Is Ridley Charitable to Collingwood?

I share Aaron Ridley's[1] enthusiasm for that part of Collingwood's theory of art[2] which concentrates on Expression in relation to the physical involvements (manipulation of paint and canvases, etc.) which are an integral part of what most artists do. Nevertheless Ridley's overall strategy for defending Collingwood's general theory (though undeniably stimulating) leaves me somewhat puzzled. In my comments I'll concentrate on these areas of perplexity and possible disagreement, in hopes of producing further clarification from him.

The overall strategy, in bare outline form, seems to be this. Collingwood's points about the close connections between artistic expression and physical involvement with a medium are so good that anything else he says must be reinterpreted so as to be consistent with these Expression insights. In particular his overall theory of art, usually interpreted as an "Ideal theory" (according to which a work of art is somehow "in the head", perhaps as the content of a mental imaginative act of expression) must be charitably reinterpreted to remove any apparent references to such mental entities.

I have two related puzzlements with this strategy. The first is that Ridley gives basically no argument at all for his assumption that an Ideal theory must be inconsistent with Collingwood's Expression insights. (For my part I am not convinced that they must be inconsistent, and will give some reasons for this view below.)

Admittedly, Ridley does make it clear that he believes that writers such as Wollheim have refuted the Ideal theory in its original form (p. 263-4.) Nevertheless, if Ridley is correct about the value of the Expression insights, a natural alternative strategy would involve a start on reconstruction or modification of the Ideal theory so as to maintain the overall consistency and integrity of Collingwood's theory. Thus I'm puzzled as to why no hint of this intuitively first-choice strategy for rehabilitation of Collingwood is to be found in Ridley's paper.

My second, related puzzlement with Ridley's strategy is this. There is more than one kind of charity involved in interpreting the works of an author. Casting about for charitable interpretations of particular passages of Collingwood so as to make them come out both true and as consistent with his other Expression-related passages runs the risk that in so doing one is being quite uncharitable to the author himself.

I doubt that Collingwood would have been very happy to be told that, after writing a whole book in which he tries very explicitly to spell out a view of art proper as involving acts of imaginative expression by artists, that really he did not mean and should not be assumed to have meant any such thing. Does this not question his capacity to say clearly what he meant, or imply he was confused about what his own theory was, or similar uncharitable assumptions?

Thus my second question to Ridley is, why opt for this strategy instead of taking Collingwood's

explicitly stated intentions (and standard interpretations of his views) at face value, even if this means that on Ridley's view much of his theory is incorrect and also inconsistent with the good parts? After all, there are worse things than being wrong and inconsistent on some matters of aesthetic theory - things such as being fundamentally confused or being unable to write clearly, for instance.

Perhaps the "charitable reinterpretation" part of Ridley's strategy might be more defensible if his reinterpretations of Collingwood were very persuasive, but regrettably I do not find them to be so. I shall briefly illustrate how I think he misinterprets Collingwood in some of these passages, after presenting some basic evidence for the view that Collingwood did indeed hold a version of the Ideal theory.

I. COLLINGWOOD DOES HOLD AN IDEAL THEORY

Recall that the Ideal theory as discussed by Ridley is defined by Wollheim as follows (_Art and its Objects_ Sec. 22)[3]:

"The Ideal theory can be stated in three propositions. First, that the work of art consists in an inner state or condition of the artist, called an intuition or an expression: secondly, that this state is not immediate or given, but is the product of a process, which is peculiar to the artist, and which involves articulation, organization, and unification: thirdly, that the intuition so developed may be externalized in a public form, in which case we have the artifact which is often but wrongly taken to be the work of art, but equally it need not be."

