Impersonal Expression: Feeling and Self-Knowledge in the Artistic Process
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For some artists, the process of creating art is a process of self-expression that leads to self-knowledge. Artists come to know what they are feeling by expressing that feeling in some way, plausibly by making a work that is expressive of that very feeling.\(^1\) So understood, the process of creating art has a kind of therapeutic value.

R.G. Collingwood, who painted in addition to everything else, is one well-known proponent of this cluster of ideas. According to Collingwood in *The Principles of Art*, works of art are expressive of emotions. When an artist creates a new work expressive of some emotion—say a piece of music expressive of longing—she expresses herself, by which Collingwood means that she becomes conscious of that emotion as one she is having, where before she was not conscious of it. The artist learns something about herself. In fact, Collingwood’s view seems to be that a work of art just is, in some sense, this mental process of expression, but I will not be engaging much with this part of his view. The thought remains without it, and this is what I want to focus on: knowledge of what we are feeling, by way of self-expression, is something to which the artistic process leads.

Some artists, however, suggest a very different way of understanding the process of making art, one on which the artist’s feelings should stay out of it. The poet Jack Spicer, for example, says that poets need to be suspicious of lines they write that express “just how” they are feeling. The novelist Flannery O’Connor says something similar, that art, in general, is not “sunk in the self,” that the artist needs to become “self-forgetful” in the process of creating her work. Both remarks suggest a view of the creative process that differs from Collingwood’s. An artist’s becoming conscious of what she feels is at least superficially in tension with her being wary of committing to the page lines that express just how she is feeling (Spicer). It is also in tension with the idea that in creating art the artist needs to become self-forgetful (O’Connor). Collingwood encourages self-expression in the creative process, while Spicer and O’Connor warn against it. How should we understand this apparent disagreement?

Plausibly, the writers are disagreeing about several different issues. I want to enter the dispute by focusing only on one of them, however, so let me say a few things to narrow my focus.

One source of disagreement, which I want to set aside altogether, concerns the conditions according to which something will count as art, at all. This is a disagreement in the metaphysics of art, and, as I said, it is something Collingwood

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\(^1\) Note on terminology: I will be using “feeling” and “emotion” interchangeably, and I will tend to use “feeling” except when there is good reason to do otherwise (e.g., in discussing philosophers who use “emotion” rather than “feeling”). I will not be using terminology to distinguishing between feelings with objects, like fear or envy, and those putatively without them, like (putatively) anxiety or other passing moods.
has in mind. He seems to say that art just is a mental process of expression, or if not this then that works of art are expressive of emotions, the results of a mental process of expression. For Collingwood, something that does not express “just how” the artist is feeling would not count as art, period. Spicer and O’Connor, however, appear to be more permissive on the issue. Spicer’s thought, for example, and exaggerating it slightly to make the point, is that poets should not write lines that express just how they are feeling, not that a work consisting entirely of lines like that would prevent it from being literary art altogether. Again, set this whole dispute aside.

The prescriptive tone of Spicer’s and O’Connor’s comments suggest that they have in mind a view about artistic value. It may be Spicer’s view that lines expressing just how an artist is feeling tend to diminish the artistic value of the poem. That value lies elsewhere, maybe in forms or techniques the application of which is disrupted or blocked by concerns about expressing feelings. It may be that Spicer and O’Connor are recommending a kind of “classicism” against a “romanticism” like Collingwood’s, which locates art’s value (in addition to its satisfying requirements on being art at all) in its being expressive of the artist’s emotions.

While there are different notions of artistic value are in conflict here that conflict is not, I will be suggesting, between formalist and expressivist views of artistic value, or between classicism and romanticism. Rather, I want to argue, the conflict is internal to the concept of expression itself.

Consider what the poet Philip Larkin says about why he writes:

it seems as if you’ve seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience. It doesn’t feel like self-expression, though it may look like it.

