

Meaning in Dance

I

There is some ambiguity about any unqualified enquiry concerning the meaning of dance. In the first place, it could be seeking a kind of sociological or anthropological account of the role of dance in human affairs; as such, it would be the kind of question one might raise about the human significance of any activity—cooking, swordswallowing, poker playing, nuclear physics—whatever. On the other hand, it might be to ask—in terms more of philosophical aesthetics or semantic theory—for an account of what or how dances themselves mean as potential bearers of communicable sense. That said, it might reasonably be thought that any plausible answer to the first question about the human meaning of dance is liable to give some weight to the consideration that dances are capable of expressing meaning in this second sense. However, this paper will be concerned to argue that the converse point—that understanding how dances signify in this secondary sense depends crucially upon their first level significance as forms of human practice—is of equal if not greater importance for any full appreciation of this issue.

All the same, prefatory to a pioneering attempt to make sense of the second level of dance meaning, David Best some years ago usefully distinguished three different senses in which physical activities might be said to be implicated in aesthetic meaning (see, for example, Best 1985: Chapter 11). First, he distinguished aesthetic sports such as figure skating and synchronised swimming from purposive sports such as football or hockey on the grounds that, though the latter can certainly be contemplated aesthetically, their main purpose is not—as with the former—to create some aesthetic effect or spectacle. Put another way, aesthetic features would not figure prominently (if at all) among our criteria for judging success in purposive sports as they would in the case of aesthetic sports. But, on the other hand, Best sought to distinguish aesthetic sports such as synchronised swimming from such performance arts as dance primarily in terms of the 'intentionality' of the latter—in terms, precisely, of their capacity to be 'about' something. Thus, whereas we might derive much aesthetic pleasure from the grace and skill of a given gymnastic, diving, even aerobic performance, it would not in the same way make sense to ask what any such performance meant, as one might sensibly ask what *Swan Lake*, Graham's *Lamentations* or Bruce's *Ghost Dances* signified or was about.

Moreover, in placing dance among performance arts rather than with aesthetic sports one might hope to make some headway with the problem of how dances mean via attention to how meaning attaches to performance in such other performance arts as drama and music. Indeed, two possibilities hove into view in relation to just these examples. First, one might conceive dance as a kind of language of movement by analogy with music construed as

a language of sound. In these terms, there would be a semantics and syntax of movement as, on a not entirely implausible view of the matter, notes and their harmonic organisation represent some sort of quasi-linguistic vocabulary and grammar for musical composition. Alternatively, one might—more by comparison with drama than music—seek to liken dancer to actor as an interpreter of some independent artistically produced script, text or narrative. On this view, as it is the actor's task to give further life or expression to the 'dead letter' of a poem or play, so dance and choreography would be concerned to give an extra expressive dimension to independently conceived ideas, themes or narratives.

Questions of their consistency apart, however, both these comparisons are treacherous. Best's distinctions go some way towards exposing the difficulties of the former conception of dance, but it is worth saying a bit more about this here. In an attempt to address some of the same issues troubling Best, I argued many years ago for a conclusion not incompatible with his that, since movements cannot qualify as bearers of meaning, dance is seriously misconceived as a construct of movement. Hence, in one place (Carr 1984), I maintained that any learning-theoretical conditioning of children into a movement-perfect performance of a given folk dance could not count as teaching them to dance in the absence of some attempt to initiate them into an understanding of what the steps and gestures of the dance were intended to express or celebrate—which would imply initiation into meaningful action or activity rather than (mere) movement. In another place (Carr 1987), however, I proceeded to identify a disanalogy between dance and music on this basis: that whereas it would not be improper to characterise the organised sound emitted by a music box as music, though no musician was playing it, it would be so to describe the movements of a plastic ballerina as dance, since the moulded plastic, though moving, could not be said to be dancing.

A basic concern in all this was to demolish an influential 'movement movement' approach to understanding dance by undermining one of its main supports—the idea that dances might be notated or scored in much the same way as musical compositions or performances. However, though I remain faithful to the gist of earlier arguments, I can now see they were flawed by a skewed comparison. Thus, whilst it does seem correct to deny that the plastic ballerina is dancing—just as the musical box is not (intentionally) playing music—there would seem to be no less reason to admit that the movement-perfect performance of an ingeniously constructed mechanical ballerina (if we could recognise it as, say, a sequence from *Swan Lake*) is dance in much the same (attenuated) sense as we take the mechanically produced tune to be music. All the same, I still think there is a general objection to construing dance as concerned with the production/organisation of movements, and it rests on recognising that artists relate differently to their media and materials in the cases of dance and music. One difference lies in the fact that the creative powers of a composer or musician are causally linked to the organisation of materials which have existence and identity apart from the artist's agency;

each note of a musical instrument has its own pitch and timbre which gives it a specific value on a given scale or in the context of some system of harmonic convention—and this gives some credence to the idea that music is a language with a vocabulary and a grammar (notes as letters, chords as terms, harmonised melodies as sentences).

