

Principles of Art

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For Collingwood there is no distinction between the true, the beautiful and the good, all of them are subsumed in truth, and as such morality as well as aesthetics have ultimately an objective nature. On morality the author does not touch, but briefly, but on art and aesthetic theory the book is devoted to, yet he never makes that claim of objectivity explicit, it is only to be inferred from the general tenor of his treatment.

The book subdivides into three parts, the first part is really a preamble in which he tries to present the problem, the second part is an involved philosophical discussion on *sensu* as opposed to imagination and the crucial role played by consciousness. In the third and final part he tries to apply the technical discussion of the previous part to try and answer the questions posed in the first.

So why is this book written? It is written in a rather passionate way as an indictment of contemporary art, seeing its degeneration as rooted in the specious ideas of the 19th century, especially the idea of *l'art pour l'art* and the exaltation of the artistic genius and his self-sufficiency. What he sets out to do is to extricate the theory of art from its false conceptions. Art is not craft, because in craft there is planning and a purpose, and in art there is no such thing, the artist never knowing in advance what he is going to express, because if he did, there would be little reason to express it. Art is not meant primarily to induce certain emotions, although art is ultimately about generating emotions, such supposed art with such explicit ambitions is not art at all, not even bad art, but should be classified as either amusement or magic. However, most of what goes as art is of either kind. The difference between amusement and magic consists in that in the former emotions are aroused to distract for the moment, to bring relief by spending themselves with no purchase on the real life of those who have enjoyed it. While in magic the emotions aroused have definite purposes, and are indeed intended to influence people's action in the real world. Why the word 'magic'? Because this is the essential meaning of the many magic practices the anthropologists find among so called primitive people, practices which should be seen not as superstitions trying to do impossible things, but as practices meant to change the hearts of other men¹ Amusement we are all very familiar with, known of course since antiquity and becoming more and more prevalent with the technological developments of its distribution. Magic, mostly in form of propaganda, was also quite known in the 30's. Thus by the criterion of Collingwood, Nazi-propaganda should not be classified as art, however artful it may be seen by many commentators, in the same way modern advertisement, however subtle and technically brilliant it may appear. Such endeavours, no matter how skilled, are means to an end, serving to manipulate an audience,

¹ Collingwood displays a commendable detachment from views on so called primitive people still prevalent in his time, never losing sight of the fact that any men are basically as foolish or intelligent as any other.

not to express specifically experienced emotions, as opposed to generating them. Art is about expressing an emotion, an emotion that is not fully developed until it has been expressed². Good art differs from bad art in so far the expression of the emotion is a true one, and a good artist differs from a bad artist in his ability to be a better judge of what is the truth of his emotions. As to truth, Collingwood makes a distinction between the mistake and the outright lie. A human being that denies the truth of his emotions commits a lie far more serious than that of mere intended duplicity, and it is here (and only here) where Collingwood touches upon the relation of morality to truth, referring to it as the corruption of consciousness. Mistakes on the other hand are legion, and the good artist continually corrects himself, while the bad artist does not have the skill to judge properly and hence being able to make the necessary corrections. Thus again an emotion is not fully formed and known until expressed, so the very act of expression is a process of giving it birth from what originally was only an embryo instigating the whole process. The exact metaphor of the embryo does not enter into the book, but I find it useful to describe the crucial features of art. Namely the urge of expression, and the fact that the emotions are in some sense not chosen but intrude themselves and the artist cannot help himself. Thus this expression of emotion is the piece of art, done without any thought of an audience, but to which an audience is invited to eavesdrop. Thus once again the expression of emotion is not served with a particular purpose, it is meant to do justice to the emotion itself, and as such it is true, and in its truth it is able to generate in an outsider (who also could be the artist himself in the future) a very similar emotion. Thus art is a means of communicating emotions, not generating them as in amusement and magic. The emotion has to be present first, to be developed in the mind of the artist, before it can be apprehended by others. While amusement and magic are clear forms of manipulation, there is nothing manipulative about art.

Now abstract and seductive as such formulations may be, they are not just figments of a philosopher's imagination, but firmly empirically based. Why do an artist paint? He or she paints in order to see better. Not seeing better in the sense of having a sharper vision, but in the sense of paying better attention. This is why Collingwood devotes an entire section of his book to delve into the relationship between mere *sensa* and their turning into imagination by the attention of consciousness. A discussion involving a brief synopsis of the views of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant on the matter. What we see, as opposed to what we perceive, is not given to us, it is created by us. And the artist gets a much fuller imaginative construction by paying closer attention. So there is no distinction in the mind of the artist between what he sees and paints and the painting itself, only by the act of painting does it become manifest to him what he has been seeing.

² Such a definition is of course very attractive and elegantly phrased, yet in its generality it may encompass startling examples. As noted above Nazi-propaganda cannot be classified as art, but what about the whole Nazi-period as such? Could political repression, war and atrocity be seen as vehicles of expression, far more brutal than the usual ones of brush and pen. And thus the 2nd world war nothing but a gigantic canvas on which a certain Herr Hitler was able to express his apocalyptic visions? Clearly not, yet the rather abstract sense in which Collingwood phrases his definition of art, it cannot properly be ruled out, although none to serious modifications (of which the author may have seen too trivial) to his original definitions would suffice to rule out the monstrous interpretations such as above.

