

ART AS EXPRESSION

TOLSTOY

one of the commonest beliefs about art is that it is essentially a form of expression
what is more, the expression of feeling
this view is so common that it is often simply assumed to be true by students, critics, and artists

Tolstoy's view:

art is the communication of feelings from artist to viewer through certain external signs
artist are people inspired by emotional experiences
use their skill with words, paint, music, movement, etc
to embody their emotions in a work of art
with a view to stimulating the same emotion in an audience

notes the expressivist point of view arises because we live in post-Romantic world
modern world a successor to one in which the creation of art works inspired by expressivism:
Expressionist painting of Van Gogh and Manet
Romantic music of Grieg and Tchaikovsky
lyric poetry of Byron and Wordsworth
in music it is only in compositions of the period from 1850-1930 that are especially suited to
expression theory
transition from Baroque to Classical to Romantic marked by a movement from music that is
marked by largely structural properties (Baroque) to music that is more readily described in terms
of feeling and expression

Croce: art as 'intuition'

clearest statement found in essay "What is Art?"
title is self-conscious reference to Tolstoy's book of the same name
supposedly he was trying to distance his theory from Tolstoy's
not clear just where this difference lies

for Croce art is essentially intuition and
"what lends coherence and unity to intuition is intense feeling. Intuition is truly such because it
expresses an intense feeling and can arise only when the latter is its source and base. Not idea but
intense feeling is what confers upon art the ethereal lightness of the symbol"

the most striking difference with Tolstoy's theory is the absence of any reference to art's effect
upon the audience

what does he mean and why does he say it when he says 'art is intuition'?
best not to start with first question

the term ‘intuition’ did not catch on widely, and its everyday meaning is unhelpful
it is sufficient to take it simply as a marker for what is special and distinctive about art
his method is like *via negativa*,
the method of determining the nature of something by making clear what it is not

I. Art is not the physical thing—paint on canvas, bronze, etc

Croce’s first distinction is between art and physical fact
this reflects the plausible claim that art cannot be identified with its physical embodiment
there is more to painting than pigments on canvas
and it is in this ‘more’ that the real painting lies

II. Art is not anything utilitarian

secondly, Croce denies that art has anything ‘utilitarian’ about it
this also captures a common thought
most people accept this distinction but Croce adds a further contention that being productive of pleasure is also a utilitarian end and thus to be discounted
most people would not readily agree with since art seems intrinsically connected with pleasure
for Croce the fact that a thing gives pleasure is insufficient to make it art
this seems obvious and thus requires the further distinction of ‘aesthetic pleasure’
thus one still needs an explanation of what makes the pleasure ‘aesthetic’

III. Art is not a ‘moral act’

for Croce art does not originate from an act of will
while it makes sense to say that an artistic image can be of something morally praiseworthy or blameworthy, it makes no sense to say that the image is itself either of these things

IV. Art is not conceptual knowledge

it is here that the term ‘intuition’ becomes clearer
Conceptual knowledge (philosophy, history, science) is founded upon a distinction between reality and unreality—basically representational theory of knowledge
for Croce, intuition refers precisely to lack of distinction between reality and unreality
unlike a scientific theory a work of art is sufficient to itself
its value is not measured by its verisimilitude
to understand its meaning we need only look at the work itself and can ignore the world beyond the work—whether it represents the world accurately is irrelevant to its aesthetic worth

if art is not physical, utilitarian, moral, or productive of knowledge then what is it?

Croce’s answer:

“Art is symbol, all symbol, that is all significant. But symbol of what? Signifying what? Intuition is truly artistic, is truly intuition and not a chaotic accumulation of images, only when it has a vital principle which animates it and makes for its complete unit.”

In short, the images of art proper are symbolic expressions of feeling

Objections to Croce's Theory

the expressivist picture of the relation between artist, work, and audience does present serious difficulties

many objections catalogued by John Hospers "The Concept of Artistic Expression" (1955)

1) by defining an art work in terms of its origins expressivism seems to assume that it must have been intense feeling which caused artists to create in the way that they did
but many celebrated artists expressly denied that emotion lay at the heart of their creative work

2) attributing to each work 'an intense feeling' which unifies it overlooks difference between simple and complex works
in a complex work there may be such a wide range of emotions and attitudes is represented that it is impossible to point to any single one which the work expresses
What emotion lies at the heart of *War and Peace*? There is much emotion in it but not any one emotion which may be said to be expressed by it

3) many artworks don't seem to be included in this definition: modern architecture, abstract paintings, musical canons and fugues

4) how exactly is the emotion in the work?

To say of a song or a painting, not merely that it causes or was caused by sadness, but that it is itself feeling sad, seems unintelligible
defenders of expressivism thus draw a distinction between 'being an expression of sadness' and 'being expressive of sadness'

5) relates to the role expressivism assigns to the audience
does aesthetic appreciation require that we feel the emotion that a work of art supposedly expresses?

