

***Art as the Expression of Emotion in the
Language of Imagination: Dickie's
Misunderstandings of Collingwood's
Aesthetics***

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It is a common statement in the most traditional views of the history of the philosophy of art to consider the nineteenth century as the moment of birth of the expression theory of art, a theory that ended pushing aside the already declining imitation theory of art. It is also usually understood that the expressionist theory defended that the essence of art was to express emotion, that the artist aim was to translate somehow emotions into artworks, and that these emotions ended in some way reaching the audience or the public of the work of art that was contemplated, listened to, or read.

This explanation of art received a further development during the first half of the twentieth century by R. G. Collingwood among others, but was soon replaced by other theories that moved in a wider scope. Nevertheless Collingwood's approach to art continues being a reference for the reflection of many contemporary philosophers, although the general sense of their approach to his philosophy of art is mainly negative: it is more worried about criticizing Collingwood's view than about understanding it.

The aim of this exposition is not to defend Collingwood's explanation of art, but to show important errors of interpretation that have become a common place in the objections that are made against his proposal. To accomplish it, I pretend to take a close look to the criticisms to his theory made by one of the most

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important exponents of the aesthetics of the analytical tradition, George Dickie. I have chosen him because he both summarizes and has contributed to extend quite well the general tone of the objections against Collingwood's account of art. These mainly focus on the understanding of art as imagination, on the definition of art as expression of emotion, and on the relation between these two approaches to art. By their analysis, I hope to give some clues to help in a better understanding of these concepts in Collingwood's philosophy of art, not only because of the historical value that this might have, but because of the light that Collingwood's approach to art can throw upon contemporary reflections on the relation between art, emotion and value.

Exposition

I am aware that this is neither the place nor the time to review Dickie's conception of art and aesthetics. Even more, in another kind of setting, I will have divided my exposition into, at least, two differentiated sections: one to expose a brief summary of Dickie's chapter on Collingwood in his *Introduction to Aesthetics. An Analytic Approach* in order to develop my objections to Dickie. But since there is no time to spare, I will try to go straight to the point.

Dickie understands Collingwood's philosophy of art as a twentieth century example of the expression theory of art that was born in the nineteenth century in close connection to the development and settlement of Romanticism.

Having all this in mind let us move on to the pages (Dickie 1997, p. 62-69) that really interest us to see Dickie's understanding or misunderstandings of Collingwood's philosophy of art. In this sense, it is possible to accept his summary of *The Principles of Art* as mainly right, so we can skip until page 64 where he begins a critical review of the theory. It is precisely on that page that he writes the first paragraph that I wish to examine:

Having analyzed amusement and magic in terms of evoked emotion, Collingwood assumes without argument that there is a necessary connection between art proper and emotion, although it is not a matter of evoking. (His assumption is perhaps explained by the fact that E. F. Carritt, a well-known expressionist, was Collingwood's tutor at Oxford. Collingwood may, for all his subtlety, be perpetuating without question a tradition he learned at school. Collingwood's theory is also strongly influenced by the Italian philosopher Croce.) The connection between art and emotion seems so obvious to Collingwood that he simply asserts it to be the case. (Dickie 1997, p. 64)

I hope the extension of the paragraph has allowed you to understand the tone of the accusations Dickie is throwing against Collingwood: Collingwood's aesthetics is biased by the assumption of the connection between art and emotion, a connection irrationally adopted by him that could even be traced back to his studies in Oxford and to E. F. Carrit.

In this sense, the first of the statements is true if we do not take into account the development of Collingwood's philosophy of art and we center our interpretation of his aesthetics exclusively on *The Principles of Art* (1938). But, this means completely forgetting about a series of facts that I wish to recall now, facts of which either Dickie did not know about or did not take into account. The first of them is obvious to any of the scholars of Collingwood's aesthetics: his theoretical interest on art begins as soon as 1916, in the first book published by him: *Religion and Philosophy* (Collingwood 1916), although it is true that this book is mainly concerned with the analysis of the relation between philosophy and religion. But if we take into consideration only Collingwood's production related to aesthetics, in 1919 he will pay tribute to Ruskin in the first centenary of his birth. It is in that conference, and speaking about Ruskin's conception of art that Collingwood states the following:

The soil in which art grows is not art but life. Art is expression, and it cannot arise until men have something to express. When you feel so strongly about something - the joys and sorrows of your domestic or national life: the things you see round you: your religious beliefs, and so on - that you must at all costs express your feelings, then art is born. And so you cannot encourage art by teaching people the manual knack of drawing, and hoping that the feeling will come of itself. If you could only teach people to feel, they would teach themselves to draw, fast enough. The problem is not, in Ruskin's own words, how to give gentlemen and artist's education; it is how to give artists a gentleman's education. (Donagan 1966, p. 33)

