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Negative Emotions and Creativity

Derek Matravers

I. Certain works of art, particularly the narrative arts, feature episodes that are apt to provoke experiences that spectators find painful. A paradigm example would be the scene in *King Lear* in which Regan and Cornwall put out Gloucester's eyes. If we combine this fact – that some art gives rise to painful experiences – with the hedonic theory of motivation we seem to have an inconsistency. This is the so called 'paradox of tragedy'; that people both are and are not motivated to pursue painful experiences. In a helpful recent article Aaron Smuts has done work disentangling various claims, and shown that the so-called paradox is not a paradox at all as there is no reason to believe the hedonic theory of motivation. Instead, he argues, we are left with two questions that do merit attention: the 'motivational question' and 'the difference question'.

The *motivational question* asks: Why is it that people want to see putatively painful art? And, the *difference question* asks: Why are people more willing to experience painful affect in response to art than in their normal lives? (Smuts 2009: 43)

I think Smuts is right about the problems that arise with respect to episodes in narrative art such as the blinding of Gloucester. However, I think 'the paradox of tragedy' has helped obscure the deeper and more interesting links between art and the negative emotions. In this paper I will show that, given certain plausible assumptions, a picture emerges in which the negative emotions have a fundamental role in accounting for the value of art. I claim, in short, that artistic creativity is at base the working through of certain negative emotions, and that this explains the categorical nature of the value of art. Having argued this, I will return to Smut's two questions at the end of the paper. To simplify matters, I shall limit myself to a discussion of painting, although what I say generalises, to an extent, to some other art forms.

The first assumption I shall make is a rather sharp division within painting between works that are, and works that are not, art. All will concede that in applying another coat of gloss paint to my front door I do not produce art. Fewer will concede Richard Wollheim's distinction between paintings that are, and paintings that are not, art:

So, there are house painters: there are Sunday painters: there are world-politicians who paint for distraction, and distraught business-men who paint to relax. There are forgers – an interesting group. There are chimpanzees who have brush and colour put invitingly within their reach: there are psychotic patients who enter art therapy, and madmen who set down their visions: there are little children of three, four, five, six in art class, who produce work of explosive beauty: and there are the innumerable painters of street-scenes, painters of Mediterranean ports, still-life painters, painters of mammoth abstractions, whose works hang in old-fashioned restaurants or modern banks, in the foyers of international hotels and the offices of exorbitant lawyers, and who once, probably, were artists, but who now paint exclusively for money and the pleasure of others. None of them are artists, though they fall short of being so to varying degrees, but they are all painters. (Wollheim 1987: 13)

The matter is not one of linguistic stipulation; it is not a question of how the term 'art' is used. It is rather a question of whether Wollheim has succeeded in providing a distinction with a difference. I think he has, and light will be cast on that difference in the discussion below. In what follows, when I talk about paintings or about art I will mean the rather narrow set of objects that Wollheim gestures at in the quotation above.

The link between art and the negative emotions is best found through reflection on the nature of artistic value. My second assumption is Malcolm Budd's account of artistic value:

If a work of art is a good work, that is so in virtue of its nature or character, the constellation of properties that constitute it: it is these properties that need to be cited in support in an assessment of the work's value. And the reason why a work of this nature or character is a valuable work of art is that the experience offered by this work – the appropriate experience *of* this constellation of properties – is intrinsically rewarding: the intrinsic value of the experience is a measure of the artistic worth of the constellation of properties that compose the work. (Budd 2007: 95)

Although I agree with Budd that the properties that constitute the work are those that 'need to be cited in support in an assessment of the work's value', it is an open question whether such justifications will always be available.

