something inconsistent with it and continue to persist, or it was not as ideal as I thought, because I did not in fact accept it as an ideal or standard for me at all. This stands as a general challenge to any attempt to erect one’s practical identity into a stable normative standard.

The force of this objection becomes stronger when we shift it into the register of self-promising. Self-promises are one salient mode of constructing one’s practical identity, both because they purport to bind one’s identity over time, thus ensuring a measure of stability, and because they purport to serve as a genuine normative standard, thus

---

<sup>28</sup> “Duties of Love,” 195.

<sup>29</sup> *In the Shadow*, 299.

ensuring that they are sufficiently ideal. And my examples were chosen in part because they emphasize the promissory character of the obligations they describe. But just as flouted duty—acknowledging but failing to live up to an obligation—can seem conceptually incoherent on the practical identity approach, so can self-promises seem conceptually incoherent, due to an objection that goes back at least as far as Hobbes’ *Leviathan*: if I can release myself from a self-promise at will, then I was never really bound. This objection is analogous to Wallace’s: if I can fail to live up to an obligation that is grounded in my own practical identity, then I was never really bound. But since self-promises are a mode of constructing practical identity, then if I can show that the objection fails in the case of self-promises, I can respond at least in part to Wallace’s objection to the normativity of practical identity in general.

In showing that the objection fails, I draw on recent work by Connie Rosati, who offers a two-stage argument for the coherence of self-promises.<sup>30</sup> The first stage consists in rebutting the standard argument for the claim that self-promises are conceptually incoherent, which goes like this: (1) In an ordinary two-party other-promise, the promisee can release the promisor at will. (2) In a self-promise, the promisee and the promisor are identical. (3) Therefore, the promisor in a self-promise can release herself at will.<sup>31</sup> Rosati’s strategy is to challenge the first premise. Even in the apparently unproblematic category of other-promises, there are instances in which the promisee cannot release the promisor from her promise ‘at will’. These will be instances in which the promisor is obliged to do something *anyway*, even in the absence of a promise. For example, you cannot legitimately release me from my promise not to murder you, since I would have an

---

<sup>30</sup> Connie Rosati, “The Importance of Self-Promises,” in *Promises and Agreements: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hanoch Sheinman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124–55. I am grateful to Anthony Cross for pointing me to this paper. In his own recent work on this topic (“Obligations to Artworks as Duties of Love,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (2017), 85–101), Cross also uses Rosati’s argument to defend his claim that aesthetic obligations are duties of love. But our views diverge in at least two major ways. First, Cross holds that we have obligations to artworks themselves, which I distinguished from my own approach in §1 above. Second, I do not think *love* is the right analysis: no matter how we might fill out an account of love, one need not love an aesthetic object in order to make a self-promise concerning it.

<sup>31</sup> Rosati, “Self-Promises,” 131.

obligation not to murder you anyway. But no one takes this fact—the fact I cannot be released from a promise to you ‘at will’—to constitute a challenge to the coherence of other-promising. My promise is no less genuinely a *promise* if its content is something that I am already obliged to do. If my partner and I have been faithful to one another for years and years, and then decide to get married, our marriage promises are not rendered incoherent or impotent just because we already take ourselves to be under the same obligations to each other that we had before we were married. Our promises have to take their place in the complex web of obligations and reasons that exist for all of us already.

The second stage of Rosati’s argument starts from the observation that the more serious objection to the coherence of self-promises must therefore lie elsewhere, and not in considerations about being released at will from promises. Rosati takes the more serious challenge to be that in the case of self-promises, it seems that we cannot distinguish between *breaching* a self-promise (flouting it, failing to live up to it) and *self-release* from the promise. This is also, I believe, the best way to put Wallace’s challenge: how can we distinguish between actually *flouting* obligations that are grounded in our practical identity and simply *deliberately changing* that practical identity? If we cannot make sense of this distinction, then self-promises cannot have genuine normative force. But Rosati argues that there is indeed such a distinction:

From an agent’s perspective there is all the difference in the world between changing her mind and acting against her own reflective judgment. Indeed, she may well recognize *at the moment of action* that she is acting against a considered decision, or compromising her values, or behaving self-destructively. In these cases, she may well think, looking forward, ‘I’m going to regret this in the morning,’ or she may acknowledge looking back that she has let herself down.<sup>32</sup>

This recognition of future regret is just the phenomenon that Proust picks out: when Marcel acts against what he takes to be his obligation to attend to the three trees, he says

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

that he “felt something die” in himself, as though he had “broken a promise to a dead man.” When Marcel flouts his obligation, he has broken a self-promise to a version of himself that has now been destroyed. It is precisely not the case that he changes his mind about what he ought to do; rather, he really does let himself down. There is admittedly a further question as to exactly what constitutes a genuine change of mind in this context, but I am fairly confident that *some* kind of distinction between changing one’s mind and failing to act as one promised can be made philosophically respectable.

Having followed Rosati in arguing for the coherence of self-promises, I now address four further questions about my positive account. (1) Could there be aesthetic obligations that do not arise through self-promising? (2) Are these obligations ultimately aesthetic or moral? (3) What is the purpose of aesthetic self-promising? (4) Is it in virtue of aesthetic value that we incur aesthetic obligations?

