Self-Expression

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In the late 1960s and early 1970s a spate of papers and chapters in books appeared in the literature concerned with creativity and education. Partly, this was in response to the emphasis given by the Plowden Report to creative work in schools. Partly, to the vogue at the time for "Creativity Tests." And, partly, it was in response to work by educational psychologists, such as Hugh Lytton, which offered advice concerning the promotion of creativity.[1] One of the aims of work by writers such as Ronald Woods and Robin Barrow, John White, and David Best was to show, contra Lytton, that self-expression taken by itself was not a sufficient condition of creativity and that such creativity, if it was to be developed in schools at all, involved the learning of and training in artistic techniques and the initiation of the learner into the complex traditions that make up artistic endeavor.[2] This aim was completely successfully realized in the work in question. However, whilst these writers cast doubt upon the sufficiency of self-expression for creativity, none of them seemed to find the term itself problematic and they all, either directly or by implication, seemed prepared to allow that self-expression was a necessary part of creativity. This paper is an examination of whether even this limited role for self-expression can be sustained.

Whilst the notion that self-expression is a necessary part of artistic creation is common place even today, it is difficult to find theoretical work which describes it and assigns its role. The notion is, by and large, a result of Romanticism and the place it gives to the artistic individual's emotional reactions to the world. Although it is easy to point to silly descriptions of creation in the Romantic tradition (for example, Wordworth's assertion that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of strong emotion"), theories which make creation rise above the behavior of a football crowd when its team has scored a goal are hard to find. There are nineteenth century writers on aesthetics who make large claims concerning self-expression and art, notably Leo Tolstoy in *What is Art* .[3] But their work is so vague as to be useless as an aid to understanding. Probably the most sophisticated and influential treatment of these matters occurs in the work of Robin Collingwood, especially *The Principles of Art*, in this century.[4]

For Collingwood artistic creation begins with a disturbing but inchoate emotion experienced by the artist. The artist's imagination then begins to give shape to this emotion. But, this process of giving shape is not merely an act of identification, rather it is a process of full, particularistic articulation. Not the shaping of, say, melancholy, but the shaping of the particular melancholy experienced by this particular person, in this particular situation at this particular time. When this process is completed — if it is completed — the original feeling has been expressed and the work of art is born. According to Collingwood, such a work is, and must be internal to the mind of the artist. Works of art are, in his phrase, "imaginary objects."[6]

There is no necessity for the artist to externalize the now fully delineated emotion in paint or stone or writing or what have you. Indeed, given that one of Collingwood's major preoccupations in *The Principles of Art* is to draw a heavy line between art proper and mere craft, one has the feeling that Collingwood would almost approve of the artist who simply refused to externalize the work of art because such externalization *must* involve questions of technique, materials, and fitting means to ends, which all are typical of craft and are therefore alien to art as properly understood. However, it obviously is the case that some artists — perhaps, simply concerned to make a living — do proceed to externalize the work of art and produce pictures that can hang on walls, novels that can be bought in bookshops, symphonies that can be played in concert halls, etc. Such public manifestations of art must not, according to Collingwood, be confused with art itself. They are merely copies of reminders of art proper. But they do serve an important function. They allow an audience indirect access to the work of art itself. Such access is not empathetic; rather it is a recognition and appreciation of the artist's articulation of emotion in all its particularity. (We can, of course, come to feel like this because one of the functions of art is to give possible shapes to feelings.)

Collingwood's theory certainly does give an account of the place of self-expression within the creation of works of art. It is, however, an account fraught with enormous difficulties. But before detailing some of these difficulties, it is worth pondering for a moment the implications for art education of acceptance of the above account. If such an education could take place at all — and there must be grave doubts about this because it is not at all clear, given this account, that one could even take the first step of identifying works of art for prospective learners — it would, surely, embody certain features. One of these features would be an emphasis on the free play of the imagination and therefore a suspicion of all descriptive exercises, whether in words or, say, encapsulated in activities such as life or plant drawing. Another would be a general down-playing of the idea that art is, at least in part, a problem-solving activity. A third would be a dislike of any instruction or training in techniques or material. A fourth feature would be the premise that, for all we know, we are all artists, and fifth an unwillingness to make students seriously engage with "art" history. There are features that should be immediately recognizable to anyone who has been concerned with art education in our schools over the last forty years.