My third assumption is that the value of some works of art, and perhaps an element of the value of all works of art, is *categorical*. The categorical status of a value is a complicated notion, although familiar from other parts of philosophy. There are at least three aspects to it. First, the value of a work of art can be experienced as being – for want of a better way of putting it – of 'supreme' value. That is, the experience is captured in judgements of the sort 'if anything is valuable, then that is valuable.' The problem has been explored somewhat in the philosophy of music, in attempts to say what is meant by judgements that a work is 'profound'. Part of what is meant by such a judgement, according to Jerrold Levinson, is that the music 'strikes us as touching, in some fashion or other, on the most fundamental and pressing aspects of human existence' (Levinson 1992: 59). My claim is that some paintings strike us in that way. Second, our judgement arises from our experience of the work, rather than inferentially. We grasp that the work is valuable independently of our grasp of the grounds of this value. Furthermore, our judgement does not depend on our ability to articulate these grounds. (I remain agnostic as to whether it is always possible for the grounds to be brought to awareness; that is, in Budd's terms, for 'an assessment of the work's value' to be articulated, although it would not surprise me if it were not always possible.) Finally, there is the Kantian thought that the value is experienced as being independent of the viewer; that is, as not depending on any particular interest or end the viewer happens to have at the moment the viewing takes place.

I should add that it is not part of my claim that the viewer's experience of the value of the work is veridical. It is sad but true that works that are 'pseudo-profound' are not easily distinguished from works that really are profound. Robert Sharpe provides plausible examples of composers whose works, he claims, are apt to be mistaken for profound works: Gorecki and Tavener (Sharpe 2004: 118). Regarding literature, the same suspicion hangs around the later works of Hemingway, and, amongst those of us who admire Rothko's paintings, there is a worry that their tendency to encourage 'muffled threnodies to the ineffable' forms a barrier to our understanding (Hughes 1991: 240).

The categorical nature of at least some aspects of artistic value has an analogy with morality in all three of the aspects mentioned. Notoriously, the phenomenology of moral obligation is of a categorical requirement. First, the feeling of moral obligation is a feeling of being bound by invisible and involuntary chains. John McDowell famously claims that obligation is experienced as overriding: as *silencing* competing motivations (McDowell 1978). Second, we generally feel the requirement before we are aware of the grounds for the requirement. As Beatrice Longuenesse has recently put it, 'common moral understanding may have a correct representation of what duty commands without having a clear representation of the universal moral principle under which this command is justified' (Longuenesse 2012: 27). Finally, and

more familiarly, moral requirements are experienced as independent of whatever interest or end the agent happens to have at that particular moment.

That we experience the demands of morality as categorical is, of course, the source of philosophical puzzlement. Moral requirements appear to outrun any reasons we might have for them. As a result, attempts to ground morality in reason (for example, social contract theory) are widely thought a failure as the moral requirements still appear binding to us even when those reasons no longer apply. Kant famously attempts to answer the question of the source of moral requirement by talk of 'respect for the moral law' (Kant 1948). However, as there is no adequate naturalistic account of this the attempt must be regarded as a failure. There has recently been a great deal of work that attempts to build on Freudian insights in attempting to locate the source of feelings of moral obligation in our early psychological development.¹ As Bernard Williams has argued, "Once we have ceased to believe in Kant's own foundation or anything like it, we cannot read [the experience of moral obligation] in this way at all...it seems to come 'from outside' in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside – from deeply inside" (Williams 1985: 191). More recently, Samuel Scheffler has provided a convincing argument that psychoanalysis is the only way to provide a naturalistic account of the experience of moral obligation (Scheffler 1994: ch. 5).

Clearly there are differences between the moral and the aesthetic case. In the moral case it is, typically, a course of action that we feel is of overriding value while in the aesthetic case it is an object, typically, a work of art. However, what drives people to appeal to psychoanalysis is the experience of value as categorical, and this is true of both the moral and the aesthetic case. To quote Longuenesse again, 'any imperative that is presented as categorical, which is to say unconditioned by any particular interest or end, and thus unamenable to criticism in the light of its adequacy to that end or the value of the end it is supposed to serve, is characteristic of the structure of the superego/ego ideal' (Longuenesse 2012: 33). We do not, however, need to rely merely on Longuenesse's observation: we have independent reason, within our thinking about the arts, for adopting this approach.

II. Our task is to throw light on the categorical value that art has for us. We need to provide an account of the deep internal sources of artistic creativity that informs our understanding of interpreting and valuing individual works of art. This is more difficult than it might appear. We cannot make use of accounts of creativity--for example, those which identify creativity with combining elements in unexpected ways--that do not represent creativity as internally related to value. Instead, we need to account for the categorical value of art in terms of the creativity that went into its making.