It is implausible, however, to suppose that there is any convention or system of conventions which might give meaning to the movements of the dancer—as movements—in the context of a dance performance. To be sure, human movements are interpretable in terms of conventions—not, however, as movements, but as actions or activities. Indeed, it is by now a commonplace of analytical philosophy that actions are the basic mode of meaningful contextualization of human movement. The same movement may count in different circumstances as different actions. Different movements in different circumstances may be construed as tokens of the same action, but without some context of agency, human movements can have little or no significance at all. Moreover, in creating or constructing a dance a choreographer or dancer is not causally operating on her own or someone else's body with a view to the organisation or arrangement of inert materials external to her own intentions and volition. The soul, one might say, is not lodged in the body as a pilot in a ship.¹ On the contrary, creating a dance is a matter of artistic reworking of patterns of human agency appreciable as expressive or celebratory of themes, ideas and feelings in a not radically dissimilar way to that in which conventional agency signifies, expresses and celebrates. What seems amiss with a behaviourist model of dance learning is that meaningful dance teaching is less a matter of conditioning children in patterns of movement than of encouraging their mastery of steps and gestures pertaining to activities in which we purposefully engage.

At all events, these observations concerning the relationship of dance to action and movement seem consistent with Best's specification—in terms of the intentions or purposes for which action is undertaken—of the three ways in which physical activities are implicated in the aesthetic. Thus, purposive sports are about competition and winning, aesthetic sports are about aesthetic satisfaction through well-turned performance. But, beyond this, performance arts are about the artistic (including the aesthetic) communication or expression of themes, issues, ideas or feelings. Whichever way we slice it, however, such activities are constructions of meaningful action more than movement. Moreover, in his magisterial work on understanding dance, Graham McFee (1992) explicitly combines an argument for understanding dance in terms of intentional activity rather than movement with Best's tripartite analysis of relations to the aesthetic, precisely to the purpose of affirming the thesis (also anticipated by Best) that it is of the nature of dance as a performance art to be

¹ This remark, of course, is made by Descartes in his Sixth Meditation; see, E. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (1969: 117).

capable of expressing or communicating 'life issues'. But perhaps this idea now opens up the possibility of approaching the meaning of dance via comparison with acting or drama: just as acting might be regarded as a mode of interpretation of some pre-existently meaningful poetic or dramatic text or narrative, perhaps we could construe dance in a similar 'value-added' way; crudely, the performance of actor or dancer might be seen as a matter of the packaging more than the production of artistic meaning.

Actually, this is not an implausible account of the nature of some performance arts, for example, playwriting and acting. Moreover, some such restriction of the role of artistic activity to interpretation may have been entertained at various times and places as the principal function of art; indeed, it is well known that classical Greek drama drew exclusively on a stock of well-thumbed traditional themes, and that Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were concerned not with the creation of new stories, but with offering new perspectives on the old and familiar. Furthermore, to whatever extent it may be implausible to regard all art, or even all drama, in such terms (since much ancient and modern drama is no doubt concerned with the invention of new themes and narratives) some such account of the thespian art as primarily interpretative seems not unreasonable. On this view, we would appraise acting performances as effective or otherwise in terms of how clearly, eloquently or expressively they conveyed the preconceived ideas or intentions of dramatists. But however well this essentially interpretative account of performance art might seem to fit the example of acting, it is doubtful whether it applies well to performance arts in general or on the performance art of dance in particular.

To be sure, it seems proper to characterise both dances and acting performances in terms of 'intentionality'—they may equally be regarded as concerned to express or present a certain 'content'. However, dance undoubtedly differs from acting in the way it expresses or presents content. Broadly, acting may indeed be regarded as a vehicle for the expression of an independently given dramatic content. To that extent, it can be construed instrumentally (without thereby denying its artistic importance) as a means to the realisation of this or that artistically separate end. But even in the case of dances with explicit literary reference (such as Martha Graham's *Night Journey*, based on *Oedipus Rex*), it is implausible to regard the 'kinetic vehicle' of the theme as just a mode of presentation of some independent narrative. Dance is not merely a sum of text and performance (for one thing, not much of a text remains from any prescinding of content from dance presentation) but an artistic whole in which performance is not incidental to content, but intrinsic to it. So, one might say, 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 by which dances are judged successful or otherwise are not governed by fidelity to some pre-given script, and greater liberties are liable to be taken with the inspirational materials and stimuli of dances than would normally be allowed in the case of the dramatic art.

II

The significance of this point for questions concerning the meaning of dance could hardly be overstated, and what Best and McFee have generally said about it is generally commendable. Thus, both are at pains to stress the inseparability of 'content' from performance in any account of dance meaning and to avoid the superficial idea that one could give the meaning of a dance by saying what it is 'about'—as one might so attempt to give the meaning of a play. All the same, their accounts do arguably exhibit certain anomalies and difficulties which it may be instructive to explore briefly. First a whole chapter of McFee's major work on dance is entirely given over to an interesting discussion of the question of dance identity in which he makes considerable use of the type-token distinction (McFee 1992: Chapter 4). It is also evident that McFee sees a need for the type-token distinction to make sense of our commonly regarding a particular dance performance—of, say, *Swan Lake*—as an interpretation of some standard type of *Swan Lake*. Moreover, after some heavy weather with this problem, McFee seems to conclude that the possibility of notating or scoring dances holds out the best hope for its formal or systematic resolution, although he is sensitive to the difficulties of what he calls the underdetermination of dance by notated scores. I believe, however, that the only possible art-theoretical significance of the type-token distinction is to explicate the idea of artistic interpretation, and hence that it can have clear application only in the case of genuinely interpretive arts such as acting. In that case, McFee might be better to conclude from his difficulties in applying the type-token distinction to dance that dance is not in the relevant sense an interpretive art, and that we would be as well to give up the distinction in this connection.

