Research Reinforcement | A Peer Reviewed International Refereed Journal | ISSN 2348-3857
Vol. 9, Issue 2 | November 2021 - April 2022 | pp. 79-85

Collingwood on Art, Imagination and Expression

Dr. Vinita Nair

Department of Philosophy
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Abstract

Benedetto Croce is commonly believed to have achieved some thing like an ultimate definition and synthesis of the expressionistic art theory. A master theory of art for art's sake, a profound realization of all that might underlie and in part justify the 19th century cry that art must be pure. He may even be said to have opened aesthetic discussion in the present century. The writings of Croce have exercised considerable influence on the work of quite a few other philosophers and aestheticians, the more important of these being Bernard Bosanquet, E.F. Carritt, and C.J. Ducasse. But the most highly regarded and widely read of Croce's followers in English-speaking countries has been R.C. Collingwood. The major finding in his writing on art may be put as follows: The essential function of art is to express emotions, not to arouse or describe them. The artistic expression of emotions is also to be distinguished from merely giving vent to them. Positively, it is the clear and highly individualized projection of emotions. It is also creation. But creation is not to be taken as the manipulation of some external material in accordance with a set method or technique. Art is not the same kind of making as craft. This difference may be clearly seen by reflecting that the true locus of artistic creation is imagination, not the outer world of performance and artefacts. As conclusion it may be stated that the expression of thoughts in words or in any artistic language makes it more clear. This artistic expression which is not a preconceived striving towards clarity is known as creation or at. Art is not confined to one sense or to senses generally and that imagination plays a vital part in the making and proper enjoyment of art. The methodology adopted here is literature based, descriptive, analytical, comparative, inductive and critical method.

Keywords: *Art Proper, Craft, Make-Believe, Creative Imaginary, Total Imagining*

Introduction

What is it to express? This is, for Collingwood, the central question of aesthetics. He points out that though the view of art as expression of emotions is not a philosophical theory or definition of art, but simply the statement of a matter which is "familiar to every artist, and to everyone else who has any acquaintance with the arts",[1] what expression of emotion really is has to be carefully thought out.

a. We are likely to believe, perhaps on the analogy of expressing our predetermined ideas in writing, that a person already knows what his emotion is before expressing it. But to so believe, Collingwood says, would be untrue to fact. According to him, when a man expresses an emotion at first, he is conscious only of having an emotion, not of what the emotion is. All he is conscious of is a excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself say by speaking, with the result that the emotion expressed is an emotion of whose nature he is no

longer unconscious. His mind is somehow lightened and eased as a result of the cancellation of the sense of oppression which accompanies an emotion not yet recognized. The emotion does not disappear from the mind but now we have that sense of alleviation which comes when we are conscious of our own emotion as a specific one, instead of being conscious of it only as an un identified perturbation. That is what we refer to when we say that it "does us good" to express our emotions.[2]

b. Further, where a man's expression of his emotion by way of speech is addressed to someone-as in the case of a parent angrily scolding his erring child-the purpose, as a rule, is not to produce in the hearer the same emotion-say, of anger-which is being expressed, but only to make him understand how the man expressing himself feels. In other words, the effect of expression is the same on the two parties. Both come to understand the emotion expressed. This is what makes the expression of emotion quite different from the arousal of emotion. In the latter case, the person who seeks to excite an emotion in others-for example, the salesman who harangues on the merits of a product of his company with a view to making the listening crowd feel drawn towards it-may not himself feel any such fascination. The salesman, and his audience stand in quite different relations to the act, very much as physician and patient stand in quite different relations towards a drug administered by the one and taken by the other. A person expressing emotion, on the contrary, is treating himself and his audience in the same kind of way; he is making his emotions clear to his audience, and that is what he is doing to himself.[3]

The man who seeks to arouse a particular emotion in the audience already knows what this emotion is; he fashions his method with an eye to the evocation of this specific feeling, and so his working is a technique, the conscious adoption of some selected means with a view to produce a clearly foreseen end. On the other hand, the man who seeks to express his emotions, though he certainly makes an effort directed at the end of expression, does not aim at any specific ("foreseen and preconceived") end other than the general one of expressing his emotions. So "expression [as Collingwood regards it] is an activity of which there can be no technique."[4]

c. Expression of emotions should also be distinguished from their mere description: "Description generalizes. To describe a thing is to call it a thing of such and such a kind: to bring it under a conception, to classify it."[5] To say "I am angry" is to describe one's emotion, not to express it. It is only to mean that my present mental state is an instance of anger. It cannot be said to express my anger if it be remembered that expression is a clarification of the precise nature of what a person, a specific individual, feels in a particular situation. My anger is in fact my own, and not any one else's; and to call it anger is simply to miss its present uniqueness. This is why "a genuine poet, in his moments of genuine poetry" that is, where he seeks only to express an emotion, and so "takes. enormous pains to bring out its individual peculiarities - "never mentions by name" the emotion he is expressing.[6] Indeed, the aim of art proper is always at an individualized expression of emotion; and this is an important point of difference between art and craft, the latter always aiming at the attainment of an end "conceived in general terms", or at producing a thing - say, a table or a knife having "characteristics that could be shared by other things."[7]