Counterexamples:

I can read a poem expressing all-consuming jealousy without becoming jealous
or can read a love poem without falling in love

it might be said that the poem seeks to convey an understanding of an emotion
but here one is moving away from expressivism to more of a cognitive theory

6) implausibility of expressivism as an explanation of the value of art
seems to remove one of the most valuable aspects of art: its imaginative power
if the focus is on recovery of the artist's emotion
it not only ignores the value of imagination (in the audience) but eliminates it

similarly, if success in arousing emotion is the key to evaluating works of art
then horror films would seem to be more successful than more celebrated works of art
but no one would put horror films on a higher level than Shakespearean tragedy
thus expressivism seems seriously flawed as a description of the nature of artistic creation and appreciation and plainly inadequate as an explanation of the value of art

Collingwood's Theory

can these objections be overcome?

More sophisticated version is found in Collingwood's *Principles of Art* (1938)

Collingwood's theory based on admiration and awareness of defects of Croce's theory thus repudiates several features of expressivism on which some of these objections are based

art is thus not concerned with the arousal of emotion at all
either of amusement or what he calls magic
both of these conceptions confuse 'art' with 'craft'

also rejects the notion that art is the expression of an emotion that pre-exists the work
thus imagination plays a central role in Collingwood's theory
art has two equally crucial elements: expression and imagination
a work of art expresses emotion
but its creation and appreciation are both acts of imagination
and the work thus exists only in the imagination
works of art thus must be recreated in the minds of their audience
the process of artistic creation is thus not a matter of making external what already exists internally
it is instead a process of imaginative discovery
thus the peculiar value of art is self-knowledge

the end of art is self-knowledge, knowledge of our own emotional states
this has the unhappy consequence that artistic creation can only be of real interest to its creator
art becomes a form of introspection

Collingwood attempts to meet this objection by claiming that it is not 'what I feel' that the artist articulates but rather 'what we feel'

"The artist's business is to express emotions; and the only emotions he can express are those which he feels, namely his own. . . . If he attaches any importance to the judgment of his audience, it can only be because he thinks that the emotions he has tried to express are . . . shared by his audience In other words he undertakes his artistic labour not as a personal effort on his own private behalf, but as a public labour on behalf of the community to which he belongs" (126).

Thus it is not merely artists, but the whole community that comes to self-knowledge in the work of art

art is thus "the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness"

art is thus not passive contemplation, but is action

the function of the audience is not merely receptive, but collaborative

Collingwood's theory advances Tolstoy's theory but the chief merit of this version is that it centers on the work of art and not the artist

Tolstoy's version lead to inquiring about the artist's history and psychology
Collingwood is scathing about criticism that focuses on historical tidbits about artists

still, if the emotion cannot be apprehended independently of the work of art
why infer back from the work to the artist's emotion at all?

seems that the artist's peculiar gift is not to feel but to imagine
this is tantamount to abandoning an important element of expressivism—that it is the artist's
business to express emotions

similarly, the audience's emotional experience also drops out of the picture on a closer
examination of Collingwood's theory
everyday expressivism holds that emotion is transmitted from artist to audience by being aroused
in the audience

Collingwood argues that using art to arouse emotion is a confusion of art with craft
if this is true it is as much a mistake to try to determine the merits of a work by audience
'reaction' as it is to judge it on the artist's 'sincerity'

here the distinction between 'being an expression of' and 'being expressive of' is important
'being expressive of' does not imply an possessor of the emotion, artist or audience
to speak of 'being expressive of' instead of 'being an expression of' avoids any false
psychologism about artist and audience

but can this distinction save expressivism?

Why is a work's being expressive of emotion something to be valued?

Collingwood's explanation is that in acting imaginatively upon emotion we bring it to
consciousness, discover thus what our consciousness contains, and come to self-knowledge
but if the emotions expressed are not our emotions then this hardly leads to self-knowledge

sometimes Collingwood's language tends to lead away from expression of emotion to more of a
cognitive theory

implies that the value of art lies not in helping us to come to a proper apprehension of personal or
even communal feeling, but a greater awareness of the world around us

if we focus on the work as 'being expressive of' emotion, then appreciation would seem to
consist in being brought to a heightened awareness of that emotion

this does not involve undergoing any element of that emotion

this seems to signal an abandonment of expressivism

if the function of art is to heighten awareness

then the special connection between art and emotion which all forms of expressivism try to
articulate and maintain is broken

for art can heighten our awareness of much that is not emotion

considers Collingwood's analysis of Eliot's "The Waste Land"

Eliot is not trying to entertain, amuse, nor is the work magical

“the artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts”

Collingwood uses a language of cognition not emotion to describe Eliot’s work

Collingwood attempts to respond to this by making distinction between two kinds of truth

truth of intellect which is the business of science

truth of consciousness which is the concern of art

art may thus be said to describe, to tell, to prophesy

but since its concern is with the truth of consciousness, none of this removes it from the world of emotional experience

to speak of truth in art some such distinction as Collingwood draws seems necessary

for what we learn from art is not what we learn from science

the advantage of Collingwood’s theory is that it avoids psychologism

but upon closer examination its advantages are won through abandoning the essentials of expressivism

in the end what emerges is an account of art as a distinctive way of understanding human experience