



‘News That Stays News’: Literature and Historical Distance

Author[s]: Derek Attridge

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‘News that Stays News’

Literature and Historical Distance

by Derek Attridge

As imperceptibly as Grief
The summer lapsed away –
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy – ¹

I read the opening of a poem written about 140 years ago and it strikes me with the force of the new. I’m surprised by the equation of ‘summer’ and ‘grief’; by the specificity of the word ‘lapsed’; by the oddness of the phrase ‘lapsed away’; by the implicit argument that imperceptibility of disappearance lessens the sense of betrayal; by the force of the word ‘perfidy’, especially coming as a climax to the stanza and carrying two of the line’s three beats; by the simplicity of the rhythmic form, redolent of nursery rhymes, in contrast to the complexity of the thought; by the avoidance of the expected rhyme after ‘away’; and by the occurrence in its place of the half-rhyme of ‘Perfidy’. Yet it’s surprising that I’m surprised, as I’ve read this stanza twenty or thirty times before, over at least forty years. And although when it was written in 1865, or when it was first published in 1891, there was little in the tradition of English verse like it, and even forty years ago – when I wrote an undergraduate dissertation on Emily Dickinson’s poems – it would have been relatively unfamiliar to readers of poetry, it now belongs to a highly familiar poetic landscape. Dickinson’s terse, lexically innovative hymn-metre poems are as well-

known as any in the canon, and their simple, memorable form has made them popular well outside the academic world.

It seems that the ‘new’ in art is not simply a literal newness, but a quality that somehow can survive historical and cultural change. In what follows I want to examine some aspects of this paradoxical quality.

That there is a close association between the idea of the ‘new’ and the idea of ‘art’ itself, at least in Western culture, is evident from almost any history of painting, or architecture, or music, or literature. Such histories present the story of a succession of new styles, new techniques, new fields of subject-matter, new modes of representation or challenges to representation. This centrality of novelty has not been fully theorized, however, perhaps because it hasn’t been central to the tradition of aesthetic theory, dominated by the philosophy of Kant and its focus on such questions as beauty, sublimity, autonomy, disinterestedness, harmony, and universality. Kant, it’s true, commented briefly on originality in the *Critique of Judgement*, and linked what he called ‘exemplary originality’ with ‘genius’ — a term that became immensely important for Romantic aesthetics. And there is a long tradition of conceptions of the artist as creator, the poet as maker, and so on. But we don’t have an adequate account of the role of newness or innovation in the *reception* of art — which, I would argue, means that we don’t have an adequate account of art, since it’s in their reception that artworks have their being as art.

Why should we value a work of art because it arrived on its historical scene with the shock of the new? Is this fact of more than historical interest? We can praise Christopher Marlowe or Gerard Manley Hopkins for achieving newness in their writing, unprepared for by cultural context within which they wrote, but does this have anything to do with the meaning or worth of their work today?

In *The Singularity of Literature* I tried to clarify some of these tangled issues by separating out the concept of originality, in the Kantian sense of exemplary originality (originality that provides a spur to

fresh creativity in others), from other related terms.² Originality is a historical fact: a property of a created work or idea understood in relation to the cultural context of its production and reception. It's not confined to art; we're familiar with originality in many other fields, including the scientific, the philosophical, the mechanical and the theological. It's not just a matter of difference — difference occurs endlessly and mostly without significant effects — but of a difference that changes the possibilities within its field for the future. So to appreciate originality, one has to undertake a historical exercise. For instance, to assess properly, and perhaps enjoy, the originality of *Lyrical Ballads* one needs to make oneself familiar with the poetry published in volumes and magazines in Britain in the late eighteenth century.

Originality, therefore, is always subject to revision, as historical knowledge grows and is corrected. The originality of *Lyrical Ballads* — as experienced by the informed reader — diminished after 1954 when a widely read study of magazine lyrics of the period was published.³ In the field of literature, the apprehension and appreciation of originality is variably accessible to individuals depending on the degree of their historical knowledge. It is indisputably one aspect of the experience of the reader possessed of the requisite knowledge in reading a work of the past; if you're very familiar with Tudor lyric poetry you will read Wyatt's 'They flee from me' with a pleasurable sense of its striking novelty in its time — but it is clearly not all there is to our experience of newness in a literary work.