Fortunately, there is such an account in the literature in the work of Melanie Klein and her followers. It will not be a surprise to anyone familiar with Klein's work that the negative emotions are found right at the centre of that account. This is not the place to venture a full account of Klein's theory of infantile psychosexual development, so I will rely on Juliet Mitchell's summary of the relevant part of that theory:

The ego makes use of [projection, introjection and projective identification] to cope with the inner world and the constant interaction between inner and outer. Its own destructive feelings – emanations of the death drive – make the baby very anxious. It fears that the object on which it vents its rage (e.g. the breast that goes away and frustrates it) will retaliate. In self-protection it splits itself and the object into a good part and a bad part and projects all its badness into the outside

¹ The approach, once rather marginal, is in danger of becoming mainstream. In addition to those quoted in the text, further prominent defenders of this approach are Jonathan Lear and David Velleman (Lear 1999; Velleman 1999).

world so that the hated breast becomes the hateful and hating breast. Klein describes this as the paranoid-schizoid position. As developmentally the ego becomes able to take in the whole person, to see that good and bad can exist together in the same person, it continues to rage against the mother for the frustrations she causes, but now, instead of fearing retaliation, it feels guilt and anxiety for the damage it itself has done in phantasy. Klein calls this the depressive position. In overcoming this position the baby wishes to undo or repair the earlier phantasized destruction of the actual and internalised mother. (Mitchell 1986: 20)

For Klein, the key to creativity is the overcoming of the depressive position, characterised by the desire to 'undo or repair the earlier phantasized destruction of the actual and internalised mother.' She tells us in some detail of the development of the painter, Ruth Kjar. Kjar was evidently suffered from feelings of loss and depression which she overcame by painting; eventually painting her relatives, her mother in old age, and then her mother in the prime of her life. From this, Klein concludes: 'It is obvious that the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself was at the bottom of the compelling urge to paint these portraits of her relatives' (Klein 1929: 93).

The account has been usefully filled out further by Klein's follower, Hannah Segal. Segal begins her account in the orthodox Kleinian way:

The wish to restore and re-create is the basis of later sublimation and creativity...all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. (Segal 1952: 44-47)

She then presents five case studies in support of the Kleinian claim that reparation is something on which we can embark only once we have worked through the depressive position. The five studies are of artists who are somehow stuck in this position, unable to move on, and unable to be creative. Segal concludes that creativity stems from overcoming negative emotions and moving onto a more positive stage in one's mental development.

One might think that this all takes place at too high level of abstraction to be of any use as a theoretical basis for criticism. After all, the claim is that *all* artistic creativity is rooted in the overcoming of the depressive position. Criticism characteristically discusses individual works of art in their full particularity; what it is to understand this particular work, and how this particular work stands in terms of value to other works. Evidently Segal thinks her account does have something to say on this issue. She says, of papers from the psychoanalytic tradition:

Until recently such papers were not mainly concerned with aesthetics. They dealt with points of psychological interest but not with the central problem of aesthetics, which is: what constitutes good art, in what essential respect is it different from other human works, more particularly from bad art? (Segal 1952: 43)

The way in which the theory bears upon particulars takes its inspiration from a line of Rilke's which Segal uses as an epigraph for her paper: '...For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we admire it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us...' (*Duino Elegies* (1923)). This line is also quoted by Michael Tanner in his book on Nietzsche as the 'basic thought' of *The Birth of Tragedy* (Tanner 1994: 17). The fundamental structure of Nietzsche's and Segal's account is the same. In both there is something terrible and unbearable, yet utterly compelling, which is the source of the attraction and value of art: in Nietzsche this is the Dionysiac abyss, in Segal the torture of the

depressive position. And in both there is something that mitigates this: in Nietzsche the Apolline surface in which the Dionysiac is reflected, and in Segal the reparation that re-creates the lost and ruined inner objects. As Segal puts it:

It would appear then that two factors are essential to the excellence of a tragedy: the unshrinking expression of the full horror of the depressive phantasy and the achieving of an impression of wholeness and harmony. (Segal 1952: 56)

Clearly, achieving the balance between the terror we are just able to bear and whatever it is that prevents it from destroying us, is, for these two approaches, the skill essential to creativity. The success or failure in drawing this balance is the key to the value of particular works of art.

