THE CROCE-COLLINGWOOD THEORY OF ART AND ARTISTIC PROCESS

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The aesthetic theories described in Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* and R. G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* are sufficiently parallel in their essential features that they have been subsumed, and not without good reason, under the rubric, "The Croce-Collingwood Theory of Art." The similarities are well-known, so I will refer to them only as it is necessary to clarify the criticisms of the theory that I am interested in here. I will argue that there is at least one substantial difference that impacts upon the ultimate viability of the theory as a whole and that Croce's conception of the theory is finally inferior to Collingwood's. This is not to say that Collingwood's version saves the theory, because Collingwood's, too, is flawed to the extent that the theory itself, I believe, is weak at best.

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that the Croce-Collingwood theory of art has made at least two important contributions to the history of aesthetic thought. First, and more importantly, it describes the work as an intentional object. Second, and of lesser importance, it clearly describes one possible artistic process. These contributions have forced us in our studies to rethink how the work of art should be defined, but, unfortunately, each of the contributions is also plagued by weaknesses that undermine the theory.

By way of example, the first positive contribution involves the agreement between Croce and Collingwood concerning the parallel between language and aesthetics. Croce asserts ". . . that all the scientific problems of Linguistic are the same as those of Aesthetic, and that the truths and errors of the one are the truths and errors of the other" (259). Collingwood's agreement is reflected in his statement that "We can answer the question, 'What kind of thing must art be, if it is to have the two characteristics of being expressive and imaginative?' The answer is: 'Art must be language'" (273).

Croce and Collingwood agree negatively that art is not a craft and positively that, as intuition and imaginative expression, art is essentially language. These are followed by other agreements. Croce and Collingwood argue that the work of art as expression may be described as an intuitional or imaginary object. Collingwood points out that:

> . . . music, the work of art, is not the collection of noises, it is the tune in the composer's head. The noises made by the performers, and heard by the audience, are not the music at all; they are only the means by which the audience, if they listen intelligently (not otherwise), can reconstruct for themselves the imaginary tune that existed in the composer's head. (139)

The tune or poem in the composer's head may be the product of the working out or the clarifying of emotions that occur at the same time as expression. This is the positive contribution of the theory. The work of art is not merely the physical object before the audience and nothing more: it is an intentional object. In other words, it is an object about which no existence claims are made, and it is essentially the subject of one or more mental acts. In phenomenological terms, for every mental act (noesis), there is a corresponding object (noema) toward which consciousness is directed. Art per se is no thing without some corresponding mental act or "intuition" that confers upon the object, internal or external, the name "art." All art objects are intentional and can hold no claim on existence without the necessary corresponding mental acts. These acts may be the product of a single mind or may be experienced by many, but in either case the existence of an artifact is not a necessity.

A difficulty arises, however, when it is claimed that the audience must have the same experience of the work as the artist for them to have an intuition of the particular work of art in question. This, I believe, is a significant and negative aspect of the Croce-Collingwood theory. The theory simply relies too heavily on the artist's internal object as the one

"true" intuition of the object when, in fact, the imaginary object itself should be the point of departure for all aesthetic experience. To put it another way, Collingwood argues that certain works, such as those of the ancient Greeks, cannot be considered to be works of art because the works were, for the Greeks, craft objects. The works of craft, modern or ancient, are excluded by definition in the theory. But, taking a broader view, one could assert that the artist has no more privilege than any other member of the audience and that the artist's intuition becomes only one of many possible intuitions. Here the artist's intuition is neither privileged nor ideal. Under this view, the object, even one from Greek times, may be art proper whether or not it was an expression of a particular artist's intuition. The Parthenon may and must be finally considered apart from its historical states of affairs if a sound judgment is to be made concerning its status as an intentional object or work of art.

