



## Art and the Language of the Emotions

C. J. Ducasse

*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 23, No. 1, In Honor of Thomas Munro.  
(Autumn, 1964), pp. 109-112.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8529%28196423%2923%3A1%3C109%3AAATLOT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>

*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* is currently published by The American Society for Aesthetics.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/tasfa.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

C. J. DUCASSE

## *Art and the Language of the Emotions*

THAT ART IS THE LANGUAGE of the emotions has been widely held since Eugène Véron in 1878 declared that art is "the emotional expression of human personality,"<sup>1</sup> and Tolstoy in 1898 that "art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them."<sup>2</sup>

1. *Expression? or expression and transmission?* Whether transmission of the emotions expressed occurs or not, however, is largely accidental; for a given work of art may happen never to come to the attention of persons other than the artist himself; and yet it remains a work of art. Moreover, the individual psychological constitution of persons other than the artist who may contemplate his work is one of the variables that determine whether the feelings those persons then experience are or are not the same as the feelings the artist intended the object he has created to express. Evidently the activity of the artist as artist terminates with his creation of the work of art. What the word *language* signifies in the phrase *language of the emotions* is therefore essentially *medium of expression*, and only adventitiously means of transmission.

But even after this has been realized, the term *language of the emotions* still remains ambiguous in several respects. The present paper attempts to eliminate its ambiguities and thereby to make clear in precisely what sense the statement that art is the language of the emotions must be taken if it is to

constitute a true answer to the two questions, What is art? and What is a work of art?

2. *The arts, and the fine arts.* The first of the facts to which attention must be called is that the word *art* in its generic sense means *skill*; and that the purposes in pursuit of which one employs skill may be more specifically pragmatic, or epistemic, or aesthetic.

Let it therefore be understood that, in what follows, only *aesthetic art*, i.e., what is commonly called *fine art*, will be in view. Indeed, because of the limited space here available, only the visual and the auditory arts, but not the literary arts, will be directly referred to. What will be said about the former arts, however, would in essentials apply also to the latter.

3. *The two central questions.* So much being clear, the two questions mentioned above may now be stated more fully as follows:

a. Just what does the *creative operation* termed *expression of emotion* consist in, which *the artist* is performing at the time he is creating a work of art? b. Just what is meant by saying that *the work of art*, once it has come into existence, then itself "expresses emotions"?

4. *The feelings, and the emotions.* Before the attempt is made to answer these two questions, it is necessary to point out that a fairer statement of what is really contended when art is said to be the language of the emotions would be that art is the language of the feelings. For the term *the emotions* ordinarily designates the relatively few feel-

ings—anger, love, fear, joy, anxiety, jealousy, sadness, etc.—for which names were needed because their typical spontaneous manifestations, and the typical situations that arouse those particular feelings, present themselves again and again in human life. And if, when art is said to be the language of the emotions, “the emotions” were taken to designate only the few dozen varieties of feelings that have names, then that conception of art would apply to only a small proportion of the things that are admittedly works of art. The fact is that human beings experience, and that works of art and indeed works of nature too express, many feelings besides the few ordinarily thought of when the term *the emotions* is used. These other feelings are too rare, or too fleeting, or too unmanifested, or their nuances too subtle, to have pragmatic importance and therefore to have needed names.

5. *Being sad vs. imagining sadness.* Taking it as granted, then, that the emotions of which art is said to be the language include these many nameless feelings as well as the emotions, moods, sentiments, and attitudes that have names, the next important distinction is between *having* a feeling—for instance, *being* sad—and only *imagining* the feeling called sadness; that is, imagining it not in the sense of supposing oneself to be sad, but in the sense of entertaining a *mental image* of sadness.

The essential distinction here as regards feelings, and in the instance as regards the feeling-quality called *sadness*, is the same as the distinction in the case of a color, or a tone, or a taste, etc., between actually *sensing* it, and only *imagining* it; for example, between *seeing* some particular shade of red, and only *imagining* that shade, i.e., calling up a mental image of it as one does when perhaps remembering the red one saw the day before.

