

# Malcolm Ross

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## The Angel in the Brain : Notes towards an intelligence of feeling

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Malcolm Ross

## The Angel in the Brain: notes towards an intelligence of feeling

Whether it be the singing of a lamp or the voice of a storm,  
whether it be the breath of an evening or the groan of the ocean –  
whatever surrounds you,  
a glorious melody always wakes behind you,  
woven of a thousand voices, where your own solo  
can find room only here and there.  
Knowing the moment to join in, that is the secret  
of your solitude.

Rainer Maria Rilke: 'Notes on the Melody of Things', transl. by D. Searts

### Feelings and Emotions

When someone asks us how we are, and we do this for each other pretty well every time we meet, they are asking us how we feel. We take this question two ways. We are being asked about our physical health for sure: an appropriate reply would almost certainly take account of our bodily wellbeing (we are getting a cold, we are recovering from an operation, our back problem is better). But we do not always and only think of our bodies in formulating our reply, and sometimes we actively choose not to report such matters – they seem too personal somehow. We are, however, always expected to report on what we might call our 'metaphysical' circumstances, by which I mean upon the feeling of how we happen to be in our lives right now (feeling anxious, feeling buoyant, feeling resentful, feeling on top of the world). Our moods say a lot about how things are with us, about what (trouble) weighs upon our mind. For we are fated to live with unknowing as well as knowing.

Roman Ingarden<sup>1</sup> holds that the central purpose of art is to open a window on the stars in the night sky of our becoming: to open the window of knowing upon the 'metaphysical qualities' of existence, upon the feeling of how we hap-

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<sup>1</sup> R. INGARDEN: *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation of the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic and Theory of Literature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

pen to be, upon ourselves as someone uniquely ‘happening’ (‘suffering’) in the world. According to Ingarden we never tire of the view through that window, never satisfy the longing we have for intimate knowledge of the furthest depths of our existence. To gaze through that window is, he says, using Aristotle’s term, to engage in an act of contemplation. In our busy lives – including our busy lives in schools – we find too little time and have too little energy to spare for star gazing. The arts, as creative, reflective practices, offer us a privileged observatory of our own night sky. The arts are for answering the question, ‘How are you?’ But indirectly. It is only when all has been said and done that we even understand that the question has been asked of us. The answer, if it comes, is always a gift.

### Expression in Art

The expressive process in art is the probing of feeling in feeling. ‘The Feeling of What Happens’<sup>2</sup> is a vague emotional experience, quite different from active emotion itself. Where active emotion is focused, entirely familiar and a call to act in connection with something directly happening to or affecting us, feelings are more diffuse – are more like the anonymous 16th-century English mystic’s ‘clouds of unknowing’. They are of course not unrelated to emotions but they lack emotional definition and intentionality. Feelings hover at the back of consciousness, dictating our mood, our state of mind, our readiness and ability to perform effectively as players in the game of life. In a sense they are the raw materials of active emotion – but they are more than that. They form a continuous stream of consciousness out of which emotional behaviour erupts and of which we again become aware in the aftermath of an emotional episode. Emotions pass; feelings change. In some respects our feelings are the closest we come to a palpable sense of our continuing, changeable, vulnerable identity, of who we are. Closer even than our skins. Our feelings tell us that who we are is problematic, an open question, never to be finally resolved this side of death.

Ingarden speaks of the work of literature that is a work of art as a ‘nothing’ – as something brought into being ‘by our grace’. I want to say that this nothing begins nowhere – and nowhen. It begins as a feeling for what we might become and a desire to test that possibility. It begins as the vaguest longing – the longing, just as Ingarden suggests, for a revelation – a revelation that is not a vision but a state of being. It is like the longing for love that depends not upon our appeal but another’s grace. For the working at art that might give us a work of art is

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<sup>2</sup> A. DAMASIO: *The Feeling of What Happens. Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. London: Heinemann, 2000.

a blind feeling for form that just might finally occur to us as a revelation, a becoming. What, beyond the impulse to try for it drives this commitment to a nothing that is everything? Going maybe nowhere and arriving nowhen? I think Ingarden would say simply an impulse to know: he calls it the 'drive to cognition'. Perhaps the most that can be said for us is, 'I ask, therefore I am.'