This problem has its root in the negative side of the second positive contribution of the theory. Croce and Collingwood insist on beginning with the artist's intuition and expression. What the theory has to say about the artistic process may be true in at least some cases. An artist may in fact be clarifying her emotions, but that does not rule out the possibility that objects produced in any number of other ways, including accident, may be works of art as well. The externalization of the work of art may be secondary to artistic intuition or expression in the theory, but the theory's claim of initial internalization is questionable. Ultimately, I would argue, the work itself is the only thing about which a judgment can be made concerning whether or not the work is a work of art and whether or not it is a good work of art. Croce and Collingwood would have us believe that there is a "private language" argument that holds for art; but, if art can be identified with language, then the arguments that can be leveled against the private language argument in general can be used against a private language of art.

Continuing with the consideration of the artistic process, Croce and Collingwood describe the inessential process of

externalization and its vicissitudes. The problems of externalization are essentially ones of craft. Croce indicates that:

> . . . externalization is preceded by a complex of various kinds of knowledge. These are known as *technique*, like all knowledge which precedes the practical activity. (182-83)

Collingwood says that in the process of externalization:

> . . . the painter "records" in his picture the experience he had in painting it. . . . It means that the picture, when seen by someone else or by the painter himself subsequently, produces in him (we need not ask how) sensuous-emotional or psychical experiences which, when raised from impressions to ideas by the activity of the spectator's consciousness, are transmuted into a total imaginative experience identical with that of the painter. (308)

I am inclined to agree with Collingwood on this point until he requires that I or some other viewer, including the artist, have the "identical" total imaginative experience. Surely the identical external object is available for our inspection, discounting the vicissitudes of time and circumstance, but nonetheless it seems unlikely that even the artist would have exactly the same total experience of the same work twice, much less a member of the audience whose experience is substantially different from the experience of the artist. Of course, both the artist and individual members of the audience will have experiences, but the determination of a work of art as a work of art is not dependent on "identical" experiences, but only more broadly on experiences of the work.

Thus, the two positive contributions of the Croce-Collingwood theory are found, first, in that it describes the work of art as an intentional object and, second, in that it

describes one possible artistic process.[1] Negatively, the theory relies too heavily on the replication of "identical" emotional or imaginative responses to the work. Such a demand requires a narrowing of the possible responses to the work. Surely it is possible to read *Hamlet* as a comedy whether or not Shakespeare worked out his feeling of tragedy while writing the play.

To this point, those matters on which Croce and Collingwood agree have been discussed. Now a difference that has been on the fringes of the earlier discussions will be considered. This difference is found in each philosopher's vision of the artistic process. It has been previously shown that Croce and Collingwood agree in a general way concerning the internal work of art and its externalization, but now the emphasis turns to the artistic process itself. Therein lies the essential difference between the two philosophers' theories. In this difference, it will be shown that Collingwood's consideration of the artistic process is an advance over Croce's in at least two ways. First, Collingwood understands that externalization may occur simultaneously with expression; whereas, Croce does not allow for that possibility. Second, because of the structure implied in the act of externalization in the first advance, the audience has a greater potential for realizing the artistic intuition than is possible within the confines of Croce's theory.

Croce's version of the artistic process is described in the following:

> The complete process of aesthetic production can be symbolized in four steps, which are: *a*, impressions; *b*, expression or spiritual aesthetic synthesis; *c*, hedonistic accompaniment, or pleasure of the beautiful (aesthetic pleasure); *d*, translation of the aesthetic fact into physical phenomena (sounds, tones, movements, combinations of lines and colours, etc.). (156)

From previous discussions, it should be evident that only step *b*

is truly expression and thereby purely aesthetic. The other steps are, as always, secondary. But there is more to be learned from the above. Note that the externalization of the work, *d*, is always after the fact of intuition. As Croce says:

> . . . expression, considered in itself, is primarily theoretic activity, and, in so far as it is this, it precedes the practical activity and the intellectual knowledge which illumines the practical activity, and is thus independent alike of the one and the other. (183)

Thus, it is found that there is an order. If you take *b* to be the central consideration of Croce's theory, it is seen that there is one more step for the audience to go through than there is for the artist. The artist simply goes from impression to expression; whereas, the audience, working from the other end of the process, must go through two steps to achieve the intuition. But the artist still must complete her intuition before she can advance to the stage of externalization.