In fact, quite insuperable difficulties here are well rehearsed by McFee himself. Even in the most plausible case of classical ballet, where we seem driven to say that there must be some archetype to which all particular performances stand as diverse interpretations, it is impossible to give a clear sense to the notion. As McFee himself admits, a notated score hopelessly underdetermines the sense of a dance since a score notates only movements, and 'colourless' movements could not possibly be bearers of dance meaning. This is after all a consideration in McFee's own rejection of dance as a language of movement. Again, it seems a non-starter to regard the plot, storyline or narrative of a given classical ballet as the relevant type since, as we have seen, story line and plot fall well short of anything conceivable as a dance. Indeed, McFee shrewdly recognises that many features which might be regarded as quite incidental to fixing type in the case of other performing arts—such as music, lighting, costume and so on, may be quite identity-constitutive in the realm of dance. In that case, to what may we appeal in the interests of establishing a type of performances of *Swan Lake*? Not to any actual performance because no particular performance can have privileged type status over another; but not to any notional performance either—for any such idealisation would be only a Platonic fiction of our own making. The trouble with this

conclusion, however, is that it seems to lead to an implausible artistic and aesthetic particularism according to which each dance performance is uniquely what it is and not another thing. Doesn't this run counter to our common-sense intuition that certain dance performances have something significantly in common by virtue of their status as instances or versions of the same dance? Not if we put it like that. I suspect that McFee's problem follows from a false assimilation of the idea of a different *version* to that of different interpretation—for whereas interpretation does require a type in accordance with which tokens may be judged as interpretations (or, alternatively, as faithful copies)—the idea of a version carries no such implications. Horticulturalists can produce different versions of a given beetroot species without having to suppose they are interpretations of a type to which particular instances do or do not correspond. There is no universal Platonic beetroot of which particular roots are only imperfect realisations. There are only actual beetroots related in virtue of certain unevenly distributed structural and material features and properties. Indeed, it may well be that understanding the relationship of one performance of *Swan Lake* to another is better assisted by the more nominalist or anti-essentialist Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance (1953: I-67) than any realist or essentialist type-token distinction.

To deny that it cuts much ice to speak of a given ballet as an interpretation of some abstract idealisation is not of course to say that it makes no sense to speak of interpretation in relation to dance. McFee distinguishes a number of significant senses of interpretation in this connection (1992: 100). First, there is the sense in which we recognise, notably in relation to performance arts, that dancers, musicians and actors invariably put their own personal stamp on a performance. Indeed, it is partly because this mode of interpretation is more or less the norm in the dance world that I am inclined to deny that much can be made of dances as interpretations according to the type-token distinction. But, second, there is clearly a role for interpretation in the appreciation of works of art whether or not these are interpretive in other senses. Indeed, Best broadly characterises artistic and/or aesthetic appreciation in terms of what he calls 'interpretive reasoning' (1985: Chapter 2), as part of what seems to be a general concern to distinguish artistic reflection or reasoning from more instrumental forms of reflection and enquiry. Moreover, as a philosopher well known for his long-standing resistance to generic conceptions of art education, Best appears to combine this interpretive conception of artistic/aesthetic appreciation with a highly particularist account of the identity of works of art. Thus, in vehement opposition to the idea that one art form or object might do duty for all if shortage of curriculum space requires us to be selective, Best has repeatedly argued that diverse forms of art—and to be sure, different instances and versions of particular art works—offer unique routes into artistic and aesthetic experience which are not coherently inter-substitutable.

But, whilst there is much here with which I can sympathise, there seems nevertheless to be something suspect about the basically phenomenological

grounds upon which Best appears to support his particularism. He is inclined to argue that the expressive uniqueness of works of art is such that any substitution of one work for another cannot but alter the character of our artistic or aesthetic response—especially, that we cannot sensibly hope to derive the same artistic, aesthetic or emotional experience from works of different artistic genres, even if they are ‘about’ the same thing (Best 1985: Chapter 10). Indeed, this view seems to have become something of an orthodoxy among leading post-war theorists of art education and McFee quotes approvingly a version of it from Redfern to the effect that it would be absurd, given the unavailability of Graham’s *Night Journey*, to hope for the same artistic/aesthetic/emotional experience from listening to Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* or attending the first of Sophocles’ *Theban Plays* (McFee 1992: 172). Even accepting the general point of this argument, however, it certainly seems a touch overstated. In fact, there may well be circumstances in which, as someone fixated on the Oedipus theme, I might elect to stay in and listen to my CD of *Oedipus Rex* rather than venture up town to see a performance of *Night Journey*—if, for example, the weather is foul and I lack transport. To be sure, the artistic experience will be significantly different, but then, given a blanket particularism about artistic experience, my experience of *Oedipus Rex* may also differ significantly from one hearing to another. But nothing seems absurd in principle about any such a decision. Ironically, what seems to force the particularist Best-McFee-Redfern conclusion to this problem concerning the identity of artistic responses is much the same impulse that drives McFee’s essentialist type-token solution to the problem of dance identity. It stems from the idea that we need to give the same general answer to each and every question about whether this is the same dance or the same artistic experience.