We have here all the elements that Dickie had previously talked about: art, expression, feeling or emotion. But, from the perspective of Collingwood's published works, the connection of these elements is not done through Carritt but through Ruskin – to which Collingwood's father devoted more than one book. It is true that E. F. Carritt was Collingwood's tutor at Oxford, and that in his *Theory of Beauty*, published in 1914, he defends the expression theory of art, but I am rather inclined to think that this was something that was “in the air” when Collingwood studied at Oxford, and that he was used to understand art in such a key, so Carritt's teachings did not provoke any dissonances in his mind. Nevertheless, the question is not so simple as that for, although in 1924, in *Speculum Mentis* he still speaks of art as having a contradictory essence (Collingwood 1924, p. 91) – being imagination and expression -, one year later, in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*, art will only be defined as imagination, and there is an interesting path from that book until his *Principles*, where Collingwood will completely recover the definition of art in terms of expression and imagination.

With all this, I do not pretend to close in a few lines the possible historical debate around the origin of Collingwood's theory in aesthetics, but I do want to show that the question is much more complicated than a simple influence received while studying at Oxford.

But let us continue with the section Dickie consecrates to Collingwood. Beginning in page 66, he is going to develop a series of objections against Collingwood's expression theory. The first of them states the following:

And there is a further question: how can someone other than the artist himself know that his work expresses emotion? Collingwood's answer is that "we know that he [the artist] is expressing his emotions by the fact that he is enabling us to express ours." This answer suffices for some cases, but what of the cases in which, say, a poet has in fact expressed his or her emotion, but the reader for some reason is unable to realize this fact? In such cases, the reader will not be able to tell whether the work is craft or art. Collingwood's reading of Shakespeare may be a case in point. Perhaps Shakespeare's words do not "work" for Collingwood and he has therefore concluded that they must have been designed to evoke emotion and are craft. This point brings out that Collingwood criterion of art proper is difficult to apply. (Dickie 1997, p. 66)

I believe Dickie has, once again, simplified the argument in this point. Collingwood's allusion to us, in the citation, is referring to the audience of the artist which must be inserted in what might be best described as a community. And who belongs to that community? One can answer easily saying that anyone that reads the book, listens to a concert, or looks at a painting. But, in Collingwood's aesthetics, both concepts - community and audience - play such an important role that there are many shades of meaning that need to be taken into account to understand him correctly. In this sense, Collingwood speaks of three components of the community of an artist besides the artist himself: other artists, the performers and the audience. He also describes the relation between all of them as one of collaboration and criticizes the consideration of the work of art as "self-expression" of the sole artist (Collingwood 1938, pp. 318-324). But this means that the judgment on whether an artwork has expressed emotions or not is not a prerogative of the artist alone, but a community question: the artist expresses not his emotions but his community's in as much as he feels them. The horizon of all this thesis is also clear in *The Principles*, although Dickie has seemingly not notice it: it is a radical opposition to individualism in art:

The understanding of the audience's function as collaborator is a matter of importance for the future both of aesthetic theory and of art itself. The obstacle to understanding it is a traditional individualistic psychology through which, as through distorting glasses, we are in the habit of looking at artistic work. (Collingwood 1938, pp. 315-316)

This way, if the reader is not able to realize the fact that a given poet has express his emotion, this is not an objection against Collingwood's definition of art proper: it is an example of readers who do not belong to the poet's community in question. In this sense, the fact that many people nowadays – beginning by many of my own High School students – do not understand contemporary art, does not prove that art does not express emotions anymore, but that they are out of the community where those artists belong to.

The next objection against Collingwood's aesthetics I want to call your attention to is going to bring us very close to the relation between imagination and expression we have already talked about, and to a common feeling many have about Collingwood's aesthetics. The objection could be summarized in the following way: Collingwood not only claims that art is expression but that it is simultaneously imagination. But he confuses two senses of the word "imagine", being one of them the act of forming mental images and the other, the act of bringing something into consciousness. But even accepting that both senses are applicable to art, there is no relation between them: describing a work of art as the result of becoming aware of something does not imply necessarily that the thing so brought into consciousness is only in our head. The objection ends with the following words:

The second sense of "to imagine" appears to be identical with what Collingwood means by "to express," so that to say that works of art are expressions and imaginary in the second sense is redundant. Collingwood appears to have confused his two senses of "to imagine" and drawn the conclusion that all works of art are imaginary in the sense of being "in the head" only. Consequently, he denies that such public objects as statues, paintings, and the like are works of art. He claims that the only real works of art are the mental images formed in the spectator's mind as the result of experiencing a public object. This conclusion is especially strange for a philosopher who purports to be following ordinary language. (Dickie 1997, pp. 66-67)