Larkin gestures at a way of finding expression for experience, feeling included, but in a way that is not a kind of self-expression. He suggests, as I understand him, that there is a kind of expression that is not self-expression. There is also Auden: “Poetry is not self-expression.” But it is not simply the craft of constructing lines that scan appropriately, either—not a matter of adhering to some poetic form or other. “Each of us, of course, has a unique perspective which we hope to communicate. We hope that someone reading it will say, ‘Of course, I knew that all the time but never realized it before.’” Creating the work is not just self-expression, but there is something about the artist, her “unique perspective,” which she seeks to communicate: to express.

But what is this other kind of expression? If it is not self-expression, does it still lead to self-knowledge? In answering these questions, my primary goal is to develop a concept of expression that meets the demands Spicer and O’Connor make on the creative process. Doing this will facilitate to several other goals, as well. It will provide a way to frame disputes about artistic value in a more precise, as concerning kinds of expression rather than something so rough as form vs. expression. It will also offer resources for critically assessing Collingwood’s view
of expression. Finally, it will provide a way of thinking about the therapeutic value of art that does not have its ground in self-knowledge or self-recognition. I discuss these all together at the end.

In section 1, I introduce Collingwood’s view in more detail. How exactly is the process of creating a process of expressing emotion? In what sense does it lead to self-knowledge? In section 2, I discuss what Spicer and O’Connor say in more detail. I want to explain what features a concept of expression must have in order to answer to what they say about the creative process. The key, I will argue, is the relationship with self-knowledge. While expression in Collingwood’s sense leads to self-knowledge, expression of the kind that answers to Spicer and O’Connor does not do so in the same way. After that, in section 3, I characterize this alternative kind of expression. In the conclusion, I discuss the way this alternative meets the various goals I described just above.

1 Collingwood’s View of Expression

Any introduction to Collingwood’s The Principles of Art will draw attention to the following passage, in which Collingwood explains what he takes to be the commonsense, pre-theoretical view of expressing emotions:

When a man is said to express emotion, what is being said about him comes to this. At first, he is conscious of having an emotion, but not conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: ‘I feel…I don’t know what I feel.’ From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself. This is an activity which has something to do with the thing we call language: he expresses himself by speaking. It has also something to do with consciousness: the emotion expressed is an emotion of whose nature the person who feels it is no longer unconscious.

The business of artists is expression in this sense. The artist expressed emotion. As Collingwood puts it, “the artist proper has something to do with emotion,” and “[n]othing could be more entirely commonplace than to say that he expresses them.” The creative process, then, is one that begins with the artist obscurely recognizing she is having some emotion, and ends with her being consciously aware of what emotion it is. She is no longer ignorant of its nature.

Consider a rough and simple way of making sense of this thought. As the artist works, she is able gradually to recognize the emotion of which her work-in-progress is expressive as the very emotion she is having, and this developing recognition guides her as she works. For example, as the artist works, she finds that her work-in-progress is expressive of resignation, and thereby comes to recognize that she herself is feeling resigned. As she continues, she discerns anger, too, in the work, and immediately recognizes her own anger, which modifies her resignation both in the her work and in herself. She may add something else to the work, and find that so developed it does not move her in the way it did. The work-in-progress becomes too cheerful or something, and she does not recognize any such feeling in herself.
The work developed that way does not resonate with her. She does not recognize herself in the work.

This take on Collingwood’s thought is a fine as a start, but it needs to be made more precise. We can recognize emotions without recognizing them as our own, as when we recognize what someone else is feeling. What more do we need to add to get an account of recognizing what we ourselves are feeling? At the same time, works of art do not have or express emotions in the same sense other people do. How can there be emotions expressed by the work in such a way that the artist can come to recognize the nature of what she is feeling? I will start with the first question. How do we come to know what we’re feeling, whether through our engagement with a work of art or in some other way?

More than one phenomenon can be called coming to know what we’re feeling. Here is a simple one. Consider the case of Marcel from Proust’s *Remembrance*; both Nussbaum and Cassam discuss it. Marcel comes to know he loves Albertine—he comes to know what he is feeling—by recognizing that he is suffering after Albertine leaves, and that Albertine’s leaving is the cause of his suffering. Here Marcel comes to know he is having one emotion (love) on the basis of observing that he is having a particularly vivid feeling (suffering of some kind) with a particular history (it began with Albertine left).

