

Meaning in Drama and Dance: A Response to David Carr

Unfortunately, David Carr (1997) extensively misrepresents some of my principal theses. In correcting the most important of his misrepresentations, I hope to bring out positive aspects of my arguments. For the rest, I hope that people will read what I have written, not what he attributes to me. While I am very grateful for his kind comments about the influence of my work, if I may say so, it would be more conducive to constructive debate if he were to take more care to represent it accurately.

Tripartite Division

There are serious inaccuracies in Carr's characterisation of my tripartite division of physical activities¹ He attributes to me the thesis that: "purposive sports are about competition and winning, aesthetic sports are about aesthetic satisfaction through well turned performance ... performance arts are about the artistic ... communication or expression of themes, issues, ideas or feelings" (Best 1978: 351-52).

There are several errors here. First, let me make what may initially appear to be a trivial criticism of a rather sloppy barbarism, but which, in this context, may lead to confusion:

(a) Purposive sports are not about anything. This is misleading and may blur an important aspect of my distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic. In order to refute Low's contention that sport can be art because of its aesthetic qualities, I point out that whereas sport can be a subject for art, art could not be a subject for sport (Best 1978: 122 and 1993: 180). Indeed the very notion of a subject for sport makes no sense. to put it crudely, a work of art might be said to be about something, whereas it would make no sense to ask what a football match is about. Thus it cannot intelligibly be said that purposive sports are about competition, although I remember a dance by Robert Cohan, entitled "Cell", which was about the effects on human personality of living in a competitive society.

(b) The same applies to aesthetic sports: they are not about anything. They may involve, but they are not about, aesthetic satisfaction.

(c) It is, perhaps, even stranger to contend that the performance arts are about the artistic expression of issues. Unlike the preceding cases, one could give some sense to it. One may, just about, be able to imagine a work of art which takes as its subject matter the artistic expression of issues, etc., but it would be highly unusual, and at present I cannot think

¹ I have written on this in several places, e.g. Best (1978: Chapter 7).

of one. Perhaps Brecht comes close to it occasionally, and there is a painting by Picasso of a painter painting a self-portrait. But these are highly exceptional cases.

(d) More seriously, as I have made abundantly clear in many places (e.g. Best 1978: 105), it is an obvious yet surprisingly still-common mistake to distinguish between purposive and aesthetic sports in terms of competition. I criticised Arnaud Reid for this mistake (Best 1978: 105). Carr is very careless here: (1) Aesthetic sports can be, and usually are, as competitive as purposive sports. For example, a few years ago, you may remember, there was an American skater who plotted the injury of her most feared rival before the Olympic Games. This is as bad as stamping in Rugby, and worse than sledging in cricket²—disgusting though that practice may be. And (2), purposive sports are not necessarily competitive. Climbing is a purposive sport, but it is rarely competitive. A friend in Phoenix, Arizona, prefers to play golf in the height of summer, with temperatures of 100° F. because he has the course to himself. He derives great satisfaction and relaxation from it, and, just to pre-empt any possible resort to the vapid notion of competition against oneself, I should add that he is not concerned about his score.

To put it briefly, the logical point, which I have made very clearly many times, is that in a purposive sport there is an end or a purpose which, as long as it is within the rules or norms, is independent of the manner of achieving it, whereas this makes no sense with respect to an aesthetic sport, where the aesthetic manner of performing is intrinsic to what the performer is trying to achieve.

Moreover, there are competitive music festivals. Kyung Wha Chung, the superb Korean violinist, after winning one such competition, said that it was one of the worst experiences of her life, since competition brings out the worst in people.

There are competitive events for other arts, so competition certainly cannot be regarded as a distinguishing feature, since it can apply to all three categories. What is so disturbing is not so much that Carr is obviously wrong here as that he attributes to me precisely the misconception which I have very clearly exposed several times. These initial misrepresentations portend more serious ones, and may underlie more fundamental misconceptions, which appear later in his paper.

² 'Sledging' in cricket means destroying a batsman's concentration during a game by shouting abuse. 'Stamping' in Rugby means deliberately stamping on an opponent's bodily parts (even the face) while he is down.