Practical implications apart, what shall we say now of the problems I mentioned above? I am not concerned, for the purposes of this paper, with the general — and well known difficulties — of Collingwood's theory, such as his dubious distinction between art and craft. I am concerned with the problems inherent in regarding this as an account of "self-expression." These problems seem to me to cluster around the private mental nature of the art object as conceived by Collingwood, that is, around his insistence that because art consists of works of the imagination it therefore consists of imaginary objects. Crucially, Collingwood's theory depends upon correct identification, both with regard to works of art proper, that is in the artist's mind, and with regard to their public manifestations. In the first case, the artist has to correctly identify the finished mental product of his imagination with the inchoate feeling which began the whole process. In the second case, the audience of the public

manifestation has to identify the picture on the wall, say, with the articulation of the emotion in the artist's mind. (Collingwood is insistent that, in this case at least, there is such a correct identification.) In both of these cases the only possible authoritative voice as far as correctness is concerned is that of the artist him-or herself. But, in neither case can the artist possibly claim such authority.

Collingwood's theory offends against those features that Wittgenstein noted as part of any private language: the fact that here — but not in language as such — there can be no way of distinguishing what is, in fact, correct from what merely seems to be correct; that if labeling, identification, recognition, are all thought of as essentially private transactions within someone's mind then there are no criteria that can be used to separate these from mislabeling, misidentification and misrecognition. But if this is the case — if we cannot distinguish the bogus from the genuine, what is correct from what appears correct — then all notions here of being correct or genuine simply lose their purchase. Collingwood's theory does not explain art in terms of self-expression. Rather, it makes both art and self-expression impossible.

One can make the same point in a slightly different manner. Given Collingwood's theory as outlined; what is the possibility of forgery here? What is to stop a rogue imagination bypassing the first two stages of what is supposed to be artistic creation of a public object? Such an imagination would not be engaged with the private shaping of any experienced feeling. Rather, it would posit such a feeling and begin from there. The imagined feeling would then be worked into the materials that constitute the finished public work. Of course, such a working in may be less than fully successful. However, given the gap in Collingwood's theory between private and public articulation and the way that such a gap has to be filled using the elements of craft that Collingwood distrusts, the same is true there. Nor could we assume that the finished "forgery" must necessarily be inferior to the genuine article. Apart from the fact that we have no way of telling which is which, this would be to assume that the product of real feeling must be superior — in particularity, say — to the product of the imagination, and there seems no reason to make such an assumption. What we, the audience, have to assess is simply how far the finished product exemplifies the feeling in question. Such a task at least spares us the impossible labor of matching our privately imagined work of art to the privately imagined work of the artist.

What we have moved from is a notion of expression as transitive, as in Collingwood and other explicators of the romantic tradition, to a notion of it as intransitive. Such a position has been held by theorists such as Deryck Cooke and Suzanne Langer who locate the emotion in, say, music in the artist's manipulation of musical elements which are either naturally emotionally charged (Cooke) or which can be organized so that they become emotionally charged (Langer).[5] There are still vast problems here, but these are not within the ambit of this paper. Problems aside, such a move — apart from banishing the mystery that is at the heart of Collingwood's theory — does, at least, give us something to teach. The good music teacher, for instance, will not merely teach their pupils about mere technique but also about how such technique may become emotionally charged. The expression of emotion becomes another skill to be taught and learned.