However, this is not the way the artist comes to know what she is feeling through the creative process. The artist’s grasp of her emotion is more basic than this; it is her *becoming conscious* of the emotion, rather than taking one emotion of which she is conscious as evidence for having another, of which she is not yet conscious. The parallel moment in Marcel’s case is his recognizing *that he is suffering*, becoming conscious of that suffering, rather than the moment of his taking his suffering to be evidence of his love. The former is what we need to explain in order to see what it is for an artist to become conscious of her emotion in the creative process. What is to become conscious of some feeling as suffering of some particular kind?

I suggest we adopt the answer Robert Hopkins gives to this question in his interpretation of Collingwood’s account of expression. According to Hopkins, we recognize affective states, such as the feeling of frustration, by recognizing characteristic affective patterns, or “profiles.” Frustration has such a pattern, “peaking as the desired object moves just beyond reach, diminishing as it vanishes off the horizon of the subject’s current sphere of influence, and waxing and waning with her desire for what she seeks.” To recognize what I am feeling as frustration, then, is to recognize this characteristic affective pattern. Doing this is in part a matter of locating the pattern among the set of other possible affective patterns my feelings might exhibit, distinguishing the pattern from that characteristic of anger,

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2 Cassam 2014, 180-1.
4 Hopkins 2017, 6.
for example, where the intensity of feeling might not vary with desire in the way the pattern characteristic of frustration does.

This, as Hopkins suggests, can help us see how an artist can become conscious of what she is feeling in the process of creating her work. It does so most potently when joined to the idea, defended by Susanne Langer in *Feeling and Form*, that properties of works of art can share a structure with our emotions, or certain aspects of them, and in this way *express* those emotions, making them available for contemplation. Works of art can share a structure with our emotions in the sense that the properties of works of art are capable of instantiating patterns that match those affective patterns (or certain aspects of them) that are characteristic of certain feelings. The dynamic profile of a melodic line might match the structure of the pattern of affective intensity characteristic of frustration, for example, or, in a different case, resignation. The repetition of images in a poem, along with its rhythmic patterns, might also match that structure. In both cases, the work is expressive of the relevant feeling.

An artist could become conscious of something she is feeling, in the process of creating her work, in the following way, then. There is the claim: the artist’s work is expressive of some feeling when its properties instantiate a pattern that matches the affective pattern characteristic of that feeling. And then the explanation: as the artist works, she recognizes that pattern instantiated in the work, and she is lead to recognize that pattern among her own affective states. Engaging with the patterns such works instantiate can lead, in this way, to the artist’s becoming conscious of what she is feeling. In such cases, in Collingwood’s view, the artist has expressed her emotion, and done so by creating a work expressive of that very emotion.

What about self-knowledge? It is part of Collingwood’s view that, when an artist expresses what she is feeling, she comes to know what she is feeling. In what sense is this true?

There is a clear sense in which the artist does come to know what she feels by expressing her feeling. She comes to know she is feeling frustration. There is another sense, however, in which the artist hasn’t (yet) acquired self-knowledge. She hasn’t yet acquired what I will call *substantial self-knowledge* of what’s she’s feeling. In general, we not only have feelings—we not only find that our affective states display a certain pattern—we having feelings *about* things. We don’t just feel frustrated. We feel frustrated about not being able to buy the fancy guitar, about the progress of our work, the quality of some relationship. We may be wrong in our frustration. In the case of the relationship, it may be that we are frustrated about something else, and we are projecting that frustration on to the relationship. Nonetheless, in having the feeling, there is something that *seems* frustrating, and this appearance can motivate us to determine whether things really are as they seem. Our feelings and emotions “attune” us to the world in this way.6

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5 The language of substantial self-knowledge comes from Cassam 2014.

6 Emotions “can enable us to see things in their true light and to make justified perceptual judgments in ways that we would not otherwise be able to do: emotions can reveal saliences that we might not otherwise recognize with the same speed and reliability” (Goldie, 98).

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If becoming conscious of an emotion is to amount to substantial self-knowledge, then, we need to have some grip not only on what our feeling is, but about what its object is. Otherwise we have something thinner; call it subjective self-knowledge, knowledge of mere feeling.