The first question is whether there are aesthetic obligations, in my sense, that do not arise through self-promises. I began with the *experience* of requirement connected with the aesthetic, the sense in which some aesthetic objects appear to have a kind of claim on our attention. But experiencing that pull does not seem to require mediation by a self-promise, let alone one as explicitly worked out as Proust and Melville describe. After all, experience is passive, but self-promising is a mental action. So how could the *sense* of requirement in our experience of the aesthetic correspond to a *genuine* normative requirement?

The short answer is that it doesn’t. The experienced demand can have, at best, the status of a veridical hallucination: although both have the same content, it is the self-promise, and not the experienced demand, that gives rise to the obligation.<sup>33</sup> Unlike persons, aesthetic objects have no capacity to normatively bind us absent our consent to be so bound. As mentioned, aesthetic objects can certainly generate *reasons*—we have reasons not to destroy certain artworks and reasons to display or interpret them in certain ways. So the sense of requirement could itself do *some* normative work; it might even

---

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful both to Chris Peacocke and to an anonymous referee for suggesting the analogy of a veridical hallucination.

generate a reason to respond further to the object in question. But I deny that merely experiencing a pull toward a certain aesthetic object is sufficient to generate an obligation; it is only when we have made something like a promise that we incur obligations, with all their reactive, semantic, and deliberative baggage.

Even so, I can agree that the overall experience feels more passive than active. Marcel and Ishmael, for instance, primarily feel drawn or pulled toward the objects in question; they are not actively consenting to respond to just *those* flowers or precisely *that* painting. But I can preserve this datum, because there is a sense of the notion of a promise in which I can incur an obligation not just without my explicit consent, but without having considered the matter much at all. Consider an analogy to our relationship obligations, and in particular to *elective* relationships such as friendship and romantic relationships. Such obligations would seem to be paradigmatically voluntary, given that the relationships in question are those that I can choose and renounce, unlike, perhaps, certain familial relationships. But even in the case of friendship, I can find myself having incurred special obligations with respect to a new friend without having performed any discrete action in which I assumed such obligations. Simply by spending time with someone, entering into conversation with them, and getting to know them generally, I may incur obligations of trust and vulnerability that I did not ever ‘choose’; in such cases, it would be the whole pattern of our interactions that gives rise to obligations. Similarly, my pattern of interaction with an aesthetic object—the nature of my attention to it, the way I find myself responding to it, including, indeed, the sense of requirement that it might induce in me—might give rise to a *commitment*, where one finds that aesthetic considerations have taken on the deliberative force characteristic of obligations.<sup>34</sup> Hubay’s example is illustrative here: while he does not make an explicit self-promise, as Marcel and Ishmael do, he does *commit* himself to seeing the opera (‘I’ve got to see *Tristan*’). And this commitment, in order to be genuinely binding, would ultimately be grounded in the

---

<sup>34</sup> For an argument that commitments just are a special case of obligation—“a commitment is just an obligation that you impose on yourself”—see Alida Liberman and Mark Schroeder, “Commitment: Worth the Weight,” in *Weighing Reasons*, eds. Errol Lord and Barry Maguire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 104–20 at 118.

importance of his practical identity. So the core form of normativity at work, whether described as a self-promise or a commitment to oneself, ultimately depends on an agent's activity, even if the experience that gives rise to it feels like a passive response.

The second question to consider is how we should categorize these obligations. Are they genuinely *aesthetic*, or are they ultimately moral? Given my emphasis on how aesthetic obligations are individualizing and even isolating, it can seem that they could hardly be moral, if the moral concerns what we owe to one another. But on a different view of the moral, derived from Kant, the primary moral imperative is self-governance, and self-regarding obligations to cultivate one's character take precedence over obligations to others. On that Kantian view, the imperative to develop one's aesthetic tastes and sensibilities is moral to whatever extent one's aesthetic tastes and sensibilities contribute to one's character.<sup>35</sup>

I do not believe that we need to answer this question, however. For one thing, as emphasized in §1, even if the normative ground of aesthetic obligations is not an aesthetic object itself, that does not entail that there is no interesting category of aesthetic obligations, which would explain the phenomenon whereby some aesthetic objects seem to demand our attention. More strongly, however, Wallace's taxonomy of strategies for grounding obligation is not domain-specific; rather, it purports to ground obligation *tout court*. So we can continue to speak of these as aesthetic obligations, because they concern aesthetic objects, without settling the question of whether the importance of one's practical identity is ultimately aesthetic, moral, or *sui generis*.<sup>36</sup>

The third question concerns the purpose or aim of aesthetic self-promising. What function does it serve, and how efficacious is it at achieving that function? A good general answer to this question would put weight on the capacity of commitments and self-

---

<sup>35</sup> For an analysis of the Kantian claim that obligations of taste are ultimately moral, see Howard Press, "Aesthetic Obligation," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), 522–30.