However, we also seem to have lost something with this move, and that is any particular "self" which is to be expressed. Of course, the products of this form of expression will belong to their producers. But only in the way that anything belongs to anyone who produces it. Is this such a great loss? In the fact that it banishes mystery obviously it is not. In other ways, I suspect it is. We do feel when we attend to art that we are, somehow, in touch with the personality of the artist; with Rembrandt's humanism; the cool, ironic gaze of Jane Austen; the passion of Delacroix; the urbanity of Mozart. A move that threatens to reduce all these to what is little more than technical trickery does seem, in some ways, to diminish our appreciation.

I want in the last part of this paper to try to give something back to the view of art that has a rather more full-blooded notion of self-expression than the model espoused by Cooke and Langer. This something is hardly likely to satisfy those who want a whole hearted return to Romanticism in its full glory. However, even if it will not satisfy those longings, it may be all that is on offer.

The key to this issue is to be found, I suspect, not in an investigation into the place of self-expression within the arts, but rather in an investigation into self-expression as such. And the natural question here, as in the more limited artistic case, *seems* to be: What constitutes self-expression? However, some thought on the matter shows, I think, that this way of approaching the matter may not be the most fruitful. Instead of asking this question we should, perhaps, ask: of all the things we do, what sort of things do not constitute self-expression? Let me try to illustrate this with examples. We are perfectly ready to take certain of our actions as "self-expressive" and others as not. So, for instance, a particular taste in flamboyant cravats may be a likely candidate as expressing a self whereas the fact that one ties ones shoelaces is not. But why does one count and not the other? It cannot be the particular article of clothing which is of relevance. A tendency not to tie ones shoelaces or a choice of pink laces tied in a reef knot would be as noteworthy in this context as loud neckwear. Both choosing cravats and tying our shoes (in a conventional way) are things we usually freely do. They are actions that came from our own personality and actions where alternatives are open to us. So why do we tend to think that one offers a key to the self while the other does not?

The temptation here is to think it is obedience to convention that, usually, rules lace-tying out. And while I think that there may be something in this, this will not do as it stands. It will not do because it simply assumes that such an obedience — and all that it may imply — is not a significant part of our self. But given the fact that it is a significant fact that most of us most of the time could not function without such obedience it is difficult to see how such an assumption could be sustained. (Contrary to what someone like Jean-Paul Sartre imagines, conventionality is a necessary part of our existence and its presence neither betokens lack of an authentic self nor lack of moral dignity.)

Another line of thought that suggests itself involves the notion of coherence. Loud neckties may in some way be thought to echo loud laughter and the two to mutually reinforce a picture of a self. But again, as it stands, this will not do. Imagine

two people: one, always dresses in a similar fashion and displays a taste for fluffy pink sweaters. Her behavior generally is such that one might describe it as "feminine and childlike." The other wears conventional gray suits to go to the office but when he is at home has a fondness for extravagant shirts. There might be a temptation to say of the first person, "Her sense of dress perfectly expresses her personality," and of the second, "He is only able to express his real self at home." Apart from the fact that we seem to be back illegitimately ruling out the conventional here, simply because it is conventional, the second descriptions seems to be begging further questions. There are no rules for coherence of personality as there are rules for coherence of argument and, given that fact, there are no rules for what behaviors express the real personality and which do not. It might certainly be the case that with more information about the second person (for example, that he is constantly complaining about his restrictive life at the office and contemplating leaving his job, wife, and child and becoming a painter in Tahiti), we might be tempted to say: "His office life and all the behaviors he displayed there were simply a sham. They were not really him." But all that has changed here is that one aspect of his life has been shown to be rather more minor than we hitherto thought. It does not, for this reason, cease to be an aspect and therefore does not cease to show us something about his real character. It might also be the case that given more information no such scenario presents itself; that all the evidence seems to suggest that he is perfectly happy with the two different sets of behaviors and has no wish to imitate Gaugin. Or we might find, with more information about the first person, that beneath the fluffy exterior is an iron will and a complete dedication to self-interest. The fluffy sweaters and the girlish giggles do not cease, in such an instance, to be evidence of her personality, rather they cease to be evidence of the type of personality we thought she had. That is, they became evidence of hypocrisy rather than of vulnerability.