The artist proper is a person who, grappling with the problem of expressing a certain emotion, says, "I want to get this clear. He does not want a thing of a certain kind, he wants a certain thing. This is why the kind of a person who takes his literature as psychology, saying "How admirably this writer depicts the feelings of women, or bus drivers" necessarily misunderstands every real work of art with which he comes into contact, and takes for good art... what is not art at all.[8]

d. Nor is artistic expression of emotion in its "proper" sense the same as betraying emotion. It would be wrong to suppose that where his work expresses fear the artist himself turns pale and stammers; for whereas "the characteristic mark of expression proper is lucidity or intelligibility",

the state of "turning pale and stammering", though it is surely a natural accompaniment of fear, does not in any way enable a man to "become conscious of the precise quality of his emotion."[9] Even an actor, if he aims at art rather than at mere amusement, does not seek to produce a preconceived emotional effect on his audience-but by means of a system of expressions only. To explore his own emotions: to discover emotions in himself of which he was unaware, and, by permitting the audience to witness the discovery enable them to make a similar discovery, about themselves. In that case it is not her ability to weep real tears that would mark out a good actress: it is her ability to make it clear to herself and her audience what the tears are about.[10]

Art as Creative, Imaginary

According to Collingwood, art is not only expression, but a kind of making. He, however, insists that it is not the making of an artifact, and that it is not a craft. Art is not made by transforming a given raw material, nor by carrying out a fixed plan, or by way of realizing the means to a preconceived end. But if it is neither a kind of technical making or fabrication nor a product of mere accident, what kind of making could it be said to be? Collingwood's answer is: the making of art is creation and he explains what he means here:

"Originally, *creare* means to generate or make offspring, for which we still use its compound "procreate".... The act of procreation is [of course] a voluntary act...; but it is not done by any specialized form of skill."[11] "It need not be done... as a means to any preconceived end... [or] according to any preconceived plan. It cannot be done... by imposing a new form on any preexisting matter. It is in this sense that we speak of creating a disturbance or a demand or a political system. The person who makes these things is [of course] acting voluntarily... responsibly; but he need not be acting in order to achieve any ulterior end, he need not be following a preconceived plan; and he is certainly not transforming anything that can be properly called a raw material. It is in the same sense that Christians asserted... that God created the world.[12]

In the same way, Collingwood adds, works of art are made "deliberately and responsibly, by people who know what they are doing, even though they do not know in advance what is going to come out of it.[13] Yet, quite unlike God's creation of the world (as conceived by Christians)-but in clear accord with the ways in which we fashion articles-artistic creation needs some prior, favourable conditions. "In order that a work of art should be created, the artist must have in him certain unexpressed emotions and the wherewithal to express them."[14] But, we must remember, these emotions are only the preconditions, not the raw material, of artistic creation. Should we find it difficult to see how creation can be done without taking recourse to transformation of some given material, Collingwood would like us to consider the case of disturbance created at a political meeting. Such disturbance is of course brought about in a determinate situation. But, it does not occur as transformation of some preexistent material, "for there is nothing out of which a disturbance can be made." Yet the parallel is by no means absolute. For whereas when we create a disturbance at a political party what is created is something real, as an occurrence in the outer world, a work of art "may only be what we call an imaginary thing." Collingwood believes that an art-work "may be completely created when it has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind."[15] So, art is not the making of an artifact, for the latter is always a real object.

But, we may wonder, is not the notation of music an actual complex of marks on real paper? It certainly is; but, Collingwood would rejoin, it is not the music itself, which still remains imaginary. The relation between notation and music, he points out, is not as direct as the relation between an engineer's plan and the bridge which it envisages. In the latter case, the plan is embodied in the bridge; it is itself a form which is only made visible by the material used. The notation, on the other hand, is not the form of the music. This form has to be reconstructed imaginatively-that is, in the mind-by the student of music, though of course on the basis of the notation.