Dance, Acting, and Artistic Content

Carr's principal thesis is that 'acting may ... be regarded as a vehicle for the expression of an independently given dramatic content. To that extent, it can be construed instrumentally...as a means to the realisation of...[an] artistically separate end' (see p. 62, this issue). This, he contends, is by contrast with dance: 'whereas presentation relates only externally to content in the case of acting, it is internally related in the case of dance. The criteria of appraisal [for dance] are not governed by fidelity to some pre-given script ...' (p. 62).

There are, of course, differences between dance and acting, but this is not one of them. What, I think, underlies Carr's contention, as becomes even clearer later in his paper, is an oversimple conception of identity: or, to put the point another way, a conception of the relationship between interpretation and text which, although perhaps initially plausible, is incoherent. The mistake here is to regard the text of a play as comprising a fixed uncontroversial meaning, and the acting as a separate attempt to reproduce that independent meaning with maximum fidelity. On this view it is a criterion of acting success to mirror as precisely as possible that independent textual meaning. Thus Carr writes of acting as 'fidelity to some pre-given script'.

But it is difficult to make sense of this, for the interpretation which is intrinsic to, and inseparable from, the acting *is* the way in which the meaning of the text is conceived, by director and actor. That is, the acting is the expression of that particular conception of the play: in seeing the acting you are seeing the meaning.

Of course there may be various conceptions of the textual meaning, revealed in various productions, but these are not contingently added on to the 'real' textual meaning. On the contrary, they *are* the textual meaning. The acting is not the icing on the cake of textual meaning, but the ingredient which constitutes the cake.

The same applies, of course, to reading the text: the supposition of a meaning which is beyond understanding makes no sense, and there may be indefinitely many understandings of the meaning of a play. But this is certainly not to concede to an extreme idealist or subjectivist position, that therefore there is no textual meaning at all. A professor of literature once made the extraordinary assertion that Shakespeare's plays have no meaning, since any meaning is given solely by the subjective interpretation which each individual gives to it. Another professor once said that the notion of a symphony makes no sense: that when we go to a concert there are as many symphonies as listeners.

These contentions are as absurd at their extreme as is the understanding-independent, interpretation-aseptic conception of artistic meaning at the other. It is rather that the text of the play sets parameters of possible valid or legitimate interpretation. There are vague and flexible boundaries to the

meaning of a play. This is abundantly evident, for instance, in the range of conceptions of the meaning of each of Shakespeare's plays. This indeterminacy of meaning, given by various productions, is the lifeblood of drama, and is the reason why one wants to see different productions of the same play, and even later developments in the run of the same production. It reflects the creative ambiguity of art. To use a phrase from my first book, there is an indefinite but certainly not unlimited possibility of valid interpretation or conception of artistic meaning.

One may be inclined to think that it would be less misleading to speak not of 'the meaning', but of 'the meanings', where a work of art is concerned. But that would be unnecessarily to fly in the face of common usage. One college considered naming one of its constituents the 'Department of musics'. While one appreciates that such a title would indicate breadth of studies, it seems unnecessary, even pretentious. On that basis, there should be departments of philosophies, histories, geographies, etc. As long as we are clear, as are most people, that the notion of artistic meaning necessarily incorporates a potentially indefinite range of possibilities, no confused idea of a single, definitive meaning need be implied.

While there may be differences with respect to, on the one hand, the relationship between text and performance in acting, and, on the other, between choreography and performance in dance, these differences, if indeed there be any, are, contrary to what Carr contends, of degree not of kind. The parameters of meaning are the understanding of the text or choreography respectively.

Interpretative Reasoning

Before continuing, it is important to correct other inaccuracies. Carr states that I characterise artistic and/or aesthetic appreciation, 'in terms of what he [Best] calls "interpretive reasoning" ... to distinguish artistic reflection or reasoning from more instrumental forms of reflection and enquiry' (Carr 1997: 354-5). Again, there are several misrepresentations here:

(a) I do not call it 'interpretive reasoning': I call it 'interpretative reasoning'. "Interpretive" is, I think, an American infection which, admittedly, like others, has now seeped into English usage. This is a trivial point, but it is yet another indication of Carr's tendency to impose his conceptions as supposed accounts of mine.

(b) Much more importantly, I did not introduce the crucial notion of interpretative reasoning for the reason which Carr attributes to me. As I make abundantly clear everywhere I use the term, it applies just as much to the sciences, history and other forms of knowledge and enquiry as to the arts. It is not exclusive to the arts, but has much more

general applicability. In my view it is more important than other forms of reasoning since, for instance, it gives sense to inductive reasoning.