The world of feeling described above, the outer spaces of our starlight nights, hover around us beckoning, as the cloud capped peak of Everest beckoned its first conquerors. The spirit of adventure is there. The longing to travel as well, to go beyond the blue horizon, over the rainbow. But maybe also some innate dream of the beautiful, which surely artists are born with, a temptation, an infatuation, a scourge, a promise, a hope. The song of the siren. Rilke sings of 'the melody of things'. It is as if artists hear that melody, but dimly, and intermittently. But there is no resisting it: Odysseus had to be tied to his mast. They long for it as the first astronauts longed, presumably, for the music of the spheres. Artists know that the way to the stars lies in their hands, falls at their feet, takes them by the ears. It begins in the possibility of the beautiful that lies within all material things, in the stuff of the world all around us. Trees speak as do mountains and rivers – earth can be made to live, metal to sound, water will turn jewel and fire bedazzle. Those are pearls that were his eyes.

There is a spell, an enchantment that lives in the handling of the stuff of the earth – and the possibility, discovered long ago, of fashioning from it, not only a livelihood, but that which will speak or sing to us of our own inmost longings and mysteries. This human dream was dreamed from the beginning and we have been living it ever since. Art arises simply as the human need to find the revelations our makings might have in store for us: to discover the poetry (*poiesis*) in crafting (*techne*). But, once more as Ingarden says, the poetry does not come in answer to our call, may not be summoned or approached directly, conceptually or conjured by magic. We are powerless in everything but the capacity for an intuitive recognition: for knowing – and for waiting, and believing. And for faith. Every time it comes from nowhere and is nothing – there's nothing we can pin down since the work is not it. We have nothing to show for our labours – and yet everything to share, for we are changed. When it comes it is a gift, a grace – so very like love in fact, it might just be that very thing.

The impulse directly to interrogate our feelings, to open the window on our own night sky, arises as a sense of disturbance, as what Leon Festinger has called 'cognitive dissonance'. We are moved by a feeling that something in our lives does not fit or sit comfortably with us and we need to find out what it is so we can either be rid of it or find a way of adapting to it. It demands attention because as a vulnerable organism we cannot afford either to be underpowered or to be preoccupied with ourselves: we need all our vigilance and adaptive powers maximally available for the business of survival. But for this to happen we must bow out for a while, take leave of our senses, be excused from the duties and

obligations of everyday. Martha and Mary. The cognitive project is cyclical, and unending. We proceed from dissonance to interrogation and knowing, finally testing the effectiveness of the project against a deep inner sense of reintegration, of self-recognition (Gk *anagnorisis*), of peace. I believe this might be how we are to understand Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*.

If feelings are the problematic material of consciousness upon which cognition is brought to bear, they are also the cognitive process itself. If feeling is a form of cognition deployed in the interrogation of feeling disturbance then the expressive process in art follows some such cycle as the one I provide as a model of creativity in my book *Cultivating the Arts in Education and Therapy*<sup>3</sup>. The expressive act in art is subject-reflexive: in other words it brings expressive materials into dialogue with subjective feeling to deliver an understanding symbolically. The art work embodies the meaning we are looking for, the meaning which will change us. Ingarden describes this coming together of materials and feelings as their 'essential connection'<sup>4</sup> – he also sees this movement of exploration as finally and essentially metaphysical. The dreams of art are made of the stuff of reality.