The process of painting not being unlike a scientific investigation, involving questions and answers, thus necessarily also involving false steps and subsequent corrections. The same experience is familiar to every writer, only in the process of writing itself do the thoughts that the writing is supposed to represent fully form. As the American diplomat Kennan remarked in his autobiography that I write in order to find out what I think. Yes any person used to writing regularly on intellectual matter, observes regularly how new ideas and connections occur to him in the very process of stringing words together.

Now the previous discussion may give the impression that artistry is mainly one of 'self-expression' no matter what is expressed. This is a notion of the individualistic artist which gained ascendancy during the 19th century. Collingwood takes strong exception to this notion. Men are finite beings, not self-sufficient Gods, men exist in communities of men, their expressions must be expressions of things that exist outside the narrow confines of an individual mind. They must express things which are communicable, the emotions although privately conceived must have a communal existence³. Thus the author stresses the role of the audience, not just as a hapless eavesdropper, but as an active collaborator in the artistic experience⁴. This becomes very pronounced in the performance of music or a production of a play, where we really have three tires, the composer or the author, the performers (be they musicians or actors) and the audience. But also in the case of public extemporaneous speaking, where the audience influences the speaker. Any one who has been standing in front of an audience has felt this, and those who have not have no business being public speakers (as Collingwood notes drily)⁵. In the case of music, the role played by the performer is crucial, not just as a more or less mechanical executer of the will of

³ Similar ideas are forcefully expressed by the nowadays discredited Jung with his notion of archetypes residing in a collective unconsciousness. The metaphorical language inviting ridicule similar to the one generated by the idea of a Platonic heaven. Needless to note, Collingwood makes no reference to Jung, only a few grudging ones to Freud.

⁴ when amused or magically manipulated, there is not the same sense of collaboration, this is why amusement and propaganda can optimally be presented on the screen.

⁵ Once again the simplicity of the arguments reveals weaknesses of his argumentation. Hitler was supposed to be an excellent public speaker, knowing how to manipulate his audience, but if so must there not have been a feed-back of the type alluded to above, of him feeling the mood of the crowds and modifying his delivery accordingly? Does this not imply a certain amount of artistry? I guess so if the feelings H. expressed were genuinely his own, such as say anti-semitism, and that he was merely expressing his emotions common to a large sector of the public. As most historians assume that H. was a genuine anti-semitist and that his feelings were (if in less extreme forms) shared by a significant fraction of the German population, we are forced to admit that according to the criteria of Collingwood we are speaking about some kind of art, however repellent to our sensibilities. Of course the principle of freedom of speech makes anti-semitic ramblings legal as opposed to anti-semitic acts, thus in a sense allowing this status of being 'art'. However, this distinction is blurred in many modern western legal codes, something very understandable, yet, I find, on principle wrong, with many unintended implications of an unfortunate nature. But if we on the other hand assume that H. was not expressing his deeply felt anti-semitic convictions, but wanted for ulterior reasons impose on his crowds virulent anti-semitic feelings, we are not talking about art but of magic in the sense of Collingwood. This view is one which is very congenial to many Germans.

the composer, but as an interpreter. The musical score cannot encode the full musical expression of the composer, but in fact cannot but make a suggestive approximation, the gaps of which it is due to the skill and the judgement of the performer to fill in. In fact Mozart expected his musicians to, if needs arose, improvise within certain limits, i.e. becoming extemporary composers themselves. The same goes maybe even more for actors, so much being unsaid in the skeletal renderings of a play. Collingwood makes fun of Shaws propensity to swarth and larde his plays with excrescences of stage directions, as if he thought his actors were fools. But the combination of expression and its execution through performance is not enough, as anyone who has gone to a dress-rehearsal may testify. In such an event everyone is going through the motions, performing as if it was the real thing. But of course it is not the real thing. The audience is lacking, and without its electrifying presence there is no real performance. The audience gives life to it all, and invigorates the action as well as the music-making.

Art is indeed something that only can exist in a community and a tradition. A piece of art is not just a collaboration between an individual artist and his audience, it is also a collaboration with other artists dead or alive. Thus the present emphasis on originality in art, as well as its ties with the artist, is wrong. Artists are never that original, they take what they find and modify it a little. They do not create the traditions, they do not create the languages in which it is phrased. People should only know how much Shakespeare borrowed from other sources, plots, themes, characters, but so what? We are not even sure that the plays were not real collaborate efforts, maybe changed and modified through successive performances, and that the definitive versions which have been handed down may just be arbitrary stages in an on-going process. In fact we are not even sure whether there actually existed a man to whom we can impute the label of Shakespeare, in the sense of being the sole authorative author of all the plays commonly assumed to be by one hand. But whether Shakespeare existed or not is a rather uninteresting question, we have the plays, and that should be enough. The personality of Shakespeare, regardless of whether we would be able to retrieve it or not, is uninteresting, it is just gossip. The works of art remain, and that should be it. The actual author of a work of art is of low importance. In fact a work of art is common property, as far as it expresses common emotions. To insist on a conception of artistic ownership is to lie yourself open to the accusation of *la propriété c'est vole*. Collingwood in his concluding chapter argues for a return to the good old days when artists could freely borrow from each other without being accused of plagiarism. The American critic Bloom speaks rightly about the anxiety of influence. Influence is inevitbale and should by all means be encouraged. The artists who are afraid of having their works pillaged, could simply abstain from publishing them, and Collingwood notes acidly, the public will probably have cause to thank them. Because anyone who has made a serious expression of a non-trivial emotion is eaten up by an urge to share it with others.

Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness. Those are the concluding words of the author.

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