(c) I do not use it to characterise aesthetic appreciation, although in some cases one might. Again, Carr imposes his own preconceptions on my arguments, this time carelessly ignoring what I regard as an important distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic.

(d) Contrary to what Carr attributes to me, interpretative reasoning does not distinguish artistic reasoning from what he calls 'more instrumental' forms of reflection and enquiry. He does not make it clear what he means by this, but, for instance, interpretative reasoning may be instrumental in affecting action, and it may be crucial in determining the sense of inductively derived conclusions.

There is much more to be said about interpretative reasoning than I can include here: I have written on it in several places. However, I must make the point (albeit too briefly) that there is, of course, an important distinction between interpretation and the conceptualisation which gives understanding of reality. Any reason necessarily presupposes a ground which gives it sense. Whereas answerability to reason is always appropriate in the case of interpretation, this is certainly not true in cases where one is using a foundation concept, i.e. one which underlies interpretation, or which gives sense to one's world. I shall give an example to make this clearer, but my main point now is to emphasise that I propose the notion of interpretative reasoning to cover both kinds of case, not because I am unaware of the important difference, but because (a) there is not always a clear distinction between them, and (b) the character of reasoning in each case is the same; roughly it consists in giving a perspective or understanding.

Near the island of Skomer, a sea bird sanctuary in Pembrokeshire, the West Wales Naturalists' Trust has provided the 'Lockley Lodge Interpretative Centre' in order to help visitors to recognise the birds which they will see and hear; but the reasons given for such recognition are so similar to interpretations that it is natural to refer to them in that way. This illustrates my point that there is not always a clear distinction between interpretation and recognising correctly what one sees. In the same vein, there are 'Interpretive [*sic*] Centres' at the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

A precisely similar situation frequently arises in the sciences. Discovery is obviously not merely a matter of accurate sensory perception. Normally an optician could not help. Bronowski puts it:

new ideas in physics amount to a different view of reality. The world is not a fixed, solid array of objects, for it cannot be fully separated from our perception of it. It shifts under our gaze, it interacts with us, and the knowledge that it yields has to be interpreted by us (Bronowski 1973).

Giving reasons for interpretations, whether of a work of art or of a scientific observation, is very like giving reasons for judging something to be of a certain kind, and, in relevant cases, it may be very difficult to decide whether a disagreement or change would be more accurately described as the same facts interpreted differently, or different facts because of a different conception. Thus, although there are important differences, there are also close similarities, and I am using the notion of interpretative reasoning to cover both kinds of case. As J.B.S. Haldane once observed: 'the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose'. Reasons for a different understanding of physical reality can radically shake entrenched preconceptions.

I raise this matter because in this context it may be objected that the notion of interpretation implies dualism, i.e. the interpretation, and what is interpreted. But, as I hope I have made clear, this is not important to my argument, which is concerned with the potentially indefinite variety of meanings of the same work of art. Whether one wants to call them interpretations or not is not relevant to my argument, although I have given reasons for it, and it is normal usage.

Identity

What seems to underlie much of Carr's confusion is an oversimple, rigid, and ultimately incoherent conception of the identity of a work of art. The concept of identity is an intriguing one in general, and we need to be clear that often it cannot be clear-cut. Let me offer examples.

In my days as an undergraduate at Cambridge it was absolutely *de rigueur* to have a decrepit, dilapidated bicycle. One would have been regarded as a vulgar, ostentatious boor to be seen on an even remotely respectable bicycle. Indeed, one of my friends took this to such an extreme that when his tyres became punctured he used to cycle to lectures on the rims, with shreds of tyres flapping. One could always recognise that he was coming because of the loud rattling of rims on road. By the end of the year many bicycles were in a parlous state, on the point of collapse. So there was a process of cannibalisation with the bicycles of those who were leaving. Next term someone might ask, 'Is that the same bicycle?' 'Oh yes. It has different handlebars, saddle, and a back wheel, but it is the same bicycle.' However, of course there are limits. My plumber told me of a television programme in which a street cleaner proudly claimed to have the same broom as when he started, 25 years ago, although he had fitted 17 new handles and 40 new brush heads.