Thus, in one context McFee wants to avoid the conclusion that each dance differs from every other, and to that end he invokes the essentialist type-token distinction as a criterion of identity for variations on a theme. In another context, however, Best, McFee and Redfern want to reject as absurd certain claims regarding the generality of art experience and, in order to do this, see a need to affirm the absolute uniqueness of particular works of art. It would seem wiser, however, to recognise that notions of sameness (and/or similarity) and difference in relation to the arts are context-relative in a way that licenses a rather more generous approach to problems of artwork identity than these accounts allow. Thus, though the theatrical, musical and danced versions of the theme of Oedipus are certainly different works of art, there will be points of view from which they can be counted as sources of the same artistic/aesthetic experience—as well as perspectives from which they cannot. But, despite these quibbles, it should be said that the work of Best and McFee makes considerable inroads on the problem of meaning in dance and much of what they say seems on the right lines. Thus, to recap: (i) dance concerns action rather than movement, because actions rather than movements are bearers of meaning; (ii) dances are distinguished from other physical activities by virtue of their ‘intentionality’—their capacity to be ‘about’ something; (iii)

the meaning of dance (what dances are 'about') is largely explicable in terms of aptness for the artistic expression of ideas, themes, feelings (or what Best and McFee call 'life issues'); but (iv), the kinetic vehicle of dance expression is internally rather than externally related to what is expressed (meaning is not lodged in dance movement as a pilot in a ship)—so that one could not begin to convey the distinctive meaning of a dance simply by relating (propositionally) what it is about.

III

All the same, there may be reasons for feeling dissatisfied with this account, and the main source of my own unease concerns the close identification of meaning in dance with intentionality construed as some sort of capacity for the artistic expression of 'life issues'. For surely, one might say, among the different forms of human activity we are inclined to call 'dance', very many are not intentional in anything like this sense. Whatever ballroom, disco, tap and even Amerindian rain dancing are 'about', it would not seem to be the expression of life issues in what I take to be the Best-McFee sense of this term.² To be sure, both authors are aware of this problem and have defended their rather exclusive conception of dance meaning as expression of life issues against claims to artistic meaningfulness of other less sophisticated dance forms. However, I suspect that they have been mainly driven in this direction by a commendable concern to defend the educational value of dance which they do not think can be upheld by anything less than an 'intentional' account of dance meaning. And, as soon as we recognise the dilemma in which this view of the artistic status of dance places us, we may also see that this is a prime example of philosophers painting themselves into a corner.

In fact, there are but two real options for dealing with those forms of ordinarily called dance which do not conform to any conception of dance meaning as the intentional expression of life issues: we might deny that these are really forms of dance at all, or we might concede that they are forms of dance whilst denying that they are art. Despite the fact that the first alternative is by far the more implausible, McFee does manifest tendencies in this direction. Hence, in his work on dance education he courts the suggestion that recognising the religious-ritualistic rather than artistic purposes of a dance from another culture might lead us to question whether it was dance at all (McFee 1994: Chapter 12—p. 132). However, this is probably better taken as an instance of untypically incautious overstatement than as a serious defence of what seems an otherwise unlikely position. What seems more plausible is the idea that there are some forms of activity which are dance but not art. In fact, this may be closer to what both Best and McFee have mostly in mind regarding the status of more 'popular' forms of dance. But this position is no less problematic given what these authors generally have to say about meaning in

² For an extended account of this idea see McFee (1992: Chapter 8).

dance. For, we may recall, their main criterion for distinguishing dances from other aesthetically implicated physical activities is that of 'intentionality'—the capacity of dances to express or be 'about' something. Other physical activities can be intentional in the weaker sense of embodying aims or purposes, but they are not intentional in this sense of 'aboutness' and therefore not dance. But this clearly leaves non-art dance in an anomalous position. On the one hand, such dance cannot count as meaningful in the sense attributable to art dance because it doesn't express life issues. On the other hand, we may still want to say that such dance is after all nearer to art than sport or 'aestheticized movement' precisely insofar as it also seems reasonable to characterise the difference between dance and non-dance activities in terms of some kind of individual or social expressiveness.