To answer the first part of the objection, the accusation of a confusion between two senses of the word "imagine" will require much more space and time than the one we have left, for in this case it is backed up by one of the most eminent scholars in Collingwood's philosophy: Prof. Alan Donagan. But I do want to briefly point out some interesting issues, at least to serve as working hypothesis that could be developed some other time. The first one is Collingwood's definition of imagination. Beginning in 1924 with *Speculum Mentis*, he always understood imagination in the following way:

This non-assertive, non-logical attitude is imagination in the proper sense of that word. The word is sometimes used with the implication that the imagined object is necessarily unreal, but this implication is illegitimate; the correct implication is that in imagining an object we are indifferent to its reality or unreality. (Collingwood 1924, pp. 60-61)

This way of talking about it is going to be repeated in every work where Collingwood develops his aesthetic theory¹, and it shows that the main feature of imagination is its indifference to the reality or unreality of that which is imagined. So it is at least questionable to reduce imagination to mean some kind of mental image. But there is more. The supposed confusion between the two senses of

¹ See, for example, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* in Donagan 1966, pp. 54-55; or Collingwood 1938, p. 136: "Imagination is indifferent to the distinction between the real and the unreal."

imagination is not clear to be such a confusion. Let me introduce what I mean with the following citation from *The Principles of Art*:

Regarded as names for a certain kind or level of experience, the words consciousness and imagination are synonymous: they stand for the same thing, namely, the level of experience at which this conversion occurs. But within a single experience of this kind there is a distinction between that which effects the conversion and that which has undergone it. Consciousness is the first of these, imagination is the second. Imagination is thus the new form which feeling takes when transformed by the activity of consciousness. (Collingwood, 1938 p. 215)

That is, from certain perspective, imagination can be defined as consciousness or awareness; but, properly speaking, is the form a feeling takes when we become aware of it. The question is the following: is there any incompatibility or inconsistency between this meaning and saying that when imagining – or better – when becoming conscious of a feeling, we are indifferent to the reality or unreality of that of which we are becoming aware of? I don't think so.

But let me go another step and try to face what is probably the most common interpretation of Collingwood's position about works of art: their imaginative character, their being “only in the head”. After what we have just explained, I believe it is clear that there is nothing to object to saying that, for Collingwood, works of art are imaginative. The problem lies in the implication that, like Dickie, many people make from that to stating that, for him, works of art are “only in the head”.

But this is just the subject of my actual research project so I will not be able to offer you final conclusions. As I read and reread Collingwood's works, it is becoming problematic for me many of the common statements around his philosophy of art, and even his philosophy in general, that are usually held; especially the ones that have tagged Collingwood as a Neo-Idealist². Leaving aside this general problem, it is also true that even in *The Principles of Art* there are many passages, most of them at the end of the book, that simply do not fit together with considering works of art as “only in the head”. Let me cite only one of them, that comes just after Collingwood has said, speaking in the name of a painter that “one paints a thing in order to see it”:

What our painter is saying, then, comes to this. The painted picture is not produced by a further activity upon which he embarks, when his aesthetic activity has already arrived at completion, in order to achieve by its means a non-aesthetic end. Nor is it produced by an activity anterior to the aesthetic, as means towards the achievement of aesthetic experience. It is produced by an activity that is somehow or other bound up with the development of that experience itself. The two activities are not identical, (...) but (...) each is

² It was Aaron Ridley's book on Collingwood philosophy of art (Ridley 1998) that made me reconsider Collingwood's idealism, not so much because he thinks that he is not an idealist, but because he defends an interpretation of his aesthetics saved from what he describes as his philosophical charge, namely, his idealism.

conditional upon the other. Only a person who paints well can see well; and conversely (...) only a person who sees well can paint well. There is no question of 'externalizing' an inward experience which is complete in itself and by itself. There are two experiences, an inward or imaginative one called seeing and an outward and bodily one called painting, which in the painter's life are inseparable, and form one single indivisible experience, an experience which may be described as painting imaginatively. (Collingwood 1938, pp. 304-305)

Does this sound coherent with defending the mere existence of works of art “in our head”? Besides, and this is on of the line I have been lately following in my research on the question of the “work of art” in Collingwood, in this text, like in many others, he uses an activity-centered language: he focuses on the activities the artist does rather than on the results or products of those activities: the painter paints in order to see, imagines to become conscious of his feelings, and so on. This will mean that, from certain perspective, the product of the artist's activity, what is usually called “artwork”, is only a kind of “residue”. But since this “residue” can become the starting flame of the aesthetic activity of the reader, spectator, ... provided that he approaches this “death” object to make it alive again in his imagination, it cannot be considered as mere waste.