Too rigid a conception of the notion of identity could have no sense: it may seem a paradox, but change is logically necessary in order for things to be the same. Can Heraclitus step into the same river on two successive occasions? 'That is the same person I knew as a schoolboy thirty years ago.' It could not be the same person unless he were very different. I know a young man who plays for the same football team as his great-grandfather.

There has to be considerable flexibility, and relativity to context, to make sense of identity, but, of course, there are parameters beyond which identity makes no sense.

That an over-rigid, over-simple conception of the identity of a play as 'fidelity to a pre-given script' cannot be sustained is made clear by the fact that very often, indeed usually, Shakespeare's plays are cut. For example, Polanski's film of *Macbeth* cut the text severely, yet remained harshly true to its spirit. *Hamlet* is very rarely performed *in toto*, but that does not militate against the attribution of its identity. Conversely, its being performed in full is no guarantee of faithfulness to its identity. Kenneth Branagh's recent film used almost the full text, but reduced the play to a cheap melodrama, a farcical caricature, in many ways, perhaps most crudely and cheaply of all in portraying him at the end as Tarzan Hamlet, the darts champion.

Carr seems to fail to recognise this characteristic in relation to the identity of a work of art, and of artistic experience. He is right that I have exposed the logical incoherence in the notion of generic arts,³ and thus perhaps had some influence in the general disappearance of this philosophically misconceived and educationally dangerous notion, which is still maintained only by one or two confused, die-hard arts-education theorists. Carr is also right that I give what he calls a 'particularist account of the identity of a work of art'. He asserts: 'Best has repeatedly argued that diverse forms of art—and different instances and versions of particular art works—offer unique routes into artistic and aesthetic experience which are not coherently substitutable' (see p. 64 above). Again, this is a serious misrepresentation. I have not argued this case for aesthetic experience (although in certain cases it might apply). Much more importantly, I certainly do not argue that works of art 'offer unique routes' to artistic experience: on the contrary, to put it that way is to imply a contingent, causal relationship between perception of the art work and the experience. And I could hardly have made it clearer that the relationship is a logical one: there is no sense in the notion of a particular artistic experience without the relevant understanding of the work of art.

Carr also writes that he is suspicious of the 'basically phenomenological grounds' (see p. 64-5 above) upon which I support my particularism. I would be equally suspicious if my grounds were basically phenomenological. But they are not. I have no idea whence he got this idea. My argument has nothing to do with phenomenology. Once again, this is a totally unwarranted at-

³ For example (a) David Best: 'Generic Arts: An Expedient Myth', *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 1992; (b) 'Generic Arts in Education', *Times Higher Education*, 31 January 1992; (c) The Arts in Schools: A Critical Time', (Monograph: *Birmingham Institute of Art & Design and The National Society for Education in Art & Design*, 1990); (d) 'The Dangers of Generic Arts', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 29/2, Summer 1995; (e) 'Collective, Integrated Arts: The Expedient Generic Myth', *Arts Education Policy Review*, [USA], 97/1, October 1995).

tribution for which he offers no evidence, for the very good reason that there is none.

It would take too long adequately to discuss the notion of the particularity of artistic experience. I have written on it at some length elsewhere. I shall confine myself to making the brief point that whether substitution is possible depends upon how one characterises the work and the experience of it. To quote an example from my late and deeply lamented friend Dick Beardsmore (1973), one could say that *King Lear* and Tolstoy's short story *Father Sergius* express the same theme, that renunciation is not a form of self-interest. But that is certainly not to say that therefore they are substitutable, in that one could have the same artistic experience in response to each.

The Discipline of Philosophy

Carr says that Graham McFee and I have been 'mainly driven...by a commendable concern to defend the educational value of dance' (see p. 66 above). While I have no doubt that this is meant sincerely as a compliment, it could be understood as double-edged, in that it could imply an overriding concern with advocacy and rhetoric, rather than philosophy. Russell once wrote to the effect that there is no proposition so absurd that some philosopher or other has not argued for it.⁴ So let me make it clear that my primary motivation is not a concern to defend dance, but, I earnestly hope and believe, a disinterested pursuit of the truth. Advocacy is secondary: one engages in it only if it be founded on what one believes to be a sound, unbiased logical argument. The converse, philosophy grounded on advocacy (of which there is too much), is, in my view, a prostitution of the discipline.