The Klein/Segal approach to creativity has the advantage over the Nietzschean approach in that there is more to draw on in describing how particular works might succeed or fail. Recall, the claim is that the source of what is compelling in art is our profound negative emotions: 'the unshrinking expression of the full horror of the depressive phantasy'. The link between the abstract theory and particular works of art is that such expression would, clearly, be difficult to bear and difficult to bend to one's will in the creation of 'an impression of wholeness and harmony'. Whether, or how, the artist succeeds in doing this is, on this view, the principal determinant of the quality of an individual work.

For some, this account will be vitiated by its appeal to psychoanalysis, and so something needs to be said about my reliance on it here. I offer two remarks: one in support of Kleinian psychoanalysis and the other in qualification of my allegiance to it. In support, it must be borne in mind that I have not given the full details of the case on which Klein's conclusion rests, but even with details supplied, it is admittedly only a single case. However, there are other grounds for taking Klein's conclusions seriously: she has a background theory that rests on years of clinical observation which gives her an explanatory framework, and her conclusions here sit within that framework. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what other kind of account of creativity will serve our purposes. A purely causal account of how works came to be would provide nothing that could feed into the understanding and criticism of a work. Accounts of creativity that are not internally related to value will be insufficient to account for categorical value. In qualification, I am not committed to the exact details of the Klein/Segal approach. All I am committed to is that some psychoanalytical account can be given, along broadly those lines. I here find myself in sympathy with Samuel Scheffler, who registers a similar qualification in his account of the sources of moral obligation:

We need not accept the theory to recognize the advantages of its explanations, or to agree that they provide a good indication of the complexity of the psychological materials from which any better explanations would have to be constructed. We may therefore bracket the question of psychoanalytic theory's ultimate acceptability, and treat the psychoanalytic account of moral motivation as an example of a naturalistic account that is more adequate psychologically than the standard accounts, which are either psychologically agnostic or psychologically insipid. (Scheffler 1994: 83)

III. Having given an account of artistic creativity, I still need to say in detail how this bears on the understanding and criticism of art. Let us grant the view that understanding a work is getting to grips with the creative process that went into its creation, a point to which I shall later return. That is, understanding a work is getting to grips with and assessing the mental states of the artist that resulted in the work before us. It is as a commentary on the assessment of such states that we can make sense of some gnomic remarks by Wollheim in his essay 'The Sheep and the Ceremony'. I shall quote at length from this essay, where Wollheim makes the

startling claim that there is only one way in which creativity can add to the significance of a work of art.

It is no small mark of the austerity, of the high seriousness, of art that, while there are several ways in which the activity of making the work can detract from its significance, there is only one way in which it can add to it. It can add to it only when that activity constitutes a process of self-knowledge – with all that that implies: for self-knowledge invariably brings in train self-change, self-reparation. ... Contrast this with ways in which the significance of the work is diminished by the nature of the artist's activity. I shall indicate two ways in which this may come about. First of all, the work of art may insufficiently, too imprecisely, fit the internal states that it is supposed to reflect, and, if this happens, not just any old how, but along a particular dimension, in that something felt to be shameful or degrading or frightening, something... whose outward manifestation could not be steadily contemplated, fails to get externalised, then the artist, in making the work of art, not only fails to acquire self-knowledge, he strenuously attains to self-error...

The second way in which the creative process can contribute negatively to the expressive value of the work is this: The fit between outer and inner need leave nothing to be desired... Nevertheless, the increment in self-knowledge that might reasonably be expected of the creative process does not occur, and the reason why is to do with the spirit in which the process was undertaken... the artist may wish to triumph over what the work could show him; he may want to disown it, or treat it as the belonging of another; he may make it serve his designs upon the spectator, to lure him or to scandalize him. But, whatever the fine detail of the motive, the upshot is the same. The artist has externalized some mental constellation so as to rid himself of it, or of its consequences, and this [is a] way in which the creative process can contribute negatively to the expressive value of the work... (Wollheim 1979: 11-12)

But what, to get to the important question, is valuable about such understanding? First, there is the mere fact that certain objects, particularly artefacts, can reflect complex conditions of the mind. As Wollheim says,

mere fit... between the inner and the outer is something to which in itself we are inclined to assign value: value, moreover, which we think of as related to significance or meaning. The inclination rests, I take it, upon the thought that fit humanizes nature, or that through fit we make ourselves at home within the world. (Wollheim 1979: 8)

This value is irrespective of whatever value we might place on the mental state itself. However, as the above quotation from 'The Sheep and the Ceremony' makes clear, that too will have value. To quote from Wollheim again: we expose our inner life to the light of day, 'and it is no small matter... whether what is exposed can stand up to the test' (Wollheim 1979: 9).