Acquiring subjective self-knowledge is still an accomplishment, though. It is plausibly the first step toward substantial self-knowledge. It is by first becoming conscious of my feeling as frustration that I can begin to look around for what I am frustrated about. I can begin to associate shifts in my feeling with some object, notice that I desire the object, and notice that the intensity of my frustration varies with the intensity of my desire for that object. In this sense, expression, in Collingwood’s sense, is what I will think of as self-expression. It is the kind of expression that leads partially and non-trivially to substantial self-knowledge.

2 Self-Forgetfulness

Let this be the Collingwoodian view of expression. Expression yields subjective self-knowledge of what we are feeling. This limited but non-trivial type of self-knowledge is the first step towards substantial self-knowledge of what we are feeling. We acquire the latter once we grasp not only the nature of our feeling, but its intentional object, as well.

While the view is appealing, some artists do not seem to think creativity activity should lead even to subjective self-knowledge. Jack Spicer is one such artist. He says that “whenever there’s a line that you like particularly well, which expresses just how you’re feeling this particular moment, […], then be so goddamn suspicious of it that you wait for two or three hours before you put it down on paper.” Plausibly enough, lines that express “just how” the poet is feeling are those that are expressions in Collingwood’s sense. In coming up with such lines, the poet will have become aware of what she is feeling—just how she is feeling—amounting to subjective self-knowledge. To suggest that poets be suspicious of lines that express “just how” they’re feeling suggests that expression in Collingwood’s is not what the poet should be aiming at.

Then there is Flannery O’Connor. “No art is sunk in the self,” she says, “but rather, in art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made.” Expressing feeling, on the Collingwoodian view, seems directly opposed to the kind of general self-forgetfulness O’Connor recommends. The event of acquiring even subjective self-knowledge is an event of self-recognition, not self-forgetfulness, though, to be fair, what is it to be self-forgetful?

In other passages, O’Connor is more specific. She says that one thing that can prevent a writer from realizing her talents is “that simple-minded self-appreciation which uses its own sincerity as a standard of truth.” This must cover sincerity about

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7 Spicer 1998, 8, my emphasis.
9 Ibid.
what the artist is feeling. The poet might evince a simple-minded sincerity by including a line in a poem because it expresses just how she is feeling. To the extent O’Connor is recommending against doing that, she is opposed to Collingwood’s view of creating art. Or consider that Collingwood mentions in passing “the perfect sincerity which distinguishes good art from bad.” Now there might be an important distinction here between “perfect” and “simple-minded” sincerity; O’Connor might allow that perfect sincerity, but not simple-minded sincerity, is something at which artists should aim. Taken at face value, however, it seems O’Connor does not see a value in expression in the Collingwoodian sense. Expression in that latter sense leads away from self-forgetfulness.

As I said above, neither Spicer nor O’Connor seem to gesture at a kind of formalism or classicism that eschews expression or expressiveness in art. While O’Connor’s emphasis on the “demands” of the thing being made do hint at some such idea. Spicer, especially, was not a poet overly concerned with form or rules of craft. Rather, I understand both to be issuing a warning about artists’ looking, so to speak, for a self-reflection in their work. Creating a work of art can, and in their view should, lead to something other than self-knowledge.

I can pin these ideas by formulating a few principles. A view like Collingwood’s entails the following maxim:

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\text{(Self-Expression)} \text{ Some feature or group of features F should stay in the work-in-progress if and only if they contribute to its being expressive of some emotion E, the artist’s grasp of which facilitates to substantial self-knowledge.}
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For someone like Collingwood, this will not only be because such features contribute to the artistic value of the work, but because they will be among the grounds of the artifact’s being a work of art, at all.

Spicer and O’Connor seem to have something else mind. At least, they have in mind Self-Expression’s negation. Facilitating to substantial self-knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for some F’s staying in the artist’s work-in-progress. But they also seem to have something stronger in mind.

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\text{(Self-Forgetfulness)} \text{ If some feature or group of features F contributes to the work’s being expression of some emotion E, the artist’s grasp of which facilitates to substantial self-knowledge, then F should not stay in the work-in-progress.}
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Unlike on a Collingwoodian view, this is not because otherwise the artifact would fail to be a work of art. It is rather—plausibly—that otherwise the work’s artistic value will be diminished. That’s the force of the “should.” The question, of course, is what’s the positive principle? What does determine what should stay in the work?