A critical part of Ridley's denial that Collingwood held such a view focuses on the first of these propositions, according to which works of art themselves are purely mental entities. However, there are several passages in Collingwood's book _The Principles of Art_ where he very explicitly states such a view. Ridley himself (p. 265) quotes one of these passages (Collingwood p. 139):

"the 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 means by which the audience, if they listen intelligently ..., can reconstruct for themselves the imaginary tune that existed in the composer's head"

As Ridley himself says, such a passage really forces the issue as to whether or not Collingwood held the Ideal theory. I take it that we both agree that he certainly seems to hold it here. Ridley chooses to deny his holding it via a re-interpretation. I instead would apply my point about the second kind of charity due to an author: if an author not only explicitly states a certain view, but also further describes and explains it so as to leave no doubt as to what he takes his own view to be, then we should take him at his word and not try to identify our own reinterpretations of such passages as an account of what he really meant. (If we wish to reinterpret we should acknowledge our own authorship of such reinterpretations, and distinguish them from his actual,

published views.)

Another such passage from later in the book (unsurprisingly not quoted by Ridley, since it would be extremely difficult to reinterpret) definitively shows,in my view, that Collingwood did indeed hold a version of the Ideal theory (p. 305):

"It follows that the painted picture is not the work of art in the proper sense of that phrase. No reader, I hope, has been inattentive enough to imagine that in the preceding section this doctrine has been forgotten or denied. [Ridley take heed!] What has been asserted is not that the painting is a work of art, which would be as much as to say that the artist's aesthetic activity is identical with painting it; but that its production is somehow necessarily connected with the aesthetic activity, that is, with the creation of the imaginative experience which is the work of art."

It seems to me that no amount of reinterpretation of other passages in the book, no matter how insightful or convincing they might be, could overturn the authority of such explicit statements of Collingwood's Ideal, mentalistic view. Any successful reinterpretations of other passages at best would show that Collingwood was sometimes inconsistent, not that really he did not hold an Ideal theory.

However, as already mentioned, in my view regrettably Ridley is not successful at reinterpreting other passages either, as I shall now illustrate.

II. QUESTIONABLE INTERPRETATIONS OF COLLINGWOOD

Part of Ridley's strategy of reinterpretation is to regard the standard view of Collingwood as involving a "doubling-up" of experiences of works of art, for example (to paraphrase) that since there is a difference between experiencing noises and experiencing music, in principle one could do the latter without the former, so that in addition to sensual experiences of music etc there is also a further entity, the relevant work of art, which is also in one's head. (E.g., Ridley p. 265 Cols. 1-2) Ridley regards this as an uncharitable view of Collingwood in that it construes noises etc. as merely instrumentally or accidentally connected with the work of art, which on this view could exist independently of them. Ridley instead advocates a "charitable" view on which "Noises..are logically indispensible means to the end of music." (p. 265 Col. 1 last para.)

The problem with all of this, though, is that it rides completely roughshod over Collingwood's avowedly quasi-Humean views about the mind (for example, see Collingwood Chap. 14, Sec. 3.) Admittedly Collingwood agrees with Hume that there can be no ideas without impressions, and he does say that "Every imaginative experience is a sensuous experience raised to the imaginative level by an act of consciousness" (Collingwood p. 306.)

However, this neo-Humean view tells us nothing whatsoever about what specific kinds of impressions or sensuous experiences are linked to what kinds of imaginative experiences, nor about whether those connections are necessary or contingent. For example, it is consistent with

the Collingwood-Hume view that a composer could mentally compose any amount of music, as long as she has once heard (or had a mental impression of) each of the notes involved. Also Mozart's imaginative experiences while composing music during a game of billiards may have as their sensuous basis the thud of the cue and click of the balls on each other, along with Mozart's bodily sensations as he moved around the table - hardly the basis of any interesting necessary connections.

To summarize this point, any attempt to 'save' Collingwood by denying that he believed that we have both "impressions" and "ideas" of works of art is doomed from the start. Maybe he is wrong, but there is no denying that this is his view.

In another interpretation, Ridley attempts to defend Collingwood against charges that such things as the "reconstruction" that he claims to go on in a listener's head (when interpreting a lecture, for example) refers to some objectionable mental entity. He says it refers ".. to nothing problematically Ideal (i.e., to nothing offensively private).." (Ridley p. 268 Col. 1 line 6.)