Wollheim provides us with the elements for an account of the value of art: creation is a process of self-knowledge in which the artist draws from deep inside. These painfully-won mental states then cause the painter to mark the canvas as he or she does in the expectation that these will bring about a certain experience in the spectator. This drives us towards the familiar debate on the relation between the meaning a spectator finds in a work of art and the mental states of the artist who created it. Specifying the role of the spectator that allows him or her to experience the value of art was one of the motivations for Wollheim's lifelong adherence to his singular and slightly peculiar version of actual intentionalism about art.

It is not, however, easy to situate Wollheim in the ongoing debate around the relevance to interpretation of an artist's intentions. The standard criticism of actual intentionalism is neatly summed up by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their famous paper when they remark that 'Critical enquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954: 13). That is, if the meaning of a work is given by the intentions of the creator, it appears to follow that the sensible way to resolve critical questions would be to consult the creator as to what his or her intentions were. As Wimsatt and Beardsley point out, this conclusion is unacceptable.

But Wimsatt and Beardsley's objection assumes two things. First, that works of art are acts of communication; the artist is trying to tell us something and the point of art is to grasp what it is he or she is trying to tell us. Second, that an artist has an intention, of which the artist is conscious, that his or her work should mean such-and-such, and the artist makes the work such that a spectator can discern that it indeed means such-and-such.

Although it is easy to imagine particular works in which one or both of these are true, neither assumption holds generally. The first simply asks the wrong question. It is only if we assume the model of 'art-as-communication' that the right question would be 'What is this work trying to tell me?' The relevant question, rather, is something like 'When I am engaging with a work of art, what am I doing?', to which Wollheim returns the answer 'retrieving actual intentions'. We do not need to consider whether to engage with the work or instead consult the creator since we are already doing both. The second assumption presupposes a quite hopeless view of creativity. For Wollheim works of art, and specifically, paintings, come about in virtue of certain states of mind of the artist, the fact that those states of mind cause the artist to mark the canvas in a certain way, and the fact that the artist is able to anticipate the experience the spectator will have on looking at the canvas (Wollheim 1987: 44). The relation between the mental states of the artist and how they mark the canvas involves, amongst other things, clarification of some of those states, the manipulation of the canvas so that it becomes a suitable object on which to project some states, and the retrieval of some states from the unconscious. Not only is there no fully-formed intention prior to the making, but there is no reason to think that artists are always conscious of what they are doing before they actually do it.

It is more difficult to pinpoint the difference between a Wollheimian actual intentionalism and the kind of hypothetical intentionalism espoused by Jerrold Levinson and others.² Levinson's view is roughly that work meaning is a matter of utterance meaning: namely, what an appropriate spectator would most reasonably take the artist to mean in putting forward this particular work in a given communicative context (Levinson 1998: 150). Levinson himself is rightly puzzled as to where the difference between him and Wollheim might lie. Wollheim's interest, as we have seen, is in the intentions manifest in the surface of the work. However, as Levinson says, such intentions 'cannot be thought of as an independent condition to which viewers' responses can be held accountable, but can only be understood in terms the responses of appropriately primed and backgrounded viewers being the ones they were intended to be' (Levinson 1998: 250). Hypothetical intentionalism would give Wollheim all he needs; no further constraint on interpretation is given by appeal to intentions.