## The Intelligence of Feeling

My colleague Robert Witkin published his book *The Intelligence of Feeling* in 1974, over thirty years ago. He and I had been researching the teaching of the arts in English secondary schools and his book, together with my own, *Arts and the Adolescent* (1975) and *The Creative Arts* (1978), were the outcomes. At the time the notion of promoting feeling intelligence in the context of education seemed both new and controversial, despite the long history in the philosophy of art of what the British philosopher, my beloved mentor, Louis Arnaud Reid, in his book *Knowledge and Truth* (1923) called 'cognitive feeling'.

In my new book I am proposing that the cycle of knowing in the arts (the intelligence of feeling) has five distinct phases. The scope of this paper allows me to do no more than introduce them. These phases have five associated metaphysical qualities – and these qualities determine the principal symbolic structures of artistic feeling, the principal artistic or expressive forms that our stories, our passions, our sufferings, take. These five forms are the symbolic archetypes of art, the basic forms of the beautiful. Following the traditional Chinese theory of the Five Elements we arrive at the following ('space-travel') story of related elements, cognition, emotion and form:

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<sup>3</sup> M. Ross: *Cultivating the Arts in Education and Therapy*. London: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 303.

		<u>Element</u>	<u>Cognition</u>	<u>Emotion</u>	<u>Form</u>
Phase 1	The Mission	Metal	Knowledge	Grief	Tragedy
Phase 2	Lift Off	Water	Intuition	Fear	Fantasy
Phase 3	The Journey	Wood	Interrogation	Rage	Adventure
Phase 4	Re-entry	Fire	Knowing	Love/Joy	Comedy
Phase 5	Recovery	Earth	Recognition	Peace	The Sacred

Every expressive project seeks the resolution of a feeling problem, registered in consciousness as a particular sensate disturbance. Arriving at an expressive form that resolves the expressive impulse means identifying and representing the character or sensate quality of its feel in embodied, symbolic meaning. The process begins (Phase 1) with the uncomfortable sense of dissonance that arises as the problematic experience eludes assimilation into our present knowledge system. Attempts at assimilation give rise to an intuition as to a way forward (Phase 2), but since the way is unclear it feels risky. Nevertheless there is a willingness to take the risk that transforms to something like frenzy (Phase 3) as the creative-destructive surge to forge a new sensate structure (represented in the emergent art work) sweeps all before it. At Phase 4, with the resolution at least partially achieved, the new knowing is shared and receives its first public, cordial welcome. The final phase of the cycle (Phase 5) allows for the testing of the authenticity of the outcome by the artist herself. Where the project is judged successful there is an incomparable sense, not of relief so much as of peace, of wholeness, of the new state of the self as, strangely, recognisable. It is a sacred moment, a gift, a grace (as Ingarden says). The cycle is completed (Phase 6 is identical with Phase 1) as the new knowledge constitutes the adapted self.

The model, as we have seen, includes feeling and active emotion. Emotion becomes the content of art; feeling is its informative and formative agent. Particular elements are associated with specific emotions and feelings. The table above suggests that each of the cardinal emotions gives rise to an associated expressive form. We interrogate what we have become to become what we might be.

### A Case in Point

I want to quote an excerpt from the diary of Virginia Woolf, the famous modern English novelist, author of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. She is writing in her diary in the summer of 1921 whilst struggling with recent poor reviews and trying to finish her novel *Jacob's Room* (1922). As was sometimes the way with her, finishing a novel was a time of growing mental crisis. She had been plagued by such trouble all her life and the periodic tensions of a life writing

were always liable to bring on another episode of what she called her 'madness' – complete exhaustion, depression and periodic hallucinations. The remedy prescribed by her doctors and enforced by her family was very punishing: total rest, solitary confinement, no work, no exercise – and an eccentric diet.