A possible refinement here (to which, again, both Best and McFee show some inclination) might be to draw some distinction between different—stronger or weaker—senses of art. Thus, Best (again followed by McFee) has in some places (1985: 159-163; and McFee 1994) distinguished a more substantial sense of art as capable of the expression of 'life issues' from a more general use of the term to denote any practical activity in which levels of skill or expertise are displayed. Allied to another familiar distinction between the non-instrumental character of artistic activities and the instrumental character of non-artistic ones, this may yield some sort of art-craft dichotomy. Since poetry and ballet are concerned with the non-instrumental purposes which include the expression of life issues they count as genuine arts, whereas (since they have instrumental purposes which preclude the expression of life issues) pottery and ballroom dancing count only as crafts. Best and McFee also sometimes appear to regard their preferred use of art as central or primary and other senses of the term, as applied to crafts, as mere 'courtesy' extensions. But any such view would be at best quite ahistorical, since the fine-art notion is in fact a more sophisticated modern variant of a root conception of art (from the Greek *techne* via the Latin *ars*) as skill or technique. It is not that less sophisticated crafts are bastard relatives of modern high-brow forms of creative art, but that the modern notion refines a more basic idea of art as intelligent making.³ At all events, any distinction between art and skill would appear to be a matter of degree rather than kind. First, fine arts invariably involve craft and skill and progress in them may often resemble craft development as much as any sort of advance in the expression of ideas or life issues. Second, craft arts generally offer large scope for creativity and such apparently skill-based and functional arts as architecture are widely considered fine arts—even as vehicles for the expression of ideas (Telfer 1996: Chapter 3). In any case, even if there are forms of so-called art which involve routine observance of skills for entirely utilitarian ends, it is not clear how we might assimilate tap or ballroom dancing to these sorts of cases, since it is not entirely clear what non-

³ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines *techne* as 'a reasoned state of capacity to make'. See citation 'Aristotle. 1925 edition'.

artistic or utilitarian significance such crafts might have. In short, the Best-McFee account of dance meaning as expression of life issues leaves dance unable to express that kind of meaning with no sort of meaning, artistic or other, at all.

But for this reason I think that whilst we need to hold on to much of what Best and McFee have taught us regarding meaning in dance—not least the idea that dance is a form of expressive action or activity in which what is expressed is related internally to the kinetic vehicle of expression—I also believe that we require a broader, more fine-grained, account of art meaning in general and dance meaning in particular. Moreover, I suspect that for this we need to re-examine what I take to be a misleading Best-McFee assimilation of dance expression in general to the more particular idea of the expression of ‘life issues’. Indeed it is just possible that the account given by these authors—despite its undoubted philosophical sophistication—is held in thrall to a particular well-trodden theory of meaning hailing from the rather surprising direction of traditional empiricism. I am not suggesting, of course, that these of all authors explicitly subscribe to an empiricist theory of meaning. On the contrary, there is ample evidence in what they have written of fierce Wittgensteinian opposition to such accounts. But as Best has observed in his own critiques of dualist conceptions of the mind–body relationship (see, for example, some of the essays in Best 1978), there are certain persistent philosophical errors which are the very devil to shake off, and they are liable to sneak up on us here at the very moment we think we have them bested (so to speak) there. In short, my suspicion as a non-Wittgensteinian about the account of dance meaning of the Wittgensteinians Best and McFee, is that they have failed to be quite Wittgensteinian enough.

IV

It is a remarkable fact of philosophical history that a particular doctrine concerning the nature of meaning which received its first clear statement by David Hume in the eighteenth century should have persisted throughout the best part of two centuries to reappear mostly intact in the work of early modern logical analysts (for Hume’s original statement of the thesis, see Selby-Bigge 1966: Sec. IV, Part 1. For a classic modern positivist endorsement of the same idea, see Ayer 1967: Ch. 11). Briefly, the doctrine held that the statement of propositions is the primary function of language and that there are only two ways in which propositions can be really meaningful—as statements of empirically verifiable fact or as rules or conventions for the uses of words. Thus, Hume’s ‘matters of fact’, the ‘synthetic’ truths of later logical positivists, are meaningful by virtue of possessing a definite content which aspires to reflect the way the world is, whereas ‘relations of ideas’, the ‘analytical’ truths of logical positivism, are true in advance of experience by virtue of their largely tautological status. The now familiar aim of this austere account of meaning was to demolish traditional metaphysical and theological claims to knowledge of such empirically unverifiable entities as God, the soul and free will;

insofar as statements about God's existence are neither true by definition nor empirically provable, they might safely be dismissed as nonsense. The principal difficulties of this thesis are too well known to need present rehearsal. For now, the pressing problem it raises is that of the meaningfulness of any sort of evaluative discourse—moral, political or aesthetic—when even the ostensibly propositional elements of such discourse seem to be unconstruable as more than unsupported opinion. But, worse still, how might a work of art (painting, novel or story) be regarded as meaningful when it concerns neither matters of fact nor definition? From this point of view, the most that might be said (and has been said) is that works of art have some sort of emotive function—to move or evoke feeling rather than inform or educate.

Perhaps it is also unsurprising in the light of two centuries of empiricist influence that ideas about artistic meaning should have gone the way they have. For a start, we see the emergence in art theory of a rough distinction between expressionist and formalist theories, directly traceable to the empiricist dichotomy of matters of fact and relations of ideas. Hence, expressionists are inclined to regard art meaning as indexed to something beyond the vehicle of artistic expression—something construable cognitively as a kind of statement, or emotively as an emotion or feeling. On this view, works of art have a referential function and that to which they refer could, in principle, be grasped (or felt) independently of the work itself. *Guernica* means something which is only contingently expressed by the actual painting of that name. On the other hand, formalists are inclined to deny that artistic meaning has any such external reference and to construe it as intrinsic to the work of art as such. This view is most plausible, as often indicated, in relation to forms like abstract painting, where meaning is said to consist in the balancing and harmonisation of line and colour according to purely formal principles of organisation—making statements which it may not, indeed, be too fanciful to construe as the pictorial analogue of analytic truths, the articulation of formal principles of graphic design 'purified' of representational or other expressive content. But none of these ideas of art meaning will do, as we can see from the most superficial examination of, say, the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The meaning of *The Waste Land* is not translatable without remainder into descriptive prose; neither is it well captured in ideas of the evocation of non-cognitive emotion or of the arrangement of words into formally pleasing patterns.