6. *Venting vs. objectifying sadness.* Next two possible senses of the statement that a *person* is expressing sadness must be clearly distinguished.

If a person who *is* sad manifests the fact at all in his behavior, the behavior that manifests it consists of such things as groans, or sighs, or a dejected posture or

countenance; and these behaviors express his sadness in the sense of *venting* it, i.e., of being *effusions* of it. They are not intentional; and the interest of other persons in them is normally not aesthetic interest, but *diagnostic*—diagnostic of the nature of his emotional state; and possibly also *pragmatic* in that these evidences of his sadness may move other persons to try to cheer him up.

Unlike such venting or effusion, however, which is automatic, the *composing* of sad music—or, comprehensively, the creating of a work of any of the arts—is a *critically controlled purposively creative operation*. If the composer manages to accomplish it, *he* then has expressed sadness. In order to do it, however, he need not at all—and preferably should not—himself *be* sad at the time but rather, and essentially, *intent* and striving to achieve his intent. This is, to compose music that will be sad not in the sense of itself experiencing sadness, since music does not experience feelings, but in the sense of *objectifying* sadness.

And that a particular musical composition objectifies sadness means that it has the *capacity*—the power—to cause an *image* of sadness to arise in the consciousness of a person who attends to the music with aesthetic interest; or, as we might put it, the capacity to make him taste, or sample, sadness without actually making him sad. It is sad in the sense in which quinine is bitter even at times when it is not being tasted; for bitter, as predicated of *quinine*, is the name of the *capacity* or *power* of quinine, when put on the tongue, to cause experience of bitter taste; whereas bitter, as predicated of *a taste*, is the name not of a capacity or power of that taste, but of *that taste quality itself*.

7. *Aesthetic contemplation.* A listener who is attending to the music with interest in its emotional import is engaged in aesthetic contemplation of the music. He is doing what the present writer has elsewhere proposed to call *ecpathizing* the music—ecpathizing being the analogue in the language of feeling of what reading is in the language of concepts. Reading *acquaints* the reader with, for instance, the opinion which a given sentence formulates

but does not necessarily cause him to adopt it himself. Similarly, listening with aesthetic interest to sad music *acquaints* the listener with the taste of sadness, but does not ordinarily make him sad.

8. *The process of objectification of feeling.* The psychological process in the artist, from which a work of art eventually results, is ordinarily gradual. Except in very simple works of art, the artist very seldom imagines precisely from the start either the finished elaborate work he is about to record or the rich complex of feelings it will objectify in the sense stated above. Normally, the creative process has many steps, each of them of the trial and error type. In the case of music, the process may get started by some sounds the composer hears, or more likely by some sound-images that emerge spontaneously out of his subconsciousness and inspire him. That they inspire him means that they move him to add to them some others in some particular temporal pattern. Having done so, he then contemplates aesthetically the bit of music he has just invented and perhaps actually played; and, if need be, he then alters it until its emotional import satisfies the inspiration that generated it. Next, contemplation in turn of the created and now satisfactory musical fragment generates spontaneously some addition to it, the emotional import of which in the temporal context of the previously created fragment is then in its turn contemplated, judged, and either approved or altered until found satisfactory. Each such complex step both inspires a particular next step, and rules out particular others which a different composer might have preferred.

This process—of inspiration-creation-contemplation-judgment-and correction or approval—is repeated again and again until the musical composition, or as the case may be the painting, or statue, or work of one of the other arts, is finished; each image that is found satisfactory being ordinarily recorded in musical notation, or in paint on canvas, etc., rather than trusted to memory.

9. *The sources of the emotional import of an object.* The feelings, of which images are caused to arise in a person when he

contemplates with aesthetic interest a given work of art, or indeed any object, have several possible sources.