Here is what she writes:

18 August 1921.

Nothing to record, only an intolerable fit of the fidgets to write away [my emphasis here and below]. Here I am chained to my rock; forced to do nothing; doomed to let every worry, spite, irritation and obsession scratch and claw and come again. This is a day that I may not walk and must not work. Whatever book I read bubbles up in my mind as part of an article I want to write. No one in the whole of Sussex is as miserable as I am; or so conscious of an infinite capacity of enjoyment hoarded in me, could I use it. The sun streams (no never streams, floods rather) down upon the yellow fields and the long low barns, and what wouldn't I give to be coming through Firlie Woods, dirty and hot, with my nose turned home, every muscle tired and the brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane and cool, and ripe for the morrow's task. How I should notice everything – the phrase for it coming the moment after and fitting like a glove; and then on the dusty road, as I ground my pedals, so my story would begin telling itself; and then the sun would be down; and home, and some bout of poetry after dinner, half read, half lived, as if the flesh were dissolved and through it the flowers burst red and white. There! I've written out half my irritation. I hear poor L. driving the lawnmower up and down, for a wife like I am should have a latch to her cage. She bites! And he spent all yesterday running around London for me.

Certain elements interest me particularly. She feels restless, vulnerable, miserable and frustrated ('an intolerable fit of the fidgets to write away'), the impossibility of the joy of her desiring. She identifies an 'infinite capacity of enjoyment' hoarded within her. Inspiration for fresh writing 'bubbles up' in her mind. She writes lyrically and imaginatively of that denied, joyful part of herself ('the sun streams (no never streams, floods rather) down on the yellow fields and the long low barns'). She knows she can find the precise utterance she is looking for, the exact words to match and recall the feelings she wants to express ('fitting like a glove'). She is used to receiving her imaginative work as spontaneous transmissions from the unconscious ('my story would begin telling itself'). Focussing on the body she readily crosses the boundaries of consciousness ('poetry after dinner, half read, half lived, as if the flesh were dissolved and through it burst flowers red and white'). Finally she finds that she has 'written out' half her misery

and is able to laugh at herself and feel grateful and affectionate towards her husband ('poor L. driving the lawnmower up and down').

It would be difficult to find a more vivid account of the expressive, healing work of intelligent feeling. She begins at the bottom of the pit and climbs out, partly by her own exertions and partly following her instincts as a writer, not talking about her feelings but embodying them in the expressive language of which she was such a master. If consciousness is indeed a 'stream' – and her writing is thought of as establishing that particular literary genre – this passage from her diary shows how feeling runs intelligently to and fro between impulsive desire on the one hand and its embodiment in symbolic form on the other, rendering her whole and healthy through the therapeutic power of self-knowing ('the brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane and cool and ripe'). In realising her hoard of happiness in a few deftly chosen images, in finding beauty through her gift as a writer, Woolf succeeds in recovering personal equilibrium and lightening her darkness.

### Cognition as Intuition

Speaking of intelligence, whether of feeling or reason, we are speaking of the 'grasping', the so called 'picking up', the appropriation, of experience – taking hold and claiming the world for ourselves. I want to suggest that whereas disembodied discourse becomes intelligible through the application of logical reasoning, the meaning of an embodied symbol is grasped intuitively. Intuition differs from rational intelligence in as much as intuitional understanding is a matter of 'seeing' rather than making connections, of contemplation rather than calculation. Intuition is a kind of divination that apprehends meaning as a whole and immediately, rather than piecing it together by an incremental logical process over time. Intuition is a feeling, the feeling of knowing.

*My Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* describes intuition as 'The immediate knowledge ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical.' (The C19 English poet William Wordsworth uses the word 'intimation' to mean much the same thing in his famous ode, 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.')

This is the way feeling intelligence works: at the level of Primary Consciousness, we sense the pain or the pleasure and we intuit danger or advantage in self-preservation. This is what Spinoza meant when he said that the effort to preserve oneself is the first and unique foundation of virtue. This is the way the intelligence of feeling works in the making of art: we perceive the sense of fittingness and intuit the emergence of meaning – of virtue if you prefer – from the confusions of being.