That the rich possibilities of learning from the arts in the deepest and widest sense, remain widely unrecognised is evident from the marginal place of the arts in the curriculum. Largely contributory factors to this general disregard for the educational power of the arts are, I believe, the poor levels of theoretical and philosophical support, and the abiding, usually implicit influence (absorbed by sceptics and supporters alike) of pervasive logical positivist or empiricist conceptions, which, for instance deny the cognitive, rational character of artistic experience. Advocacy is certainly needed, but it must be founded on a sound philosophical position.

"Arts"

There is insufficient space to discuss Carr's contentions about my use of the term 'art' and its cognates (1978: 356 *et seq.*). I shall limit myself to emphasising that I have offered (Best 1993: Chap. 12), not a definition, but only something like a humble necessary condition. I conceded, indeed insisted, that there were difficulties about my attempted characterisation, in terms of

⁴ I am grateful to Terry Diffey for supplying the author. I cannot remember where Russell wrote it.

the possibility in an art form of expressing life issues. But, as I shall emphasise later, I am still convinced that it is pointing in the right direction. The notion of life issues is necessarily vague because of the huge and varied range of possibilities. Graham McFee has subsequently produced an interesting variation (1992: Chap. 2). Carr contends that this is a prime example of philosophers painting themselves into a corner. It seems to me more like a prime example of his faulty eyesight: for there is no corner.

There is irony here. Carr characterises me as a Wittgensteinian. I do not know whether I am one, partly because I am not much interested in exegesis, and therefore would not feel qualified to be one; and partly because I think that I disagree with Wittgenstein in some respects. Yet Carr also criticises me for not being Wittgensteinian enough. The irony is that he says that I am Wittgensteinian but not enough: he insists that he is not Wittgensteinian, yet in one respect at least, he is too 'Wittgensteinian'. For he asserts that the problem of what can count as art or dance can be solved by resort to family resemblances. But appeal to family resemblances cannot, as he assumes, explain the use of a general term, such as 'art', since one can find resemblance of some sort between any two objects or activities.⁵

Life Issues

Carr fundamentally misunderstands what I mean by 'life issues'. He seems to think that by a work of art's expressing a life issue I mean that it has to be propositional or positively prescriptive. Thus, astonishingly, he seems to be denying that *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot* express life-issues. This, at least, is what I glean from a rather unclear, convoluted sentence on p. 73. If I understand him, he is objecting that despite my thesis about life issues, I do not give examples of such works, which he says are concerned 'centrally or indirectly with some sort of moral, social, or political edification'. Yet I never use the term 'edification' or its cognates in this context, and neither would I. Again, Carr is attributing to me what I have not said. To edify is to instruct and improve morally. It is completely unwarranted to aver that that is what I mean by the expression of life issues: on the contrary, this aspect of the arts is morally neutral. The immense and largely unrecognised power of learning from the arts consists mainly in their emotive force, and their relationship to life. That imposes a great responsibility upon teachers, for that power can be equally morally corruptive.

If I understand him, Carr cites, as the kind of example which he assumes that I ought to give, Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which he takes to be a classic ex-

⁵ I place 'Wittgensteinian' in inverted commas because it is unlikely that Wittgenstein intended the notion to be understood as explaining the use of general terms. However, the term is widely understood in this misleading way. Many people who know nothing else about Wittgenstein confidently trot out the term as a supposed general, blanket explanation of the use of terms which cannot be defined. To repeat: family resemblances cannot do that job, and were not meant to do so.

ample of prescriptive art, amounting even to propaganda. A consideration of Carr's example will bring out a very important aspect of what I do mean, for it reveals as distorted and oversimple a conception of the play as it does of my thesis. As a schoolboy I was taught a similar conception, namely that the trilogy *Henry IV Parts 1 & 2* and *Henry V*, were written to present a glorified image of the ideal warrior king, and the English army. It took me several years to realise what a caricature that is. Even in the early part of *Henry IV Part I* (Act I, Sc. 2), when we first meet him, Prince Hal's soliloquy shows him coldly and cynically manipulating his Eastcheap companions, and planning already to banish them when it suits him. And when, in *Henry V*, Falstaff dies, a broken and banished man, the Hostess cries out in anguish: 'The king has killed his heart.' In the same play (Act 3, Sc. 3), Henry threatens the besieged citizens of Harfleur that if they do not surrender they will suffer the most savage and bestial atrocities:

... your pure maidens
 Will fall into the hand of hot and forcing violation ...
 Your fathers (will be) taken by the silver beards,
 And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls.
 Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
 Do break the clouds.