It is beyond doubt that a large role in loosening the grip of traditional empiricist/verificationist views of meaning was played by so-called 'use' theorists of meaning such as Wittgenstein, Austin and Ryle. Basically, their main concern was to explode the empiricist dogma that the chief and only rational function of language is to express propositions primarily descriptive of the world. Wittgenstein, for example, was fond of the analogy of language as a tool box containing an array of instruments for different linguistic purposes (Wittgenstein 1953: Part I Section 11). By such devices, use theorists sought to evade empiricist construals of moral judgements as either bogus propositions or expressions of non-cognitive feeling—via, in some cases, a conception

(admittedly controversial) of moral discourse as concerned with rational prescription more than description. But such moves also open up the possibility of construing aesthetic and artistic usage in a non fact-stating way—not just aesthetic appraisals, but the language of novel, drama and poetry as such. On a view of this kind one might see *End Game* as an extended metaphor of the human condition or the *Four Quartets* as a kind of symphony of metaphor—regarding metaphor, in turn, not as simply an oblique way of stating facts, but as an invitation to transcend everyday experience through the imaginative possibilities of ‘seeing-as’ (Wittgenstein 1953: Part I, Section 11). But then we may recognise that whilst poetry is a special artistic use of language which stands to be contrasted with non-artistic uses (witness testimonies, newspaper reports, bills, invoices and so on), it is nevertheless not the only possible type of artistic usage. Indeed, there seem to be many modes of linguistic activity and practice (rhetoric, funeral orations, after dinner speeches, comedy, joke-telling, satire, and so on) upon which we readily confer the title ‘art’. Such art, of course differs from high poetry and drama by virtue of this or that overtly instrumental purpose, and we may still be disposed to observe some distinction between fine art and crafts. But, as already noted, there is some continuity here, and we may be hard put to know where to place a play by Aristophanes or a Tony Hancock radio show in terms of this distinction—since, despite their primary instrumental purpose of making us laugh, they contain much scope for the expression of life issues.

But what relevance has all this to the present issue? The point is that if we understand dance, with Best and McFee, as a type of formalised intentional human action or activity, we can also attribute meaning to it—since intentional action, like language, is a primary bearer of meaning. At a primitive level, smiles, shrugs, hugs, handshakes, caresses, waves, gestures of insult and so on all have meaning within systems of convention—which (even if we should argue that they are parasitic upon linguistic meaning) nevertheless clearly have a life of their own. There is more to a handshake than stands to be expressed in the word ‘hello’ (and different qualities of handshake ‘speak’ volumes concerning different personalities and attitudes). It is important, by the way, to distinguish what is at issue here from those unintentional physical cues (causally correlated with such largely sub-rational responses as the submissive behaviour of subordinate to dominant baboons) generally known as ‘body language’. The present point is that intentional action and activity are in their own right prime modes of communication in which human being deliberately engage because they are often as, if not more, effective than linguistic communication. Moreover, it is crucial to grasp that ‘intentional action’ does not here mean ‘accompanied by an intention’ and that although intentional actions are rightly described as performed for a reason, reasons are not lodged in actions as a pilot in a ship. Human actions are meaningful in virtue of being performed in accordance with systems of publicly recognisable convention, and they can be so in the absence of any ‘inner’ rehearsal of thoughts or propositions. Indeed, it may well be impossible to give exhaus-

tive linguistic expression to all contextual nuances of a given intentional action.

At all events, as with spoken or written language, actions have multiform meaning by virtue of the diverse purposes for which they are performed. Some meaningful actions and activities, such as waves and handshakes, are simple. Others, such as the skills involved in dressing oneself or soldering an electrical connection, are complex and sophisticated. But by and large, skills are complex modes of agency organised, routinised or ritualised for the achievement of objective human purposes in accordance with some or other set of formal conventions. Among the complex and sophisticated skilled activities we generally regard some, such as classical and modern ballet, but not others, such as soldering a joint, as arts. Indeed, these examples mark a reasonably clear distinction: soldering is a non-expressive activity with a clear instrumental purpose and modern dance is an expressive activity with a non-instrumental 'art for its own sake' purpose. So, on this view, Bruce's *Ghost Dances* would be a rough kinetic analogue of *The Waste Land*. The dance offers a complex metaphor for disinterested contemplation just as the poem constitutes a complex linguistic metaphor. On the other hand, soldering a joint is neither disinterested, expressive nor dance. As in the case of language, however, there is an interesting middle ground of formalised human action, activity and skill with respect to which it is not entirely clear how to employ these distinctions. Folk dancing is not 'high' creative art, but it is not clearly instrumental, and is certainly potentially expressive of themes and issues. Liturgical dance is evidently instrumental but can all the same be 'high' creative art. Tap dancing is not expressive of issues—but, despite its instrumental (though not necessarily utilitarian) purpose to entertain, it would widely be regarded as at least a minor art form. And, though disco may be neither expressive (in any artistically relevant sense) nor even particularly artful, it also seems non-utilitarian—and it would be anyway difficult to know what we might call it other than dance.