Expression, I suggest—just in a non-Collingwoodian sense, expression of a kind that does not engender self-knowledge, of a kind that is compatible with Self-Forgetfulness. The Larkin passage I quote above suggests there is some such thing,

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10 Collingwood, 115.
expression that is not self-expression (“though it may look like it,” as Larkin says). What sort of expression might this be?

3 Personal and Impersonal Expressions

I am going to argue for a distinction between kinds of expression. My argument will not be complicated. It will amount to pointing out that there are two relatively separable clusters of features that go naturally together. Some cases of expression—some cases of expressive work—have primarily features in one of these clusters, and other cases have primarily features in the other. For reasons that will become clear very quickly, I will call one kind of expression personal, and the other kind impersonal. In the next section, I will discuss the relationship between each of these and expression in Collingwood’s sense. I will start with broad strokes, after which I turn to what I take to be a feature of each that distinguishes cleanly between them.

Some expressive work can be used to infer things about what the artist who created the work was feeling. We value expressions of this kind for the way they acquaint us with the artist. This is so in the sense that the work’s artistic value would be to some degree undermined were we to find out that the artist did not feel any of the things we find expressed in her work. If we found out that Bukowski, for example, was not really angry in the way he was, never felt any of the frustration of which his work is expressive, the way we value the work would change. Expressive work like this is are connected with what you might call confessional artistic values. Often, we value work expressive this way not just for the way it acquaints us with the artist, but for the way they show us that others feel some of the same things we do. We feel less alone knowing that others are as lonely as we are, as heartbroken, as optimistic. These are the personal expressions, then; work of this kind is personally expressive.

Not all work is like this, however, so intimately linked with the artist’s personality. Consider Chopin’s “Raindrop” prelude, expressive, say for the sake of argument, of some kind of complex, resigned sadness. Appreciating this music’s expressiveness does not turn on our sense for Chopin’s having lived through a particular episode of complex resigned sadness. We do not use it infer something about the way Chopin felt, and nothing—or extremely little—would lost if we found out that Chopin never experienced anything like that feeling. As it happens, Chopin’s letters tell us something about circumstances in which some of the piece was composed. Chopin was waiting on a rainy night for George Sand and her son to return to a monastery where they were all staying. This does tell us something about the work, and establishes some relationship between the feeling expressed by the music and something Chopin felt. But if we were to find this was all mistaken, the letter forged, nothing (or extremely little) about our sense for the work’s value would change. These are the impersonal expressions; work of this kind is impersonally expressive.

To mark the distinction between these two in a satisfying way, however, we need more than these sketches; and it will come as no surprise that I suggest the way to do so is through the concept of self-knowledge.
I said above that, if an artist creates a work expressive of longing, and thereby comes to know herself as experiencing longing herself, she can thereafter try to find out what she is longing for. She can attempt to determine the object of her feeling. The same could go for resignation or optimism. In each case, as I put it, the artist can acquire subjective self-knowledge and then build on that in order to acquire substantial self-knowledge. The artist’s subjective self-knowledge facilitates to her substantial self-knowledge. This, I suggest, is one of the marks of personal expressions.

(PE) If a feeling is expressed personally, then either it constitutes or it facilitates to substantial self-knowledge.

The personal expression of feeling is, in this sense, orienting. It is one step along the way to refining her own understanding of the way her feelings attune her to the world. And it is part of why personal expressions are also ways in which we can get to know artists. Their work bears, in one way or another, the trace of their personality—objects of fear, frustration, regret, love. When something appears in the work as an object of fear, for example, this is how it appeared in the artist’s experience. We can use that as evidence of what the artist felt, and so can the artist herself. The fear is expressed personally.

How does the Chopin compare in this respect? Certainly, Chopin learned something about what he was feeling in composing the music.