Yet when Collingwood says that a work of art is an imaginary object, and not a real one, we should not take him to suggest that art is merely a matter of make-believe. He, in fact, takes pains to distinguish imagination from the latter:

a. What we call make-believe is always opposed to reality, and vice versa. If, when I am hungry, I imagine myself as partaking of a feast, this "bare imagination of a feast" is a make-believe situation which I create unreally. Imagination, on the other hand, is "indifferent to the distinction between the real and the unreal."[16] This may be brought out with the help of an instance. Suppose when I look at a big tree in the midst of a grassy lawn punctuated with flower beds, I also imagine grass and a small flower-bed behind the tree; and suppose, further, that only the grass is there in reality. Here, though the flower-bed alone is unreal because it is not there, the (real) grass is as much imagined as the (unreal) flower-bed. In other words, unlike make-believe, imagination is not necessarily tied down to the unreal.

b. Again, when after a spell of make-believe we reflect as to what we were doing, we generally dismiss the imagining as but a vain interest in the unreal. But this is precisely what we do not do when we reflect on the imaginative creation of a tune. At the same time we do not positively regard the imagining as our being related to the real in the same way in which we deal with things and situations:

The act of imagining is of course an act really performed; but the imagined object or situation is something which need not be real and need not be unreal, and the person imagining it neither imagines it as real or unreal, nor, when he comes to reflect on his act of imagining, thinks of it as real or unreal.[17]

c. Finally, whereas make-believe is determined by, imagination is simply indifferent to, the distinction between aversion and desire. Make-believe is imagination as working under the censorship of desire; and, what is more, the desire here is "not the desire to [merely] imagine, nor even the desire to realize an imagined situation, but the desire that the situation imagined were real."[18]

We may now develop the positive aspect of Collingwood's thesis that the work of art is an imaginary object. Here what strikes us at once is his emphasis on the art-work's internality. Thus, of music considered as art, Collingwood says: The real locus of the tune is the composer's head; "the noises made by the performers, and heard by the audience, are not the music at all; they are only means by which the audience, if they listen intelligently can reconstruct for themselves the imaginary tune that existed in the composer's head.[19] It may be conceded that perhaps no one can possess himself of the music unless he does hear the noises; but, there is something else which he must do as well. This other thing is listening and [this is] rather like the thinking we have to do when we hear the noises made, for example, by a person lecturing on a scientific subject. In each case, what we get out of it is something which we have to reconstruct in our own minds, and by our own efforts; something which remains for ever inaccessible to a person who cannot or will not make efforts of the right kind, however completely he hears the sounds that fill the room in which he is sitting.[20]

Listening, we are told, is no mere source of sensual pleasure. The heard sweetness of music may, of course, give us some pleasure too; but "any concentration on the pleasantness of the noises themselves concentrates the mind on hearing, and makes it hard or impossible to listen."[21] Collingwood also expects us to see that "music does not consist only of heard noises and paintings do not consist only of seen colours."[22]

Views such as these are clearly not easy to accept. If the listener is a rasika, that is, a qualified contemplator of music, sustained attention to the soul-filling quality of a svara, say, the upper tonic sung sweetly and steadfastly, would in no way inhibit his perception of the passage that may follow, because he is aware of the raga-form to which every detail of the music has to conform. And if it be agreed that "music does not consist of heard noises", would not our grasp of the content of music be impoverished? At this point, however, Collingwood's answer would readily be that

art does not consist of a form understood as a system of relations between the various parts of the observable work; that the form-matter distinction is applicable only to craft, and that, properly understood, the work of art "is something not seen or heard, but something merely imagined."[23]

But here some other questions may be put. What exactly is this activity of imagination in which a work of art is said to consist? How does it manifest itself? Such questions would elicit the following from Collingwood:

1. Negatively, we disimagine, a great deal of what we actually see and hear. Thus, at a concert the noises made by our breathing and our shuffling neighbours, and even those that are caused by the performers themselves-such as occasional coughing in the case of our classical vocalists-are just not taken note of, unless of course they are too obtrusive to be ignored. Similarly, while "looking at a picture, we do not notice the shadows that fall on it or, unless it is excessive, the light reflected from its varnish."

2. Positively, the imagining in question consists in amending, in many little ways, variously what is in fact seen or heard. Thus "the music to which we listen is not the heard sound, but that sound as amended by the listener's imagination, and so with the other arts". Again, just as when "we listen to a speaker or singer, imagination is constantly supplying articulate sounds which actually our ears do not catch", so "in looking at a drawing in pen or pencil, we take a series of roughly parallel lines for the tint of a shadow."