From this perspective, it may be more useful to regard all activities commonly called dance as artistic formalizations of human intentional action for various purposes of recreation, celebration and expression. Moreover, though dance forms and the purposes invested in them may vary considerably, we can nevertheless discern a complex and overlapping web of resemblances which warrants our calling them all dance. In short, what is required here is something like a use theory of dance meaning (incorporating, perhaps, a family resemblance account of relationships between different forms) more than the (uncharacteristically un-Wittgensteinian) essentialist Best-McFee account of the difference between dance and other forms of physical activity which has the rather paradoxical consequence of throwing into question either the art or dance status (or both) of forms which do not obviously have meaning via the expression of life issues. But does this not blur the distinction observed at the outset of this essay between an anthropological sense of dance meaning, and that artistic or aesthetic sense in which at least some dances can

be said to be 'about' something? In truth, it does not so much blur this distinction as obliterate it—since it recognises, with Wittgenstein and others, that it is something akin to an empiricist mistake to believe that we can distinguish 'meanings' as such which are independent of the uses to which words or actions are put. Moreover, this is where the Best-McFee distinction of dance from other physical activities, via the idea of the expression of 'life issues', may be even more treacherous than we have so far recognised.

V

For whilst the idea of intentionality or 'aboutness' may help distinguish at least some forms of dance from other physical activities, it is not at all clear that this idea is well served by the notion of expressing 'life issues'—not least in the sort of cases which Best and McFee seem to have in mind. To be sure, it is perfectly intelligible to ask what a poem by Wilfred Owen or a work by Martha Graham is 'about' in anticipation of the reply that the first is about war and the second about Oedipus; but there is another sense in which a poem by T.S. Eliot and another work by Graham may be ill represented by saying that the first is about a waste land and the second is about grief. Moreover, it has been common for modern day art theorists to characterise the meaning of fine artworks in terms of metaphor—and if, as I have suggested, it is appropriate to regard works such as *The Waste Land* and *Lamentations* as complex symphonies or constructions of metaphor, a significant feature of them will be an element of ambiguity. Indeed, both Best and McFee are at pains to emphasise the multiple meaning of works of art and a need of some sort of interpretive capacity for their appreciation. The difficulty now, however, is that there are various accounts of metaphor (Cothey, 1993: Chapter VI), none of which seem particularly congenial to the 'life issues' theory of artistic meaning. On the weakest view, a metaphor is simply an oblique way of stating a literal truth or a compressed way of stating several literal truths. On a stronger view, metaphors are not reducible to literal truth but the bearers of a distinctive metaphorical truth which has no necessary extrinsic reference to the world of literal experience. On the most radical view, since to make metaphors is to engage in something other than a proposition-stating language game, it is simply a mistake to attribute truth to metaphors at all.

The first account could well be grist to the mill of the life-issues thesis, but it is clearly both an implausible view of metaphor and tantamount to a redundancy theory of art. If the metaphorical presentation of a theme, issue or narrative is no more than an obscure or shorthand way of expressing literal truths, we have not much reason to value the artistic means of expression for its own sake. It is also not clear that it would always deliver an account of literal meaning as concerned with life issues, since someone might well interpret *Lamentations* literally—but quite abstractly—as a metaphorical depiction of (say) the interplay of action and reaction. Embracing the third account might be consistent with the general Wittgensteinian sympathies of Best and McFee, and might also help the latter with some of his apparent difficulties

about reconciling abstract art with the life issues thesis. One could regard art works as concerned with the imaginative free play of ideas or the juxtaposition of images and as quite indifferent to considerations of truth. But such a view presents real difficulties for understanding artistic motivation as a species of human motivation—for explaining why anyone might want to engage in sport of this curious kind—and one might also expect such a non-cognitivist view of art to be generally uncongenial to Best and McFee, irrespective of their use-theoretical inclinations. The second account of metaphor as vehicles of a kind of truth not reducible to literal truth may appear more promising, but it may still be doubted whether it is hospitable to the life issues thesis. Indeed, it could be that Tolkein had this sort of view in mind when he firmly insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* should be appreciated entirely for its own sake, in terms of its own internal fictional logic, and not regarded as any kind of moral or political allegory. On such a view, *King Lear* and *Swan Lake* do not lead us to a better understanding of our personal emotional or social circumstances—but, on the contrary, take us beyond ourselves into realms of imaginative possibility which may have no obvious connection with literal truth. Indeed, one might say that insofar as one did learn something about one's own jealousy from *Othello*, it could only be as a consequence of regarding the play as something other than a work of art.