Part of the problem here concerns the type of reification and therefore obscurantism that often attends the use of the term "self." So, for instance, when we talk of self-deception, self-denial, self-knowledge it is tempting to think that there is some essence of character here which is being, or has been, obscured by other facets of the personality. But a cure for this, in the case of self-expression as well as these other cases, is to ask *who* is supposed to be doing the denying, deception, the garnering of knowledge? It cannot, in at least some of these cases, be the self in question because it is exactly this self that is being hidden, denied, found or expressed. But does this mean we have to posit another self ("self two" so to speak) to explain the position of self one? This then prompts the question as to the supposed relationship between these two selves and their identification with the person concerned.

Very often the cure for such problems is simply a different way of conceptualizing the situation. So, for instance, "self-denial" is something which happens when our desires conflict and one prevents the indulgence of the other. Self-deception occurs when we fail to take notice of important aspects of our personality, as one might in insisting "No, I am never grumpy in the morning," and self-knowledge occurs when we own up to these aspects. (Such knowledge may, of course, be knowledge of discontinuity as well as continuity. Homer's Hector is not essentially

brave although he often runs away, or essentially cowardly although he often stands and fights, but rather, *both* brave and cowardly by turns.) And when we talk of someone revealing him or herself, we often mean no more than that what he or she is doing now makes us see what he or she has done before in a new light; for example, we come to understand that all of Uriah Heep's protestations of humility were lies. But new lights do not negate the previous behavior, they simply change its interpretation.

But all of this leaves us with our original problem: if everything counts as self-expression then nothing particular counts and this term has lost all meaning. Collingwood, interestingly, seems at ease with such a proposal. He says at one stage in *The Principles of Art*: "Every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art."[7] All are equally expressive, in other words, and therefore all equally art. He does not seem to realize that such an admission robs both "art" and "expression" of any determinate sense and therefore makes them useless.

I think the solution to the problem lies in looking at the facts from a slightly different direction. I said a moment ago that I thought the notion of convention a significant one in this area. It is, I suspect, but not in terms of an expression of self. Rather, what is important is the way in which conventional behavior impedes individuation. So, for example, if we are asked to describe somebody and we simply mention traits that this person shares with the majority of mankind, such as, tying ones shoelaces, the description, although accurate, completely fails to individuate. To simply describe someone as wearing a gray suit in the middle of the City of London is to fail to provide any useful information if we wish for some reason to identify the particular person concerned. However, although a single conventional fact must fail as an individuating characteristic in a setting in which that fact is to the fore with many individuals, this does not apply to conventional facts in all circumstances. Given a set of conventional facts and a vantage point from which the set is discernible, we may have a group of characteristics that are perfectly individuating.

But, in concentrating upon such issues we have left the usual concerns of self-expression a long way behind. First, because the facts at issue are typically only of concern to third parties. (Individuals rarely if ever have difficulty in individuating themselves). Second, because there is no necessary reference here to the existence or externalization of psychological states in the individual concerned. What we are talking about is the presentation of a public personae which enables others to identify the person in question.

The nearest equivalent here that I can think of is our creation of a signature. I can remember — and I take myself to be typical in this — upon learning that I had not only to write my name but also to sign my name, practicing for days in order to come up with an acceptable version of that name. Although I did not realize it at the time, such a version has to fulfil at least three conditions. It has to, for whatever reason, be acceptable to the person concerned (and I think here most of us would regard as simply fatuous any enquiry as to whether our signatures fulfilled some deep psychological function). It has to be, more or less, repeatable. And it has to serve, within a broad set of contexts, to identify us for others.