Yes; but it matters very much how we construe that something. It is plausible that the emotional content of music. That content is notoriously difficult to put into words. Calling a kind of complex, resigned sadness hardly does it justice. There is some temptation to think that this because the feeling is very abstract in some way, however it is more plausible that it is because the feeling is extremely definite. Mendelssohn is one musician who proposes the idea. Any attempt to put the content of the music into words fails because there is always more in the music that the words do not capture. Collingwood himself thought that this was one of the marks of emotion properly expressed. Any attempt to descript the emotion, to conceive in the way required for linguistic representation, was inappropriate to genuine expression.11

If this is right, then, in composing the Raindrop prelude, Chopin did learn something about what he was feeling, but what he learned was something very precise about a complex stretch of affective experience, ebbs and flows of feeling that the music is able to capture, but which language cannot. This is what the music expresses. When we listen to the music, we can appreciate and engage with expressive content. We can recognize the music as expressive of this complex stretch of affective experience.

However, there is an important difference between this an the personal expression of feeling. Chopin cannot use what he learned about his inner life, this complex stretch of affective experience, as one step along the way to understanding the way his feeling attunes him to the world. What he learned about himself is not

11 Collingwood 112.
something on which he can act to find out how he feels about something or other; it does not present something as having one or another emotion- or feeling-specific property, as, for example, fear, presents some object as being fearful. And this is so not because the content of the music is too general or abstract, but rather because it is too precise; it hews too closely to complex affective structure of Chopin’s inner life.

I want to put it this way. Chopin’s work articulates subjective experience more precisely than can facilitate to his learning something about his affective attunement to the world. The work, rather than bearing the trace of his personality as in the case of personal expression, bears the trace of his subjectivity. It is expressive of the complexities of something close to his raw subjective experience in all its stability and instability, rather than the distillation of that into some more determinate, orienting feeling.

Because Chopin’s expression neither constitutes nor facilitates to substantial self-knowledge, it is not satisfy the requirement on personal expressions. Rather, it shows us the relevant contrasting requirement on impersonal ones.

*(IE)* Impersonal expression do not constitute or facilitate to substantial self-knowledge, while personal expressions do.

The expression is impersonal not in the sense that it is cold, or distant, or abstracted from experience, but rather in the sense so precise as not be personal, individualizing. It does not reflect something about Chopin’s individual point of view, such might ground inferences about what Chopin was feeling when he wrote the music. This is why our sense for the music’s value would survive coming to know that Chopin himself never had the affective experience of which his work is expressive.

Explained this way, impersonal expressions are very similar to—are possibly an instance of—what Susanne Langer calls symbols of feeling. In Langer’s view, feeling is a very broad notion. It applies not only to what we might think of as moods and emotions, like longing or resignation, but also to more abstract features of human experience. One of these, very roughly, is the subject experience of the passage of time. Another is the experience of the space around us as organized into a field of possibilities for action.

All human feeling, as Langer understands it, is characterized by a pattern of tensions and the resolution of those tensions.12 “Probably all emotion, all feeling tone, mood, and even personal ‘sense of life’ or ‘sense of identity’ is a specialized and intricate, but definite interplay of tensions—actual, nervous and muscular tensions taking place in a human organism.”13 And works of art, Langer suggests, make different aspects human feeling available for contemplation, and they do so by being *symbols* of those aspects. The works, qua symbols of human feeling, have a structure, a pattern of tensions and resolutions, that matches in some way—that is “isomorphic” with—one or another of the “specialized and intricate, but definite

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12 Langer 1953, 372.
interplay” of tensions and resolutions that characterize human feeling. I briefly mentioned this claim above in discussion Hopkins’s interpretation of Collingwood.

“Feeling” in Langer’s sense appears to cover what I called above a complex stretch of affective experience. And her claim that works of art are symbols of feeling plausibly entails the claim that works of art are expressive of complex stretches of affective experience. I take this to reflect positively on the claims I have been making. Still—and assuming Langer has covered all the relevant territory here with her concept of a symbol of human feeling—I take my distinction between personal and impersonal expressions to be a distinction within the extension of that concept, one that Langer herself does not draw. Personal expressions are one type of symbol of feeling, impersonal expressions another.