Collingwood takes a different point of view concerning the externalization of the work of art. The artistic process as an imaginative experience is described in the following manner:

> Wherever there is an idea, or imaginative experience, there are also the following elements: (1) an impression, or sensuous experience, corresponding with it; (2) an act of consciousness converting that impression into an idea. . . . Every imaginative experience is a sensuous experience raised to the imaginative level by an act of consciousness; or, every imaginative experience is a sensuous experience together with consciousness of the same. (306)

Hereby Collingwood allows for the possibility that the externalization of the work could occur simultaneously with the expression, although it is not necessary that they occur

together. This possibility pinpoints the difference between Croce's and Collingwood's positions precisely. A painter could paint only after an intuition under Croce's theory; but, Collingwood makes the following improvement:

> There are two experiences, an inward or imaginative one called seeing and an outer or 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. (304-5)

The expression of a painter may be produced at the same moment as its externalization. As a matter of fact, the expression may be realized only in the externalization for the painter.[2]

For Croce, the externalized object cannot be considered to be a work of art: it has purpose only in so far as it makes possible ". . . the preservation and the reproduction of the intuitions produced" (159). This reproduction takes the following form:

> . . . the object or physical stimulus . . . designated by the letter *e*; then the process of reproduction will take place in the following order: *e*, the physical stimulus; *d-b*, perceptions of physical facts (sounds, tones, mimetic, combinations of lines and colours, etc.), which is together the aesthetic synthesis, already produced; *c*, the hedonistic accompaniment which is also reproduced. (159)

The externalized object is nothing more than a symbol by which the audience and the artist himself may be reminded of the original intuition. However, with the addition of the physical object in permanent form, the audience is moved a further step away from the internal work of art. The audience must now traverse three stages to reach the original intuition.

Collingwood, on the other hand, permits a closer tie between the audience and the work of art as expression. He says:

> We are, in fact, assuming two different theories of aesthetic experience, one for the artist, another for the audience. . . . (a) For the artist, the inward experience may be externalized or converted into a perceptible object; though there is no intrinsic reason why it should be. (b) For the audience, there is a converse process: the outward experience comes first, and this is converted into that inward experience which alone is aesthetic. (301-2)

On this view, the audience begins where the artist leaves off, but the advance is found in the fact that the audience is only one step away from the possible intuition of the object. Collingwood has improved on Croce's theory: (1) by allowing the simultaneity of expression and externalization, and (2) by eliminating the stringent and unrealistic ordering of production and reproduction found in Croce. Collingwood's audience assumes a more positive role than is permitted in Croce's theory.[3]

Collingwood's advance has at least one more implication for the general Croce-Collingwood theory and its potential acceptability. In Croce's theory, it is not possible for an artist to manipulate her medium before the intuition since manipulation implies craftsmanship. Collingwood, also, decries those who would call craftsmen artists. Nevertheless, by indicating that expression may come about through the activity of externalization, Collingwood has broken down the strict barrier between the artist and the craftsman. This is not to say that they are equal by any stretch of the imagination, but only that the technique of the craftsman, when employed by the artist, may be an essential aid in the artistic process. For Croce, such a claim is an impossibility.

Finally, it appears that the Croce-Collingwood theory of

art cannot be considered as a viable aesthetic theory. It fails primarily in its treatment of the work of art itself as an artifact and in the consideration of the audience's relation to the work. The theory begins with the artist and therein lies the crucial error. Nevertheless, invaluable are such individual insights of the theory as the description of the artistic process, the relation between art and craft, and the understanding of the work of art as an imaginary object. It seems that the Croce-Collingwood theory of art constitutes that rare case in which the parts are greater than the whole.

NOTES

[1]The second contribution is also weak in another regard. It is too narrow since it does not allow for other possibilities as far as the artistic process is concerned.

[2]The possibility of contradiction, or at least inconsistency, rears its head here. How can Collingwood consistently maintain that a work may exist "only in the head of the artist" and now assert that for a painter the inward and the outward are inseparable? Either painting must be able to exist in the head alone or it must be externalized. Collingwood cannot have it both ways.

[3]Indeed, the audience's role truly parallels the work of the creative artist—so much so that an aesthetic response is built into an act of creation itself. After all, the two roles may be played by the same person.

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