It might be thought that Levinson is wrong that intentions do not provide an independent constraint on interpretation. After all, there are facts about intention that would not be available to viewers of the work in the absence of background knowledge. Intentions might be realised but only to a degree; some parts of the work might have come about by design and others by accident; there could have been a change of mind, or the artist could have stuck to his or her intention and failed in it and more besides (Wollheim 1980: 188-194). This does seem a contrast between the two views. However, we must first enter a caveat: much of what is available to Wollheim's critic will be available to Levinson's critic as Levinson allows his

² Such as Gregory Currie and Alexander Nehamas (Nehamas 1981; Currie 1993)

critic (as we have seen) to be ‘appropriately primed and backgrounded’. That is, Levinson’s critic can know nearly as much about the nature of the artist and the circumstances of the work’s production as Wollheim’s critic. I say ‘nearly as much’ because Levinson explicitly disallows appeal to ‘the author’s actual pronouncements of intent to mean or convey this or that’, arguing that such an appeal would be ‘contrary to the ground rules of the game of literary decipherment’ (Levinson 1992: 207-208).³ As Wollheim does allow such appeals it looks as if we have at least this difference between the two views.

Appreciating why this interpretation of the differences misconstrues the debate returns us from this digression on interpretation to the value of the negative emotions in art. As we have seen, Wollheim allows that knowledge of the artist’s state of mind, gained independently of experiencing the work, can feed into our interpretation of that work. This, however, is not the core of his thought. The important contrast between Wollheim and Levinson (and other contributors to the debate⁴) lies in the different conceptions of the relation between an artist’s intentions and the work of art that the artist produces.

Here is Levinson defending his view that the critics should disregard ‘actual pronouncements of intent to mean or convey this or that’:

The artist’s *state of mind* is not our ultimate goal as interpreters of literary works, but rather what meaning can be ascribed to those works, albeit as indissociable *products* of those very particular communicative agents... (Levinson 2002: 306)

And here is Wollheim in a revealing – and at the same time rather amusing – description of his critical method:

I evolved a way of looking at painting which was massively time-consuming and deeply rewarding. For I came to recognize that it often took the first hour or so in front of a painting for stray associations or motivated misperceptions to settle down, and it was only then, with the same amount of time or more to spend looking at it, that the picture could be relied upon to disclose itself as it was... To the experience, to the hard-won experience, of painting, I then recruited the findings of psychology, and in particular the hypotheses of psychoanalysis, in order to grasp the intention of the artist as the picture revealed it. (Wollheim 1987: 8)

| **The** task of the critic, for Wollheim, is to bring to the understanding of art an extremely rich conception of human nature. He or she needs to retrieve the creative process which includes, as an important part, understanding the way in which the artist worked through the depressive position to reparation and brought the two into an impression of balance. It also includes grasping the role of the artist’s unconscious, his or her attempts at complex projection, and more besides. The nature of this highly refined and fine-grained engagement with the artist’s creative process dissolves Levinson’s distinction between the artist’s state of mind and the meaning that can be ascribed to the work. The deceptive appearance of similarity between Wollheim’s view and the current literature stems from construing his view as stateable in terms of some kind of communicative act. But it is not. The issue for Wollheim is not one of

³ Although not directly relevant to the argument here, it seems open to Levinson to take a different view: namely, allow the critic to make use of such statements as simply one more piece of evidence in the mix. Provided the statements are (a) answerable to the experience of the work and (b) not regarded as authoritative I do not see how they are a threat to the hypothetical intentionalist position (Stecker 1997: 200-202). Were Levinson to allow this, however, then the contrast with Wollheim’s view would likely vanish.

⁴ See for example Noel Carroll’s recent Wollheim Memorial Lecture. Although this is much to agree with in Carroll’s essay, I do not think he takes sufficient account of this point (Carroll 2011).

working out *prior* intentions, communicative or otherwise; rather, for him, what we experience in the surface of the work, albeit in a bafflingly complex way, are the *actual* intentions that went into its creation.

IV. How, if at all, does the position argued for in this paper relate to the ‘paradox of tragedy’? Recall, the ‘paradox’ arises out of the inconsistency between the fact that we are motivated to engage with works that arouse the negative emotions and the hedonic theory of motivation. Given the hedonic theory of motivation, all that is required for the problem to arise is that a work arouses a negative emotion. Thus the problem arises regardless of the quality of the art: encompasses canonical art works (such as *King Lear*) as well as grindhouse movies, horror movies, and the like. To reflect this generality, Berys Gaut has renamed it ‘the paradox of the enjoyment of negative emotions’ (Gaut 1993: 333). As the position argued for in this paper has nothing to say about such works generally (as it only concerns works that are art in Wollheim’s sense) it is not likely to contribute to a solution. Furthermore, I do not think the problem arises in any simple sense for Wollheimian art. If this is right, it should greatly diminish the significance of the problem for aestheticians.