I have introduced the concept of impersonal expressions by thinking about music discussing Chopin and his Raindrop prelude, but impersonal expressions are not limited to music. They will be among the expressive possibilities for any artwork that draws on life in some way: portraiture, realistic narrative in novels and movies. In these cases, an artist will create her work by attending to her objects in a particular way. She will, as O’Connor says, giver herself over to the object—of her experience, the artifact she is working on—“in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made.” In portraiture, for example, the painter attends in a such a way that the work is expressive of a complex stretch of affective experience, where that experience was the painter’s complex encounter with the subject of the portrait.

Or consider a movie, like Greta Gerwig’s Ladybird. The events, the experiences of the characters, are expressive of a complex stretch of affective experience that is so complex we may be inclined just to call it a stretch of life. In appreciate what the work is expressive of, we are not so much learning something that Gerwig herself qua individual personality. She went to high school in Sacramento, and presumably had some of the experiences she depicts in the movie. However, in the movie would retain its expressive power even if we found out that she had made it all up for the sake of the story, that she grew up in Europe or something. When we watch the movie, we are learning something about the subjective experience of living the events in the film. We encounter those events as experienced by a thinking, feeling human, not by some individual, so not by Greta Gerwig. By contrast, we encounter many events in Bukowski’s writing as events experienced by some particular individual, Charles Bukowski. Much of that work’s power derives form the way it bears the trace of his personality.

Both the portrait and the movie are impersonal expressions, I am suggesting. Producing them is a matter of the artist’s attending to the objects of experience in such a way that the result is not a distillation of personal feeling from that experience, such as would constitute or facilitate to substantial self-knowledge.

Langer claimed explicitly that symbols of human feeling do not have practical import. I take this to be consistent with my claim that impersonal expressions are not the kinds of things artists can act on, cannot use to understanding their affective attunement to the world.
Rather, the artist attends in order to meet the demands of the thing seen; her duty is to the original experience, to adapt Larkin’s phrase. What is left over as a result is not a trace of personality, a personal expression, but rather a trace of subjectivity, an impersonal one.

The way I have been explaining the distinction between personal and impersonal expressions makes it sound like a work of art is either one or the other, but this isn’t true. Many works of art does achieve both kinds of expression. I think of the paintings of Francis Bacon. Here there is rage, say, and this is plausibly Bacon’s own, rage personally expressed. But there is also something else in addition, something expressed impersonally, a confrontation with mistrust, shame, and whatever else. It may be true of many, or of most, works of art that they express both personally and impersonally. It may be that the distinction between them is a matter of degree, that they are at opposite ends of a spectrum. This would not erase the distinction. That distinction turns, fundamentally, on the relationship to self-knowledge; that is its crux.

4 Impersonal Expressions, Artistic Value, and Therapeutic Value

At the beginning of this paper, I said that my primary goal was to develop a concept of expression that would meet the demands Spicer and O’Connor place on the creative process. I also said that doing so would facilitate to several other goals, as well. To conclude, I want to return now to these various issues, beginning with the relationship between personal and impersonal expressions, on one hand, and, on the other, Collingwood’s view of expression. How does the latter fit into the former? Attempting to answer will reveal tensions in Collingwood’s view.

To the extent that, in Collingwood’s view, expressing an emotion facilitates to substantial self-knowledge, as I argued it does, it is concept of personal expression. At the same time, there is reason to think Collingwood would have thought that some of the features of impersonal expressions are also features of his concept. Collingwood says that, when artists become conscious of emotions by expressing them, they become conscious of the very particular emotion they are having. Linguistic description is inappropriate to capturing the content of those emotions, because linguistic description is inherently generalizing, and the content of the artist’s emotion is more specific than this. This is very close what I said about impersonal expressions, and, to this extent, Collingwood’s concept of expression looks like a concept of impersonal expression.