Art as Total Imagining

But, we must remember, the imaginative experience which is a work of art in Collingwood's view is "total" or comprehensive. In any case, it is much more than the activity of the inward eye or the mind's eye. Consider, to begin with, the art of painting. Collingwood says:

...the spectator's experience on looking at a picture is not a specifically visual experience at all. What he experiences does not consist of [merely] what he sees. It does not even consist of this as modified, supplemented, and expurgated by the work of the visual imagination. It does not belong to sight alone, it belongs also (and on some occasions even more essentially) to *touch*.[24]

But, as is emphasized by the Cezanne-Berenson approach to painting, these tactile values are no mere aspects of things "like the texture of fur and cloth, the cool roughness of bark, the smoothness or grittiness of a stone, and other qualities which things exhibit to our sensitive fingertips"; they are not actual, but "imaginary motor sensations."[25]

Here, Collingwood tries to buttress his argument with references not only to painting, but to some other arts as well. He points out that in listening to music we not only hear sequences of audible sounds, but enjoy imaginary experiences that are visual and motor. "Seeing" a musical passage describe a graceful curve or project sheer expanse, or the shapely onrush of a rhythmic pattern which seems to carry us along with itself towards the *sama*-these are, in fact, our common experiences in listening to classical music.[26] Again, poetry has the power of bringing before us not only the sounds which constitute the audile fabric of the "poem", but other sounds, and sights, and tactile and motor experiences all of which we possess, when we listen to poetry, in imagination.[27]

Why then should we believe, as many did in the 19th century, that in looking at a picture we only see flat patterns of colour, and that one can get nothing out of the picture except what can be contained in such patterns?

Collingwood adds that in respect of a picture's creator too, as distinguished from its mere contemplator, it is wrong to suppose that he uses only his eyes, and that he uses his hands "only to record what the use of his eyes had revealed to him." Cezanne, for instance, paints "like a blind man":

"His still life studies, which enshrine the essence of his genius, are like groups of things that have been groped over with the hands; he uses colour not to reproduce what he sees in looking at them but to express almost in a kind of algebraic notation what in this groping he has felt. So with his interiors; the spectator finds himself bumping about those rooms, circumnavigating with caution those menacingly angular tables, coming up to the

persons that so massively occupy those chairs and fending himself off them with his hands. It is the same when Cezanne takes us into the open air. His landscapes have lost almost every trace of visuality. Trees never looked like that; that is how they feel to a man who encounters them with his eyes shut, blundering against them blindly. A bridge is longer a pattern of colour... it is a perplexing mixture of projections and recessions, over and round which we find ourselves feeling our way as one can imagine an infant feeling its way, when it has barely begun to crawl, among the nursery furniture."[28]

What is more, "Cezanne's shapes are never two-dimensional, and they are never merely traced on the canvas; they are solids, and we get at them through the canvas. In this new kind of painting the 'plane of the picture' disappears; it melts into nothing, and we go through it.[29]

With regard to the picture-plane, its disappearance, and the con sequent deletion of perspective as well, Collingwood would like us to note the following:

a. Vernon Blake would often tell his draughtsman that the plane of the picture was a mere superstition: "Hold your pencil vertical to the paper", he would say, "don't stroke the paper, dig into it, think of it as if it were the surface of a slab of clay in which you were going to cut a relief, and of your pencil as a knife. Then you will find that you can draw something which is not a mere pattern on paper, but a solid thing lying inside or behind the paper."[30]

b. The "disappearance" of the picture-plane is the reason why in the work of some modern artists who have learnt to accept Cezanne's principles, and to carry their consequences a stage further than he himself could, even perspective has disappeared. "The man in the street, who clings to the picture-plane as unconsciously and as convulsively as a drowning man" to a floating log of wood, may tend to believe that this has happened because these modern fellows cannot draw"; but such a belief would as absurd as the thought that "young men of the Royal Air Force career about in the sky because they can't walk."[31]

c. Perspective is the logical consequence of imagining the picture-plane. We can, of course, become aware of the picture-plane also by handling it. But in order to see a picture as a work of art one has to stand back and to look at it. And when we do that, the picture plane does not face us as something given in sensation alone; it is present to us rather as an object that we visualize by means of a tactile (or rather motor) imagination. This imagining-and along with it, the perspective-are necessary because of our relation to the picture as a bodily thing. When we look at the work aesthetically the necessity of perspective disappears.

However, sometimes there may well be good aesthetic reasons. for imagining the picture-plane, and so for perspective. Consider, for instance, the use of painting as an adjunct to architecture.

