

## MAKING THE PAST: McFEE'S FORWARD RETROACTIVISM

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'WE MUST understand works by these authors [i.e., precursors of Kafka] in terms of Kafka's ideas'. We would not perceive the Kafkaesque quality if Kafka had not written; 'in other words it would not exist' (Borges).

Graham McFee<sup>1</sup> quotes Borges as a preamble to his claim, which he characterizes as 'forward retroactivism', that later works and later events can change the meaning of earlier works of art, a conclusion which depends on certain general premisses drawn from the philosophy of language. I shall try to reconstruct an argument which he expresses rather fluidly.

1. The grounds for a judgement affect the content of the judgement. Thus if different reasons are given for two judgements which are ostensibly the same, the judgements differ. Thus if different grounds for the judgement that, say, Beethoven is the supreme representative of the Viennese classical period are given by a contemporary such as Spohr or E. T. R. Hoffman and a later writer like Tovey, then two different judgements are being made. Suppose, then, that different considerations become available to critics in the course of time. Suppose that they make what, at first sight, is the same judgement about what a given work of art or part of that work means. Nevertheless because their grounds differ, their judgements about what the work means will differ. This alone will not give us the conclusion that the meaning of the work or part of the work has changed. For it is possible that one of the judgements about the meaning is wrong. We need also premiss 3 below.

2. The judgement of a later critic may depend upon the existence of ideas which were not current when the work was created. There was not, in 1605, a fact of the matter such that *Hamlet* was about individualism for the reason that the concept of individualism was not extant. Where such a judgement cannot be made the facts do not exist. For this reason we cannot say that *Hamlet* had that meaning when it was written but that Shakespeare's contemporaries failed to grasp the fact. (This is not one of McFee's examples.)

3. McFee believes meaning and understanding are correlated. Thus if we understand *Hamlet* differently from Shakespeare's contemporaries, then the meaning of *Hamlet* has changed. So, assuming that our understanding of *Hamlet* has changed, it follows that its meaning has also changed.

The first thesis does not convince. It carries the unacceptable consequence that we could never find new and further grounds for a judgement already

made. Thus I could not find further grounds for the claim that the events of *The Turn of the Screw* are a fantasy of the Governess because any further grounds that I find, either through letters or diaries of Henry James or by noting a previously overlooked part of the text, would entail that the judgement made on that basis would be a different judgement from the earlier. This does not accord with our practice and, if viewed as a proposal to reshape these practices, would have disastrous consequences for our methods of ratiocination; it is an integral part of these procedures that judgements already made can be confirmed in the course of future debate. By the same token, its corollary, McFee's belief that two judgements will differ where different things would make the judgement false, would, if followed, severely restrict our capacity to revise or overturn existing judgements. We could not overturn a judgement on the basis of newly discovered evidence.

I shall not dispute the second of these theses. McFee illustrates it with reference to the claim that Bach and Handel are the culmination of the High Baroque, a judgement which is unexceptionable and which contemporaries of these composers would not have made for two reasons. Firstly, they lacked the periodization of musical history required for this judgement and, secondly, a related point, they could not have known that the Baroque was about to give way to the Galant style and ultimately to Viennese classicism.

Having said this, however, the example is an odd one for McFee to choose because it is not a judgement about meaning at all. (Indeed any examples from music are odd given the problems about what music 'means'.) It is not part of the meaning of the music of Bach and Handel that they are the apotheosis of the High Baroque. I suppose we might say that a failure to consent to this judgement would show a failure to understand the nature of eighteenth-century music but what that advertises is a distinction between meaning and understanding which flies in the face of McFee's conflation of the two. I shall have more to say about that in a moment.

Before I do so, I want to consider another of McFee's themes. In an *oeuvre*, later works may come to cast light on earlier. It is very hard to listen to Beethoven's First Symphony as his contemporaries heard it, as a development of, in the main, Haydn's later work. What we hear are the signs of mature Beethoven. In the same way immature Keats may remind us of the late great poems. But there is no reason to suppose that the late poems change the meaning of the earlier. They may cause us to notice features in the earlier which we would not have noticed had Keats died even younger than he did. When we hear those phenomenal early French orchestral songs by the fifteen-year-old Britten, we notice signs of the mature composer. (Remember such signs can mislead us. We can pay the wrong sort of attention.) It is a matter, I would say, of 'foregrounding' but not of 'meaning'.

Let us now turn to the third and final claim. A distinction is sometimes made between 'meaning' and 'significance'. The meaning of a work is settled once and for all at its creation. Its significance may change. McFee is suspicious of this distinction which, he claims, is a distinction made within critical practice and not antecedent to it. Certainly, but that McFee is committed to its existence is shown by his treatment of another and rather worn example, Akenside's phrase 'his plastic arm'. McFee has to say, of course, that to read this as referring to a prosthesis is a misreading. But here he helps himself to a notion to which he is not entitled. This misreading is a misreading because it attaches a sense to the words 'plastic arm' which cannot be given to such words at the time Akenside was writing. Yet if the meaning of a poem changes over time why has the meaning of this not changed? Why should we privilege the eighteenth-century sense of 'plastic'? That we do so McFee tacitly concedes. Indeed the principle that meaning depends on what the sense of the words was at the time of writing is confirmed every time a textual authority corrects a misunderstanding of a word or a stretch of text by pointing out that the word had a different sense when penned. As a consequence of this we may then change an overall interpretation of a work. We require, then, of McFee something which he does not provide, a criterion enabling us to say when it is licit to change the meaning of a work and in what ways. But if we have this, then we have the distinction between meaning, which depends upon usage at the time of creation, and significance, which can change, a contrast which McFee has denied.

Of course, conventions of literary understanding are just that, conventions, and they could alter. But we keep the conventions we have because they are of value. If we were to allow readings of a work to be at the mercy of later developments then we would be imprisoned in our own parochialism. Part of what makes art worth while would have been lost, namely an insight into cultures which differ from our own. There is a major difference between those responses to a work of art which are peculiar to me or even to my culture and those which are controlled by the meaning of the work, in so far as that is recoverable.<sup>2</sup> The fact that a work seems to me to sum up some of the dilemmas of modern man may be what makes the work peculiarly valuable to me and, to the extent that other people in my culture share that view, may account for its significance to us more generally. If that significance is not illusory, it will depend in turn on securing the original meaning. Securing the meaning of a work of art is, in this respect, a form of securing the meaning of a historical document.

I am not clear why constructivism requires McFee to adopt a thesis which denies a distinction between the meaning of a work and its significance for us. On the face of it, there seems an equivocation between two senses of 'understanding', one correlated with meaning and the other with significance. However this may be, a play or a poem contains, if not speech acts, imitations thereof<sup>3</sup>

and on any defensible view what is meant by a speech act<sup>4</sup> depends on the usage of the context of utterance, not on the usage several centuries later.

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Graham McFee, 'The Historical Character of Art: a Re-appraisal', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1992), pp. 307–319.
- <sup>2</sup> This distinction reception theory elides. See my 'Where Interpretation Stops', in G. McGregor and R. White, eds., *Reception and Response* (Routledge 1990), pp. 181–195. Indeed it seems to me that McFee's position
- allows the same sort of pointless games with texts as did deconstruction though, of course, his paper displays an intelligence and level of argument not to be met with in any advocate of deconstruction that I have ever read.
- <sup>3</sup> Or something like it—it hardly matters for this objection that I get that issue straight.
- <sup>4</sup> And, *pari passu*, imitations of that.