Hardly an edifying character—treacherous to those who thought him a friend, and capable of releasing such rape and slaughter. Indeed, a knowledgeable friend regards Henry as one of the most unsavoury characters in Shakespeare, on a par with Iago, Edmund (in *King Lear*), and Cloten (in *Cymbeline*), because of his ruthlessly calculating manipulation of people and events to achieve his ends and promote his image.

Henry seems to reveal a literal family resemblance. One recalls his father -- Bolingbroke's confessed 'by-paths, and indirect crookt ways' to gain the crown, and his incitement of the butchery of the imprisoned Richard II. One recalls Henry's brother, Prince John, to whom Falstaff refers as 'this same young sober-blooded boy', and who is guilty of the most appallingly cynical treachery (*Henry VI, Part 2*) in inviting the leaders of the rebel army to a parley at which he has them arrested and executed. Hal can be seen as a chip off the family block.

The English (British, actually) army is largely a rabble of villains and cut-purses such as Poins, Pistol and Bardolph, along with pressed men of the kind we see in *Henry IV Part 2* (Act 3 Sc. 2). And they are capable of, even eager for, the savagery of Henry's threat. In Michael Bogdanov's brilliant production, the English army, waiting to embark for France, were presented as a crudely abusive, yelling, aggressive gang of football hooligans off to an international. They carried a large banner: 'Fuck the Frogs.'

With exquisite timing the scene immediately switched to the elegant French court, with the French king saying disdainfully: 'Thus comes the English.'

It may be objected: 'What about the famous victory against the odds at Agincourt? What of Henry's later magnanimity?' Well, the latter may have been calculated to promote his image, but even if not, this is exactly what I am trying, far too briefly, to show. Shakespeare is never as oversimple as Carr's caricature of *Henry V* indicates. Shakespeare raises the issues: he does not prescribe.

The critic John Peter makes the point (1993): 'Shakespeare is notoriously mean on instructions. His plays have a 'Do-It-Yourself' morality'. The director David Thacker notes: '... you have to make up your own mind, without any nudges from the playwright'.

This is as much expression of life issues as moral prescription. Of course, a work can be prescriptive, as in Athol Fugard's plays revealing the human misery involved in apartheid, and in much of Dickens and D.H. Lawrence. As I have made explicit, and implicit in many examples, the notion of expression of life issues in art is far more varied than Carr's narrow conception of edification.

Carr also seems to be denying that *Waiting for Godot* is a prime example of expression of life issues. Yet I well remember in my youth, the shock to my whole crumbling belief-edifice when I first saw the play. After waiting interminably, with Godot the only hope of a meaning in life, Estragon admits to Didi that he would not even recognise Godot if he did come. And Pozzo, so certain and self-assured in Act I, is blind in Act 2. The wretchedly thin, crushed and subjugated Lucky says nothing until ordered to think, then pours out in unstoppable torrent of quasi-intellectual absurdity. Vladimir says that where Christ lived, they crucified quick. Contrary to what Carr seems to believe, this play can certainly be seen as expressing profound, extensive, foundation-shaking life issues. (It may, of course, be open to different interpretations.)

It is precisely this characteristic which makes it impossible for the very young to appreciate a play like this, and *King Lear*. For appreciation is possible only if one already has a depth of experience of life.

Meaning: What Else Could This Be? Engine Trouble.

Finally, I come to my biggest bone of contention with Carr. Once again, with no evidence for, and this time overwhelming evidence against, he attributes to me a conception against which I have been arguing for over 25 years. I cannot adequately diagnose the root cause of his confusion here, but I shall suggest a very likely probability.

Carr rightly points to the continuing pernicious influence of the empiricist conception of meaning—briefly, that meaning is given primarily in propositions of empirically verifiable fact. As he says, according to the empiricist doctrine, ‘the chief and only rational function of language is to express propositions primarily descriptive of the world.’ Carr attributes to me an unconscious allegiance to this view. He does this at some length, partly by criticising the use of metaphor in discussion of the arts (see p. 72), which he assumes must be implied by my thesis about life issues. The problem, however, is that, for precisely the same reasons, I hardly ever use the term, and never in the ways he criticises. It would, of course, be very convenient for his thesis if only I were to have done so. Hence I am puzzled. My response is: ‘Yes, I agree, but what has this got to do with me?’