Such conditions seem trivial, but transposed to the production of works of Art, within a certain context, they become vital. The Western Art world for the last five hundred years — at least — has been comprised of a marketplace in which crucial emphasis has been placed upon the characteristics of continuity and originality. Works of art to be valued within that context have to be seen to both inhabit a particular tradition and to be distinctive within that tradition. In such a situation the idea of making your own works of art distinctive in some way and therefore easily recognizable — at least by the cognoscenti — becomes for most artists (not, of course, forgers) a basic notion if one wishes to flourish and continue to be productive within this Art world.

Not all Art worlds are like this. As far as I understand it, traditional Chinese aesthetics with regard to painting simply emphasizes the continuity of a tradition and the production of beautiful objects. This is why the attribution of particular works to particular artists becomes a real problem at any distance from the time and place of production. In the contemporary Western art market there are artists and art movements which will, in time, experience the same problem. An emphasis upon the sort of one dimensional originality that seems to characterize some works within Conceptual and Minimalist art must make such works unattributable. The irony here is that the sophistication with regard to the Western art world that someone like Damien Hurst seems to show, may in the end be totally self-defeating because whilet it is not true that anyone can paint like Picasso, it is true that anyone can immerse dead animals in formaldehyde.

It must not be thought that the points that I am making relate to the purely commercial aspects of art. There is a chicken and egg situation between the emphasis that is aesthetically placed upon the artist's formation of a personal style and the commercial emphasis that is placed upon the same thing. These aspects interact in the training of artists so that, whereas Chinese art teachers aim at the suppression of individuality within the work produced by their pupils, teachers within the Western tradition emphasize, within the limits drawn by continuity, exactly the opposite. The points I am making do not depend upon complete success in either tradition. (After all, it is often possible to assign Chinese works to particular painters and to fail to do this for Western works.) Nor do they mean that the practice within the Western tradition of training by imitation is rendered opaque, partly because of the emphasis on continuity mentioned above, but partly, and more importantly, because the attempt to imitate others is often a road to finding one's own particular style.

At other levels of art education the thesis presented here is equally important. It means, taken together with the work of the writers I mentioned at the beginning of the essay, and the work of Ernst Gombrich in demolishing the myth of the "innocent eye," that the child in school confronted with the demand to "express yourself" in her painting, writing, or what have you, is facing a demand completely empty of significant content.[8] And the response to this demand is not to free oneself from tradition or convention but simply to resort to unacknowledged — and, perhaps, unrecognized — traditions and conventions. Far better to forget the dubious psychologizing of art education and focus upon aspects of the child's style.

Is he better at color than line? Can she draw the human form? Does he understand, and can he use, perspective? But of course, to evaluate such things the teacher also needs to understand them and not merely stand back and decline responsibility.

At a different level with art education we must attack the notion that Romantic artists such as Casper David Friedrich, Delacroix and, above all, Van Gogh, were somehow more authentic, more in touch with their "selves," than classical artists such as David or Poussin. (I'm using examples from painting here but only for convenience; there are obvious examples from the other arts, for example, Pope and Wordsworth, Mozart and Beethoven.) Instead we should concentrate upon how all of these artists used or changed the traditions or conventions they inherited and whether such usage or change was successful in particular cases. Again this means that teachers of such things have to have a real knowledge of their material, but this must be all to the good.

My suspicion is that good art teachers, at every level, over the last two hundred years have emphasized exactly the features of students' work which this paper draws attention to. However, they have been doing this whilst thinking they are doing something else, but then, that is the point of this paper.

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1. Hugh Lytton, *Creativity and Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

2. Ronald Woods and Robin Barrow, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (London: Methuen, 1975), chap. 8; John White, "Creativity and Education: A Philosophical Analysis," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 16, no. 2 (1968): 123-37; and David Best, "Can Creativity Be Taught?" *British Journal of Educational Studies* 30, no. 3 (1982): 280-94.

3. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).

4. Robin Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

5. Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) and Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

6. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art,* 134-39.

7. Ibid.*,* 285.

8. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon, 1977).