But another feature of Collingwood’s view draws it back in the direction of the personal. Collingwood thinks that becoming conscious of our emotions, expressing them, leads to a kind of proto-freedom. Once the artist is conscious of her feeling as one of frustration, she can prevent it from determining her behavior without her consent, in the way it does when she is not conscious of its nature, when it is felt as a mere perturbation. The aspects of experience of which the artist becomes conscious in producing an impersonal expression, however, are not those that are

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15 Collingwood, 112.
suitable for determining action in this way. It is not even plausible that emotion as precisely expressed as Collingwood thinks it is would provide grounds for determining action. Maybe becoming conscious of very particular emotions has an effect on behavior. It may prevent the artist from acting in certain ways that spring from the complex subjective experience to which she has given expression, but this is different from a kind of proto-freedom—as if the artist can say, oh now I know I’m feeling *that*, and I don’t want to act out of *that* feeling, whatever its precise nature. Personal expressions provide material for this latter type of control over action, while impersonal expression do not.

What this shows, I suggest, is that Collingwood’s own concept of expression is incoherent. This is no big deal, really—Collingwood might be happy to break his concept of expression in two. Doing so would presumably have consequences for other parts of his theory, but he may be happy to make adjustments elsewhere. In any case, there is good enough reason to reject the univocal account.

But criticizing Collingwood was not my primary goal; that, rather, was to develop a concept of expression that is capable of meeting the demands Spicer and O’Connor make of the creative process. I articulated those demands in the principle of *Self-Forgetfulness*. To repeat it:

\[ (\text{Self-Forgetfulness}) \] If some feature or group of features \( F \) contributes to the work’s being expression of some emotion \( E \), the artist’s grasp of which facilitates to substantial self-knowledge, then \( F \) should not stay in the work-in-progress.

It is clear enough that impersonal expressions satisfy this demand. They do not facilitate to substantial self-knowledge. They also suggest a positive principle:

\[ (\text{Self-Forgetfulness}+) \] If some feature or group of features \( F \) contributes to the work’s being impersonally expressive, then \( F \) should stay in the work-in-progress.

Here, again, we are dealing with a maxim the justification of which lies in a view of artistic value, not with conditions on what it is to be a work of art.

And just what are these competing conceptions of artistic value? The distinction between personal and impersonal expressions helps answer this question, too. It does so by enlarging our resources for understanding expressive value in art. Expressive value is tied to communication. Work that realizes this value communicates, makes available for others to grasp something about inner life. Not all valuable work is valuable because it is expressive; work can be valuable as—e.g., important historical artifact, insightful comment on artistic practice or history, a perfection of form or technique. Where expressive value is concerned, though, it is easy to think about it as tightly joined to the artist’s personal experiences and point of view, and so part a process of self-recognition: the process of finding ways to reflect, reinforce, or refine a sense of self or identity, for both artist and appreciator. And this is an expressive value, so an artistic value, one grounded by the concept of personal expression.
But expression does not always take this form. In some cases, it is aimed at communicating, making contact with, aspects of inner life that do not facilitate to the process of self-recognition. Such work is valuable not for the way it helps us know ourselves and others better, but for the way it reveals the complexities of experience, the way it reveals, in some cases, things in the world as objects of experience—the subject of a portrait, the events in a movie—rather than as elements in some individual’s experience of the world. This is also an expressive value, so an artistic one, and it is grounded by the concept of impersonal expression. It is possible to argue about the relative merits of type of expression: to see one as more valuable than the other, to formulate maxims in terms of the requirements each one makes of the creative artist. This seems to me to be a large part of the disagreement between Collingwood (or a Collingwood-type view) and Spicer and O’Connor. I have not taken any stand on this evaluative issue.

Then what, finally, about the therapeutic value of creating art? I said at the beginning that one main source of that value lies in the way creating art can lead to self-knowledge, and substantial self-knowledge, in particular. Creating art can help us know something about ourselves, get things off our chests or get clear about things. If impersonal expressions do not facilitate to self-knowledge this way, is the therapeutic value of creating undermined?

The answer is no, I suggest. When the artist aims at impersonal expression, she does not aim to acquire self-knowledge, as she does when she aims at personal expression. She aims, rather, at something, which I might call self-transcendence. To aim to leave a trace of subjectivity, rather than a trace of personality, is to aim to get over and past oneself in a way that can be both demanding and rewarding. It is to aim at shedding those aspects of experience shaped by habit and history and personality, an acquaintance with things that is both more intimate and less self-implicating. There is good in this, too, grounds for claiming there is therapeutic value in impersonal expressions.