Or at least, perhaps we should say, it would not be to regard it as an artwork of that kind with which Best and McFee clearly want to associate the idea of expressing life-issues. I am not here insanely denying that there are what we would ordinarily regard (in advance of any fancy philosophical theorising) as works of art which are concerned, centrally or indirectly, with some sort of moral, social or political edification—only saying that these do not seem, by and large, to be the sort of works discussed by Best and McFee as expressive of life issues. In fact, these would be works more like Shakespeare's *Henry V* or Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich* than *King Lear* or *Waiting for Godot*—works which, on account of their overtly instrumental (if not propagandist) purposes, might not be regarded on more purist accounts as artworks at all. This is not, of course, a problem for the use account of art meaning I have been advocating in this paper, since this recognises that artworks perform a wide variety of functions and roles in human life. All the same, it does raise doubts about *Swan Lake* or *Lamentations* as particularly good examples of dances expressive of life issues. Indeed, for such examples perhaps we should rather look for dance analogues of representational painting or social realist novels. In actual fact, I do not think that there is anything much in the sphere of dance which provides a likely analogue to this sort of art. It may be that the nearest one can get to dance which deals in life issues is folk dance, which may be construed as in a certain way symbolic or representative of such aspects of human social concern as sex, fertility, marriage, harvesting, war-making, thanksgiving and so on. But such dance is ultimately concerned less with information or narrative than with reverence and celebration, and is probably better compared to religious painting than to *Les Misérables*.

To be sure, folk and liturgical dances invariably involve the use of tropes and symbols of a near metaphorical kind for the expression or celebration of cultural or religious themes, but such modes of representation are liable to be of a more straightforward allegorical or mimetic nature than those we encounter in the self-referenced kinetic metaphors of such fine-art danceworks as *Ghost Dances* or *Black Angels*. Indeed, the difference here may well reflect a use-theoretical distinction (by no means always clear cut) between acts of celebrating and acts of imaginative expression. In the sphere of language it might be the difference between offering a funeral oration and writing a sonnet. But just as the fact that cultural dances may sometimes fall short of fine art (though we have seen that there is much continuity here) should not preclude our regarding it as art, so the fact that other kinds of dance (ball-room, tap or disco) are not primarily classifiable as modes of either celebration or imaginative expression should not force us to deny their meaning either as dance or art, albeit in some less exalted sense. In short, a use-theoretical approach to dance meaning may encourage us to explore the many mansions of the house of dance in ways apt to be discouraged by any procrustean separation of genres into those which are truly dance and art because they express life issues, and those which are not obviously either because they do not. For just as there are significant continuities between, for example, ritual dance and fine art choreography, so there are between disco and folk dance.

Indeed, this essay is partly driven by a long-standing disquiet about what I take to be some of the implications for dance education of the sharp Best-McFee distinction between activities which express life issues and activities which don't. For whilst both authors are motivated by a highly commendable concern to defend the educational value of dance, I believe that their effective assimilation of dance meaning to the expression of life issues reflects, unconsciously or otherwise, the influence of a powerful modern theory of education as primarily a matter of initiation into rational forms of knowledge (Hirst 1974: 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge'). This theory also enshrines a sharp dichotomy between knowledge which is meaningful because it expresses propositions, and mere skills or 'knacks' 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. But we have argued that this doctrine is false, since human actions, activities and skills also have meaning by virtue of their concern with a rich diversity of human ends. Perhaps not all these ends should be regarded as fit concerns of education, but a use-theoretical account of meaning may require the distinction between the educational and the non-educational to be drawn in a different place from that common in much recent educational philosophy (perhaps as operating across rather than in line with some crude theory/practice dichotomy). To be sure, such an account may well require a quite complex mapping of different forms of dance onto an equally complex picture of the relationship between education and schooling.

Thus, whilst I should regard disco as having little or no educational value, and hence no place in the formal curriculum, it might well have a significant role to play in the extra-curricular life of the school. The skills of tap might well have a place within the formal programme of PE, though I doubt (bearing in mind that not everything of curricular value is educationally worthwhile) that there is much case for their educational value. The practice of forms of social dance may have an instrumental cross-curricular contribution to make to so-called 'PSE', and the creative dance of Best and McFee clearly warrants a rightful place in the formal curriculum of arts education. But, insofar as I incline to a broad use-theoretical account of dance meaning, I would assign educational value to rather more dance genres than those which these authors have associated with the expression of life issues—for example, folk, ethnic, and even social dance. Indeed, I suspect that in his educational writings McFee falls into a trap of concluding, in the light of the Best-McFee dichotomy, that if such forms do not express life issues in the required sense, they can at best have extrinsic educational value as contributory to cultural studies (McFee 1994: Chapter 11). What I want to say, however, is that folk and ethnic dance have *intrinsic* educational value precisely insofar as they promote a grasp of culturally significant *dance* meaning which is, all the same, not concerned to express life issues in any Best-McFee sense.

I also hope that it is not inappropriate to conclude these critical remarks on the work of Best and McFee with a note of appreciation of the enormous contribution made over the years by these authors to our understanding of these important topics. I do not doubt that without their pioneering efforts the crucial matter of understanding dance would continue, to the detriment of our general understanding of the role of the arts in human affairs, to be a largely closed book to art philosophers and theorists. That said, it is a matter for some regret that their work has not drawn the critical response from dance-theoretically inclined philosophers or philosophically minded dance-theoreticians it undoubtedly deserves. Journal articles on topics opened up by Best and McFee are still too few and far between, and the debate has been slow in moving forward. In view of this, I venture to hope that the present effort might contribute at least something to the much needed shot in the arm.

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