The creative process in art, as either making or reception, comprises a series of intuitive (feelingful) decisions as the maker's attention oscillates between the feeling impulse seeking formal expression and the medium in which the artist or the art lover hopes to find it. The making and reception of the art symbol is the revelation or uncovering of personal meaning in Higher-order Consciousness from the intimations provided in Primary Consciousness. The intuition of meaning is the angel in the brain. It is the intelligence of feeling that is the go-between drawing low definition feeling or intuition in Primary or Core Consciousness to full articulation and resonance in Higher Consciousness. When Virginia Woolf receives her story it is a gift offered by the story-making processes of the cognitive (constructive) unconscious, picked up as an intuition or intimation of a kind of immortality in Primary Consciousness that immediately becomes her heart's desire. She allows the writing to be guided by feeling or intuition alone in the realisation of her 'infinite capacity' (we might say 'appetite') for joy. For personal meaning. For the beautiful. Art answers this desire as nothing else – apart from the beloved, and the beloved country. The work of the artist in me is always the work of love, the love of life, the love of my life. Rilke in the poem quoted above says, 'the love of God'.

## Conclusion

Ingarden writes 'We do not have the strength, we do not have the time, as it were, to lose ourselves in contemplation; yet there lives in us, for whatever reasons, an inextinguishable longing for precisely this losing of ourselves in contemplation. This longing is the secret source of many of our acts. But it is also the ultimate source, on the one hand, of philosophical cognition and the drive for cognition, and, on the other hand, of artistic creativity and satisfaction in it... Art, in particular, can give us, at least in microcosm and in reflection, what we never attain in real life: a calm contemplation of metaphysical qualities.'<sup>5</sup>

Ingarden's idea of the self lost in reflective contemplation of the metaphysical qualities of art meets Rilke's vision of the Melody of 'Things, *sub specie aeternitatis*. It also meets Virginia Woolf's account of her writing herself out of her irritability, and of her losing herself in a 'bout of poetry' – 'half read, half lived, as if flesh were dissolved and through it the flowers burst red and white.' To match these metaphysical understandings lies the challenge for the teacher of art in a world dominated by the principle of calculation. In education she must be given the time, the license and the strength to do the work of contemplation.

<sup>5</sup> R. INGARDEN: *The Literary Work...*, p. 293.

Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!  
Oh look at all the fire folk sitting in the air!  
(‘The Starlight Night’, by Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Malcolm Ross

### Kultywowanie sztuki w edukacji i terapii

#### Streszczenie

Autor proponuje twórczy, ekspresyjny model poznawania w sztuce. Przyjmując metafizyczną perspektywę Romana Ingardena w spojrzeniu na znaczenia w sztuce, domaga się pedagogiki, która angażuje i rozwija „inteligencję odczuwania” (inteligencję uczuć) dziecka. Autor odróżnia uczucia od emocji i pokazuje je jako medium świadomości. Pisze o pilnej potrzebie odzyskania równowagi w systemach edukacyjnych, które tradycyjnie akcentowały obiektywność i racjonalność, ze szkodą dla subiektywności i uczuć, wiedzę, ze szkodą dla poznawania, i kalkulację, ze szkodą dla kontemplacji.

Malcolm Ross

### Die Pflege der Kunst in Ausbildung und Therapie

#### Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser bemüht sich, ein innovatives, expressives Erkenntnismodell in der Kunst zu entwickeln. Die metaphysische Betrachtung der Kunstbedeutung von Roman Ingarden zur Kenntnis nehmend, fordert er eine solche Pädagogik, die die „Intelligenz des Empfindens“ (Gefühlsintelligenz) des Kindes in Beschlag nehmen und weiterentwickeln würde. Die Gefühle von Emotionen trennend lässt er sie als ein Medium des Bewusstseins erscheinen. Der Verfasser behauptet, dass es sehr nötig ist, in den Bildungssystemen in denen: Objektivität und Rationalität nachteilig für Subjektivität und Gefühle, Kenntnisse nachteilig für Erkenntnis und Kalkül nachteilig für Kontemplation hervorgehoben waren, ein Gleichgewicht zu erreichen.