One of them is the *form* of the object; that is, the particular *arrangement of its parts in space, or in time, or both*. Taking as simplest example a tone expressive of sadness, its form would consist of its *loudness-shape*, e.g., diminuendo from moderately loud to nothing.

A second source of feeling would be what might be called the *material* of the tone; that is, its *quality* as made up of its fundamental pitch, of such overtones as may be present, and of the mere noise it may also contain.

And still another source of feeling would be the emotional import of what the presented tone may *represent* whether consciously or subconsciously to a particular hearer; that is, the emotional import which the tone may be *borrowing* from past experiences of his to which it was intrinsic, that happened to be closely associated with experience of that same tone at some time in the history of the person now hearing it again. For instance the tone, although itself rather mournful, might happen to have been the signal of quitting time at the factory where he worked at a tedious job. This would have made the tone *represent* something cheerful—would have given the tone a cheerful *meaning*; the cheerfulness of which henceforth automatically mingles with, or perhaps masks for him, the otherwise mournful feeling-import of the tone's presented quality and loudness shape. This third possible source of the emotional import of an aesthetically contemplated object may be termed the object's *connotation*; so that in the example just used the tone has mournfulness of quality and form, but cheerfulness of *connotation*.

Something must be said at this point, however, to make clear both the likeness and the difference between what Santayana, when discussing specifically beauty, means by beauty of *expression*, and what would be meant by beauty of *connotation*.

By beauty of expression, Santayana means such beauty as an object would owe to the fact that, in the past history of the person who now finds it beautiful, it had

*pleasurable* associations, and that, if these are not now explicitly recalled, their pleasurable-ness is automatically borrowed by the object; thus making it beautiful since, in Santayana's view, that an object is beautiful means that, in aesthetic contemplation, it is found pleasurable.

The likeness between what Santayana means by beauty of expression and what would here be meant by beauty of connotation is that, in both cases, the beauty now found in the object arises from something automatically borrowed by the object from associations it has had in the past experience of the person concerned.

The difference, on the other hand, is that in what Santayana calls beauty of expression, what the object so borrows and connotes, is *not beauty* but, and essentially, *only pleasurable-ness* (no matter whether sentimental, aesthetic, or other); whereas, in what would properly be called beauty of connotation, what the object borrows and connotes would be the *beauty* of something *itself beautiful*, with which it had been associated. Thus, whereas the cheerfulness of the tone was *cheerfulness* of connotation, the beauty of expression of an object is *not beauty* of connotation, but only *pleasurable-ness* of connotation.

The sense of the word *expression* in Santayana's phrase *beauty of expression* is thus different from the three senses of expression already distinguished, to wit, (a) expression as designating the kind of *operation* being performed by an artist creating a work of art; (b) expression in the sense it has when one speaks for instance

of the sad expression on a man's face, for sad expression then means *symptom* of sadness—*diagnostic sign* that he is sad; and (c) expression as designating the *capacity* of an object when aesthetically contemplated by a person to generate in him an image of sadness, i.e., to make him taste sadness.

10. "*The language of the emotions*" defined. The effect of the several distinctions, to the indispensability of which attention has been called in what precedes, is, the writer believes, to make it possible now to state precisely the sense in which it is true that art is the language of the emotions. This sense is as follows.

Art is the critically controlled purposive activity which aims to create an object having the capacity to reflect to its creator, when he contemplates it with interest in its emotional import, the feeling-images that had dictated the specific form and content he gave the object; the created object being capable also of generating, in other persons who contemplate it aesthetically, feeling-images similar or dissimilar to those which dictated the specific features given the object by the artist, according as the psychological constitution of these other persons resembles or differs from that of the artist who created the particular work of art.

*Brown University*

<sup>1</sup> Véron, *L'Esthétique* (Paris, 1882), p. 35; 1st ed., 1878.

<sup>2</sup> Tolstoy, *What is Art?* Trans. Aylmer Maude (London, 1899).