Once again, he can cite no example from my work, because there is none. Regrettably, this seems to be a case of setting up a straw man. He just seems to assume, with no evidence, that by ‘life issues’ I must mean ‘metaphors’: indeed, he seems to assume that artistic meaning is necessarily metaphorical. But he is so very unclear on this question that one cannot be sure. (My account of the relationship between life and art is given in the final chapter of *The Rationality of Feeling* (1993). There is no resort to metaphor.)

More importantly, he makes the extraordinary, and equally unwarranted and unsupported, leap from ‘life issues’ to ‘the old empiricist doctrine’. He asserts (see p. 74) that my view is influenced by: ‘a powerful modern theory of education as primarily a matter of initiation into rational forms of knowledge. This theory also enshrines a sharp dichotomy between knowledge which is meaningful because it expresses propositions, and mere skills ... which are meaningless because they do not—and what else could this be but a vestige of the old empiricist doctrine that only bearers of truth, either definitional or factual, can have meaning.’

What else could this be? I have a lot to say about that. One possibility, which he apparently has not considered, is that it could, perhaps, be what I say it is, rather than the preconception which he imposes upon it. What partly blinkers Carr is his tendency to bring to discussion a set of neat, ready-made labels which he sticks on liberally. Thus we have ‘Wittgensteinian’, ‘phenomenological’, ‘essentialist’, ‘a powerful modern theory of education’, and ‘empiricist’. I hardly know how to respond to this last wildly implausible assertion. It rather reminds one of talking to an uncritical, wholly committed Freudian who, whatever one’s protestations to the contrary, nods knowingly and persists in attributing to one unconscious intentions which are far from what one says or does. Thus, on such an analysis, it could be shown that, deep down, Margaret Thatcher has Marxist inclinations.

Perhaps I should take heart because Wittgenstein has been just about equally assumed to be an idealist and a realist, by people who cannot conceive of any other possibility, and therefore cannot understand that he is rejecting

both, and offering a radically different conception. I hope, without much optimism, that I have recently persuaded a friend, after a long struggle, that I am not an idealist. Now Carr is accusing me of being a logical positivist in disguise.

First, I am not in the least influenced by the powerful modern theory of education which he attributes to me. Indeed, I do not even know what it is. I am not influenced by any theory in this respect: I believe that any theory of meaning is conducive to confusion. I am also hostile to talk of initiation into forms of knowledge, largely because it strongly smacks of Hirst (1974), whose forms-of-knowledge theory is explicitly propositional. I have often criticised this kind of view as fundamentally flawed (for example see Best 1991): it is a misconceived, and very restrictive conception of education.

What I do say in this respect is quite simple, non-theoretical, and, I should have thought, uncontroversial, namely that for any activity to be legitimately educational it must be cognitive and rational. That is, learning must be possible in the sense of the progressive development of understanding by means of reasons. For far too long it has been, and still is, widely assumed that this rules out the arts, since they are believed to be a matter of feeling, and therefore purely subjective, non-cognitive, and non-rational. The common cliché is that the arts, including dance, are a matter of feeling, not of reason. That prevalent assumption, even by supporters of the arts, especially in conjunction with the assumption that the arts do not have any connection with life issues, is a main reason why the arts are marginalised in the curriculum. With friends like that who needs enemies? Hence I have spent many years exposing the disastrous fallacies in this subjectivist way of thinking, and, more importantly, proving that artistic experience is as fully cognitive and rational as any other subject in the curriculum, and artistic judgements as fully objective as those in any other subject.

But WOW! 'Cognitive'! 'Rational'! 'Objective'! Red lights flash! Knees jerk in response! Such talk must imply a thinly disguised adherence to the old empiricist doctrine of meaning. But, of course, such a knee-jerk response, ignoring all the evidence to the contrary, could come only from someone who is himself so blinkered by empiricism that any other conception is literally unthinkable. In short, the answer to the question, 'What else could this be?' is that the accusation reveals far more about the accuser than the accused. Carr asserts that empiricism has, so to speak, bested me. On the contrary, this is a paradigm case of, so to speak, a Carr backfiring.