The next objection Dickie develops against Collingwood's theory relates to its critical side, for his aesthetics offers also criteria for distinguishing good art from bad art. The disagreement rises on the following statement that Collingwood makes in *The Principles*: “The definition of any given kind of a thing is also the definition of a good thing of that kind.” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 280) Dickie continues the objection stating that Collingwood has confused classifying a thing as a thing of a certain kind with evaluating it as a good or bad thing of its kind. The paragraph ends with these affirmations:

We do, however, frequently speak of bad works of art. Collingwood tries to account for this by saying that “A bad work of art is an activity in which the agent tries to express a given emotion, but fails.” (Collingwood op. cit., p. 282) In other words, a bad work of art is something that tried to be a work of art but failed. The most obvious difficulty is the paradox that a bad work of art turns out not to be a work of art! One would think that for something to be a bad thing of a certain type, it would have to be of that type - a bad horse would have to be a horse to begin with. Also, Collingwood evaluational scheme is so simple that it cannot account for some cases of bad art. For example, someone might write a poem that in fact expresses one's emotion without any preconceived plan of evoking emotion, and it might still be a bad poem.” (Dickie 1997, p. 67)

What Dickie questions in this case is whether Collingwood's definition of art can be taken in an evaluative sense as well. According to him, it cannot be considered that way because it would imply leaving aside our common way of speaking about good and bad art. To support his view, Dickie argues that for something to be a good or bad thing, it must be that thing in question first – for example, a horse, a goat, or whatever. It is interesting to note that Dickie's examples, here and elsewhere, are always taken from the natural world. Is this kind of conception

about definitions and evaluation criteria extensible to the cultural, social or human world? I make the question not only to show that nobody is free from certain assumptions, but because Collingwood himself makes clear his intention to center the problem of evaluation only in works of art (Collingwood 1938, p. 280) and Dickie, who once again seems to have skipped this part of the book, keeps treating the issue relating it to objects or things that are not works of art, or even to leaving organisms.

But, besides, there is much to discuss about Dickie's treatment of the criterion. Collingwood understands that bad works of art are just failed works of art. Dickie goes one step further, and understands that this means that Collingwood defends that they will not be works of art at all, because they do not express anything, they are failures of expression. But I don't believe the criterion can be pushed that far. The difference between art and not-art lies, for Collingwood, in what the supposed artist was trying to do. If he was merely trying to evoke emotion, according to a preconceived plan, then his work is not an artwork. If he was trying to express emotion, becoming aware of this emotion while expressing it in his work, the object that results will be a work of art. Now, if trying to express his emotion, he is contempt with whatever he gets, although he is conscious that he has not yet become aware of the emotion he was trying to get conscious of, then, that is bad art. What qualifies the object as art is the attempt. What qualifies it as bad art is that is a failed attempt.³

Besides, the question is not so simple as Dickie has exposed it. The work of expressing one's emotions in, say, a painting, is something that the painter does in every stroke, as Collingwood describes in *The Principles of Art*. After each of them, there is always a question: is this what I pretended? If the painter, not being satisfied with it, decides – for example, out of laziness – that it is so, and deceives itself, the result will be bad art. Once again, what makes an object a work of art is the intention of the artist, and not the result (Collingwood 1938, pp. 281-284). This is, for sure, the thesis that might be disputable from some other theory – whether the intention of the artist is to be counted as a classificatory criterion –, but it is not how Dickie has developed his objection.

With this, I have ended with the criticisms that are related to Dickie's interpretation of Collingwood's aesthetics. The chapter ends with three last objections that judge Collingwood's thesis in general. Since it is not my intention, in this exposition, to decide on the merits or demerits of the expression theory of art, I will not review them.

³ Cf. Collingwood 1938, p. 282. "A bad work of art is an activity in which the agent tries to express a given emotion, but fails. This is the difference between bad art and art falsely so called, to which reference was made on p. 277. In art falsely so called there is no failure to express, because there is no attempt at expression; there is only an attempt (whether successful or not) to do something else."

Conclusion

I hope that the final result of my exposition and criticism to Dickie's treatment of Collingwood is clear: I have tried to show how Dickie has developed a distorted interpretation of Collingwood's philosophy of art, and has constructed his objections against it based on his own misunderstandings. With this, I pretend to call everyone's attention to the extended practice of criticizing philosophers and their philosophies without a well-established knowledge of their philosophies. But, in Collingwood's case, my concern is even greater. His philosophy in general, and his aesthetics in particular, have come in for a great deal of misunderstandings based, many times, in hasty readings of his works. I only hope not to be falling in the same trap.

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