However, one cannot just assume that any mentalistic theory of art is "offensively private" without specifying in what ways this is so. Ridley himself in his section III gives a good reason why Collingwood cannot be accused of two major kinds of offensive privacy, namely of incorrigible knowledge and privileged access, for as Ridley notes, on Collingwood's account, "..the emotion is not revealed for what it is through being expressed. Rather, it becomes what it is through being expressed." (Ridley p. 269 Col. 2 line 3.)

In other words, the artist has no special knowledge nor privileged access to the work of art prior to its being expressed in a public context. And as Collingwood says and Ridley acknowledges (Ridley p. 271 Col. 2 line 24 ff), in such contexts the audience for art has access (on Collingwood's account, through their own imaginative recreations of the artist's expression) to the same artwork which the artist has created.

Collingwood himself has much to say about other kinds of "offensively private" accounts of art, which he castigates as "Aesthetic Individualism" (Collingwood p. 315ff.) It is a virtue of his own Expression theory that it can and does provide an illuminating account of the many ways in which artists and their public mutually collaborate (including mutually adjusting to each other's expectations) in the production and understanding of works of art. For example, "..the position of the audience is very far from being that of a licensed eavesdropper.. Performers..know that their audience is not passively receptive of what they give it, but is determining by its reception of them how their performance is to be carried on." (Collingwood p. 322, second para.)

There is no denying that throughout this remains a basically mentalistic account of interaction, in terms of such things as the understanding by artists/performers of the psychological expectations of an audience. But nevertheless it provides (in my view) as good an account as any of the ways in which audience and artists actually interact in a public, non-private way. That these matters are fundamentally mediated on Collingwood's view by their own understandings of the artworks and artistic community of which they are a part seems to me a harmless (and indeed in some sense obviously true) observation.

Most of Ridley's other interpretive points are put in question by his initial assumption that the Ideal Theory and his Expression Theory are inconsistent. He uses valid points from the Expression Theory in an attempt to show Collingwood couldn't have held the Ideal Theory in various passages. But once one questions that supposed inconsistency, his interpretations seem strained at best.

III. IS COLLINGWOOD'S OVERALL THEORY INCONSISTENT?

On the issue of inconsistency, here are some reasons for doubting that it has been conclusively established. One main strand of Wollheim's criticism of Collingwood (Ridley p. 264 Col. 1) is that "..to conceive of a work of art as something that might exist solely in the artist's head...is to overlook or mistake the crucial role played in the production of art by artistic media" such as the stone involved in the production of "..the peculiar fluidity and grace of Bernini's _Ecstasy of St. Theresa_..." Ridley regards the citing of such an example as leaving the Ideal Theory of art "..dead in the water."

However, there are two different kinds of impossibility to be considered here. One is that it is impossible for any work of art to be mental. I am not convinced that Wollheim, Ridley or anyone else has shown this. The other is that it is impossible for an artist to achieve an imaginative expression of a sculpture etc. without his/her actually interacting with a physical medium such as stone. This I think is true for many kinds of art, and furthermore it is strongly supported by Collingwood's views about expression, according to which an expressed work doesn't exist in all its specificity and uniqueness until the artist's interaction with any physical medium involved is completed. (Ridley gives several examples where Collingwood discusses the importance of such artistic interactions with a medium.)

But clearly it doesn't follow at all from this that the work of art itself is not something in the artist's head - only that such artistic mental achievements require the right physical circumstances in order to be achieved. And Collingwood's insistence on the non-existence and non-identity of a work of art prior to its actual imaginative expression under such conditions provide exactly what is needed to make those relevant physical circumstances part of the necessary conditions for the existence of the work of art (conditions which Wollheim, Ridley and myself can all agree upon) - rather than merely as external or accidental conditions for something mental which would exist whether or not such conditions hold.

Thus in my view we have (initially at least) good reason not to find basic inconsistency in the parts of Collingwood's theory. And as briefly illustrated, we can use the Expression insights to make a start on a rehabilitation of Collingwood's Ideal theory as well.

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1. Aaron Ridley, "Not Ideal: Collingwood's Expression Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 263-272. References to Ridley's article will appear in parentheses in the text.
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938). All page references to Collingwood refer to this book.
3. Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).