Why, otherwise, does Carr simply ignore my extensive arguments, and numerous examples, some of which I shall shortly repeat, exposing the misconceptions of empiricism? For instance, as I explain in many places, the prime example is non-verbal reasoning, as, for example, in Beckett's powerful *Quad 1* and *Quad 2*, which, to put it crudely, express the most severely concentrated, starkly ascetic conception of the meaning of life, but in which no

words are used at all. This would be anathema to an empiricist. But I should prefer that reaction to distorting what I have said into empiricism in disguise; at least such hostility would be taking what I have said seriously.

In short, Yes, I insist on rationality and cognition. But over many years I have argued for a very different, much wider and more fundamental kind of reasoning and cognition than that of the empiricists. For instance, interpretative reasoning centrally involves opening fresh horizons of understanding. This is, in my view, the most important contribution of education, in all areas of the curriculum, and for the whole of one's life. Yet it is beyond the scope of empiricist confines.

It is unfortunate that one has to make these points over and over again, because the pernicious influence of the empiricist doctrine is so powerful that Carr, like many others, just cannot escape from its preconceptions sufficiently even to recognise a very different conception, whether or not he agrees with it.

Cognitive: Not Propositional

Let me offer two examples which I often use of learning which does not involve, and indeed is in my view far more important than, acquiring the ability to state propositions.

King Lear, tormented by the treachery of his daughters, is evicted without adequate clothing onto the heath in a violent storm of torrential rain. Buf-feted, cold, drenched, in tortured despair, he meets Tom O'Bedlam, an almost naked beggar who lives in a hovel. Lear is shocked into a realisation of what he had never realised in his 80 years of luxurious, royal comfort:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel ...

King Lear has learned a powerful lesson. Yet he obviously knew in his days of pampered royalty that beggars are poor, ragged, cold, often starving, and without adequate shelter. That knowledge is a mere truism. What he learned could not be captured in propositions: he had not acquired, in that sense, new factual truths. No, he had learned what it amounts to to be a poor, homeless beggar. That new understanding did not consist in new facts, but in an understanding which was inseparable from a deep emotional feeling. It was a gut-understanding. What Lear learned could not be captured in words, although partly in that way.

When the Ghost reveals how he was treacherously murdered by Claudius, Hamlet cries out in anguish:

O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!
 My tables. Meet it is I set it down
 That one may smile and smile and be a villain.

Hamlet has learned a powerful lesson. But what has he learned? If, in order to answer that question, one were to consider only the proposition which he has written on his tables, then one might well echo Horatio:

There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave to tell us this.

For of course Hamlet knew before this incident that villains can smile deceptively. Yet the full force of what that amounts to may be brought home to us by a particular incident, such as what the Ghost told Hamlet. Such a realisation may strike us in everyday life, for instance, if we should be cheated by a plausibly charming salesman.

Dance

I have said little about dance directly, because it is mainly Carr's account of meaning in drama which is fallacious. However, as I hope I have made clear, I contend that the question of meaning in dance is, in relevant respects, the same. There is as much an internal relation between text and acting as there is between choreography and dance performance.

Coda

I am very suspicious about what I think Carr says about a supposed contrast between 'literal truth', and meaning in terms of life issues in the arts. I cannot pursue this adequately here. It is a very large question, and it is unclear precisely what he is claiming. I shall confine myself to pointing out that the most profound truths about the human condition cannot remotely be captured in propositions, nor are they in some mythical 'real' world beyond the possibility of human conception.

Someone on a radio programme made a comment which captures something of what I mean, although I do not agree with his apparently oversimple conception of history: 'there is a distinction between fact and truth. History deals in facts, the arts with truth.' The actor David Schofield, replying to my letter congratulating him on his deeply thoughtful, exquisitely sensitive playing of Shylock, wrote that his overriding concern as an actor is with the truth. It is because the arts can express the truth in this profoundly human sense that dictatorial regimes are so nervous about their potential influence, and characteristically persecute artists. This important potential of the arts has recently been recognised in the creation in the Netherlands of the Association Internationale de Défense des Artistes.

Recently I came across a quotation from the Chilean Nobel-prize winning poet, Gabriela Mistral, which perceptively captures what I am trying to convey

about this potentially profound character of expressing truth with respect to life issues in the arts: "The arts are to society what the soul is to the body."

If logic cannot accommodate the meaning of 'truth' in such a vital sense, then that conception of logic is seriously inadequate.

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