<sup>36</sup> This makes my account compatible with, though not committed to, the strategy proposed by McGonigal, who considers a version of the practical identity approach based on integrity, worries that it ultimately grounds aesthetic obligation in moral rather than aesthetic reasons, then responds by rejecting the very typing of reasons into aesthetic and moral. Like McGonigal, however, I believe that these issues "are complex, and demand a more thorough treatment" elsewhere ("Aesthetic Reasons," 26).

promises to help construct one's practical identity. To return to the Proustian example, the narrator's promise concerns how he will act when he is grown up, and this commitment structures his deliberations and indeed his sense of what he ought to do with his life as a whole. As Richard Moran puts it in discussing this passage: "naturally he breaks his promise to the hawthorns quite soon, and thousands of pages later he is still absorbed with paying calls in Paris and listening to silly talk. This isn't the end of the story, of course, and in his own way and in his own sweet time he remains faithful to his hawthorns, in the writing and remembering itself."<sup>37</sup> The self-promise, like all promises, brings in its train a sense of accountability. It's a strategy, one of many—others include habits, resolutions, will-power, and so forth—that help to keep us *stable* over time.<sup>38</sup> And although it is *only* a promise, after all, and hardly absolute, it is no less significant or useful for that.

Finally, the fourth question returns to the discussion of Kant in §1 above, asking whether it is in virtue of aesthetic value that we incur aesthetic obligations. Can we have aesthetic obligations even to the ugly, the kitschy, or the trivial? My answer is yes. In fact, my account entails that it is not in virtue of the impersonal aesthetic value of an item that we incur aesthetic obligations; rather, we respond to its idiosyncratic value for our personal identities. This is perhaps the most controversial feature of my account, and even previously sympathetic readers may well lodge a complaint at this point. After all, the claim might seem to cast aspersions on the domain of the aesthetic. If aesthetic objects as such cannot give rise to obligations of attention, then doesn't the aesthetic lose in significance against other domains of value? But I interpret the claim in a more positive light. For one thing, aesthetic objects as such can give rise to other kinds of obligation, such as moral obligations of preservation. I deny only that aesthetic objects as

---

<sup>37</sup> Moran, "Kant," 307. An anonymous referee has objected that a *child's* promise cannot play the kind of deliberative, binding role characteristic of an obligation. One response would point to companions in the guilt: both Moran and Nick Riggle ("On the Aesthetic Ideal," *BJA* 55 (2015), 433–47 at 439) think it can play such a role. Moran even claims that the passage "stands as a representative expression of the experience of beauty" ("Kant," 308). A less concessive response would insist that since the adult Marcel treats his youthful promise as giving rise to an obligation, it *ipso facto* does so.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rosati, "Importance," 140–5.

such can give rise to obligations of attention. This yields a democratizing result: there is no general requirement to attend to masterpieces, such as those picked out by Humean true judges. The examples from Proust and Melville, in particular, concern a broader swathe of the aesthetic than traditionally conceived: a bunch of flowers, an ordinary cluster of trees, and a defaced oil painting. *Any* aesthetic item, regardless of its impersonal aesthetic value, can potentially give rise to the kind of transformative, identity-constituting obligation described here. It is not in virtue of aesthetic value, but in virtue of the properties of the object that give it a perceived claim on one's attention, that one incurs an aesthetic obligation. As a matter of contingent fact, of course, many objects of high aesthetic value will be those that capture our attention: the archaic torso on a bust of Apollo, or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, or David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. But the range of aesthetic objects that can occasion obligations is in principle unrestricted. It is up to us as aesthetic agents to find out which objects can in fact give rise to identity-constituting aesthetic obligations.

#### *§4 Conclusion*

I have argued that obligations of attention to the aesthetic are grounded in the connections that some aesthetic considerations have to our practical identities and to which we respond in making aesthetic self-promises or commitments. It would be worthwhile to explore in future work how far this grounding strategy can extend to the other classes of 'aesthetic' obligation that I mentioned. Could obligations to preserve artworks, or even to interpret them in various ways, be analyzed as obligations to ourselves (whether as individuals or interpretive communities)? For instance, those with a particular aesthetic sensibility might be obliged to interpret a work in the way that it seems to 'call out for' or 'merit'. To conclude, however, I would simply like to suggest that the strategy urged here can also help to make sense of the aesthetic demands that others place on us. The examples I considered were all phrased first-personally. Yet other forms of demand are frequently heard: 'you must play that video game' or 'she really has to check out the ballet'. My account implies that it is a necessary, but not sufficient,

condition for these demands to count as genuine aesthetic obligations that they correspond to obligations we might possibly assume ourselves. This suggests that others are justified in demanding such responses of us only to the extent that they have knowledge of our aesthetic sensibilities.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> For discussion of these issues, I am grateful to Catherine Elgin, Max Hayward, Philip Kitcher, Dom Lopes, Errol Lord, Richard Moran, and Chris Peacocke, as well as to audiences at the American Society for Aesthetics Meeting (2016), the APA Central Division Meeting (2017), and the Aesthetic Normativity Conference (2017). Thanks also to Elisabeth Schellekens, Anna-Maria C. Bartsch, and Anthony Cross, respectively, for their very helpful comments on those occasions. I am also grateful to the editors and to the anonymous referee.