In order to state the paradox one needs to distinguish works that arouse negative emotions from those that do not arouse negative emotions. This already suggests the problem does not arise for Wollheimian art as the account I have given allows no such distinction: *all* artistic creativity has its source in working through early psychic trauma. However, surely one can put that to one side. Whatever the account of creativity there will still be *some* kind of division between works that depict state of affairs apt to arouse the negative emotions and works that depict states of affairs that are not apt to arouse the negative emotions. The ‘paradox of the negative emotions’ will arise for works of the first sort but not for works of the second. However, as one would expect of an account of creativity rooted in psychoanalysis, the state of affairs a work depicts is only the beginning of the story about its content. We can see this if we look at some examples of Wollheim’s commentary on a particular work.

Titian’s *The Flaying of Marsyas* depicts Apollo and his companions removing the skin from the still-living satyr. The state of affairs depicted is truly horrendous: Marsyas’ body is suspended upside down from a tree. His skin is half off, and the dripping blood has made pools which are being lapped at by a small dog. Various spectators look on. One reason Wollheim picks this picture to discuss is that it presents a problem for criticism. An interpretation of the work in terms of iconography has it as demonstrating ‘joy, elation, and triumphant righteousness...the victory of what is higher in nature over what is lower.’ This can take various forms: the triumph of rationality over the senses, the ascent of man from the world of confusion into the realm of eternal harmony, or the triumph of the soul over the body. The difficulty is in our being able to the experience the picture in that manner (Wollheim 1987: 324). According to the account I have presented, however, what the picture is about is not the state of affairs it depicts but rather what the depiction of this state of affairs meant to the artist. In a startling five pages of criticism, Wollheim attempts to disentangle the metaphorical, representational, expressive, and textual content of the picture and emerges with the view that Titian’s intentions, and thus the correct way to experience the work, are indeed positive. What the painting is about is indeed ‘the victory of the soul over the body’ (Wollheim 1987: 326).⁵ In short, the negative emotions provoked by a work’s depicted content feature in our engagement with such works as only one element, which interacts with a number of other elements, in an exceptionally complicated episode. It follows that, in

⁵ In contrast, works that appear innocent can be traumatic. John Constable’s *Hadleigh Castle* (which, unsurprisingly, depicts Hadleigh Castle) is described as ‘deeply harrowing’ and Monet’s *The Seine in Thaw* (which, again unsurprisingly, depicts the Seine in thaw) is described as ‘expressing sorry, and regret, and the slow recovery from sorrow sustained by the abandonment of old regrets’ (Wollheim 1987: 86, 95).

themselves, they do not raise any issues concerning either our motivation to engage with the works or in what we get out of them.

With this in mind, we can return to Smuts' two questions and ask how they bear on Wollheimian art.

The *motivational question* asks: Why is it that people want to see putatively painful art? And, the *difference question* asks: Why are people more willing to experience painful affect in response to art than in their normal lives? (Smuts 2009: 43)

The motivational question, applied to painting, asks why we would want to engage with a painting when such an engagement would require us to retrieve, and perhaps work through, some harrowing mental episodes. It was exactly the problem of finding an account of our motivation that was adequate to our engagement with art that drove us to seeking an answer in psychoanalysis. Our motivations for engaging with art are built deep into our natures. The difference question, applied to painting, is easier to answer. Artworks, and the paintings among them, are different from 'our normal lives'. They are essentially sites where the human mind is laid bare and its complexities revealed, and nothing in the non-artistic realm is, in this respect, remotely comparable. Hence, if we want the rewards offered by art, art is the only place we are going to find them.⁶

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⁶ Versions of this paper have been read to Philosophy Departments at the Open University, and the Universities of Leuven, Auckland, Waikato, and Singapore. I am very grateful to the hospitality shown, and for all the comments I received, on those very enjoyable occasions. [I am also very grateful to Jerrold Levinson for his forbearance, and for suggestions that have greatly improved the paper.](#)

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