If the shape of an interior is meant to be looked at aesthetically, and if these two aesthetic experiences are meant to be fused into one [not otherwise], then, since the wall-plane is an element in the architectural design, the picture must be so painted that a spectator's imagination is drawn to wards the wall-plane, not away from it. This is why Renaissance painters, acting as interior decorators, revived and elaborated the system of perspective already used by interior decorators at Pompeii and else where in the ancient world. [But] for movable pictures, perspective is mere pedantry.[32]

To conclude, we may say that what we get out of a work of art is divisible into two parts. First, there is a specialized sensuous experience, an experience of seeing or hearing as the case may be. Second, there is also a non-specialized imaginative experience, involving not only elements homogeneous after their imaginary fashion, with those which make up the specialized sensuous experience, but others heterogeneous with them. So remote is this imaginative experience from the specialism of its sensuous basis, that we may go so far as to call it an imaginative experience of total activity.[33]

But it would be wrong to suppose that the second element is merely imposed by us on the first, and that the latter (or the first) alone is given. For, when the artist painted the picture, "he was in possession of an experience quite other than that of only seeing the colours he was putting on the canvas; an imaginary experience of total activity,

more or less like that which we construct for ourselves when we look at the picture."[34] "But if he paints his picture in such a way that when we look at it using our imagination, find ourselves enjoying an imaginary experience of total activity like that which he enjoyed when painting it, there is not much sense in saying that we bring this experience with us to the picture and do not find it there. The artist, if we told him that, would laugh at us and assure us that what we believed ourselves to have read into the picture was just what he put there."[35] "A work of art is [indeed] a total activity which the person enjoying it apprehends, or is conscious of, by the use of his imagination."[36]

Conclusion

The commendable features of Collingwood's aesthetic theory are obvious. It is probably as much true of our emotions as of our thoughts that their expression in words makes us more clearly aware of what they really are. Nor can any one disagree with the views that artistic creation does not show that calculated striving after clearly preconceived ends which distinguishes craft; from art that art is never only or essentially a manipulation of some given material; that neither the creation nor the contemplation of art is confined to any one sense or to senses generally; and that imagination plays a vital part in the making and proper enjoyment of art. It is also commonly admitted that where it is present in art, expression of emotions is not the same as merely giving vent to them; and that in art contemplation the working of imagination is both positive and negative. It is even easy to see why the two sides must concur not merely in the general sense that to attend is necessarily to focus at some content and to leave out, more or less effortlessly, what merely environs it, but at times in the special sense that the perception of the precise character of the object may necessarily call for discriminating-and so, in a measure, intentional-avoidance of what is close to it, and is likely to be confused with it. In reading poetry, for instance, determination of the appropriate meaning of a word frequently demands, first, a careful look at its context, and then an omission of the word's other meanings which the context does not admit. Similarly, in listening to a vocal exposition of, say, raga bhoopali, and in acknowledging it as such, we incidentally, yet necessarily, distinguish it from räga deskär. The dual, negative-positive working of imagination as it serves the contemplation of art very often runs quite undividedly, as a single, though not simple, exercise of discrimination.

References

1. Collingwood's essay (175) Art as Expression in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, 4th edition, paperback, pp. 91.
2. Collingwood, R.G. (1975) *The Principles of Art*, paperback, pp. 109.
3. Ibid, pp. 91-92.
4. Ibid, pp. 92.
5. Ibid, pp. 93.
6. Ibid, pp. 92.
7. Ibid, pp. 93.
8. Ibid, pp. 94. Italics added.
9. Ibid, pp. 98.
10. Ibid, pp. 99.
11. Ibid, pp. 129.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, pp. 130.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid, pp. 136.
17. Ibid, pp. 136-37.
18. Ibid, pp. 137. Bracketed word added.
19. Ibid, pp. 139. Italics added.
20. Ibid, pp. 140-41.
21. Ibid, pp. 141. Italics added.
22. Ibid, pp. 141-42. Bracketed word added.
23. Ibid, pp. 141. Italics added.
24. Ibid, pp. 146-47. Italics added.
25. Ibid, pp. 147.
26. *Pr A*. pp. 147.
27. Ibid, pp. 144.
28. Ibid, pp. 145. Italics added.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid, pp. 145, footnote.
31. Ibid, pp. 153, footnote, 2nd para.
32. Ibid, pp. 147-48.
33. Ibid, pp. 149.
34. Ibid, pp. 150.
35. Ibid, pp. 151. Bracketed word added.