A couple of well-known statements by Pound suggest that the sense of newness is not just a question of historical knowledge:

Literature is news that STAYS news.

A classic [. . .] is a classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.⁴

I would dispute the 'eternal', but Pound seems to be pointing to something real and widely acknowledged about our encounters with

art. My earlier comments on ‘As imperceptibly as Grief’ were pointing to the same feeling. In *The Singularity of Literature* I quoted F. R. Leavis, who comments on the experience of reading through *The Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse* and coming to the poetry of Donne:

The extraordinary force of originality that made Donne so potent an influence in the seventeenth century makes him now at once for us, without his being the less felt as of his period, contemporary.⁵

Leavis makes a strong claim here: that what makes Donne seem contemporary now is just what made him original (with exemplary originality) in his own day. This is clearly allied to Pound’s ‘news’ and ‘freshness’, and there is ample testimony to this response as a familiar experience: as we read we sense something like newness, an opening onto new possibilities, even if we’re reading the work for the umpteenth time.

We don’t, however, have this experience if we view a machine, or follow through a theorem, or read a philosophical argument that was highly original in its time but has become part of the familiar world today. (Unless, that is, we are reading it — to some degree, at least — as literature.) This is the puzzle and the paradox of ‘the new’ in art: not just that artists can produce works that break with existing norms and create new avenues for later art, but that this ‘newness’ appears capable of transcending historical time, that it’s *part of* the reading, or viewing, or listening experience, and of repeated readings, viewings, and listenings. And that one doesn’t have to have historical knowledge about the work to participate in this experience.

The term I’ve used to capture this property of artworks is *invention*, the quality of newness being *inventiveness*. Invention happens both within and to a culture; it’s not a merely private feat of bringing something into being (for which I reserve the term *creation*) but an intervention in the public domain. And it happens both in the production of art and its reception. How can it be explained? Traditionally, an appeal has been made to ‘human universals’ that allow time and place to be

transcended. (Pound's reference to an 'eternal' freshness suggests this kind of appeal.) But this is a dubious explanation that in fact explains very little. I prefer to see human values, experiences, and practices as historically conditioned, and seek an explanation that accepts this framework.

An initial crucial point is that invention is an *event*. The result of the invention may be an artefact, but in the field of art it is possible that this invention — we use the same word for the process and the product, which is one reason why it is a useful word — may never lose the quality of an event. And it is as an event that the artwork exists, not as an object. It's only in the reader's 'performance' of the work of literature that it comes into being as a work of art, as literature (and of course it can be read in many other ways — as a historical document, as a psychological document, as a linguistic example, and so on).

So when Leavis reads

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd?...⁶

he is experiencing the inventiveness of this opening onto new possibilities, as I am when I read 'As imperceptibly as Grief'. But we need to ask whether he or I are responding, as Leavis claims, to the *same* features that Donne's and Dickinson's contemporaries would have found fresh and inventive? Perhaps — but this is not a *necessary* condition of Leavis's experience. There can't be a literal transcendence of time; it follows from the fact that the work of art is constituted again and again in the acts of its reception that history continually changes it. What is important is the *experience* — which may be an illusion — of a reaching back to ordinary inventiveness on the part of the author.

In other words, the poem as poem has its being in the present, in the performance of the reader (even if it is being read silently); and if it is experienced as new, fresh, inventive, this newness must be felt to be an aspect of the event of the poem's invention. (This is not the

same as an awareness of the poem's *originality* in its seventeenth-century context — though as we've seen, this can play a part on the knowledgeable reader's response as well.) If I'm right that the work of art — even the painting or sculpture — has its existence *qua* work of art only as an event, we can see that inventiveness in art is not the introduction into the world of new knowledge or content (though that could well be part of a work's originality), but of new ways of handling, presenting, forming knowledge or content. In literature, this means the fresh deployment of meanings, sounds, rhythms, generic expectations, narrative developments, allusions, etc.

This is why I believe the study of what has traditionally been called 'form' is crucial — but form has to be understood as taking place as an event in the reading of the work, and as including, not being opposed to, meaning (a word which should also be taken in a verbal sense).

Drawing on Derrida's indispensable essay 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', we can relate the event of invention to two other properties: *alterity* (or otherness) and *singularity*.⁷ The event of invention brings into the culture that which is other to it, changing the culture in order to make it apprehensible. And this inventive other is a singular formation of cultural materials.

When we read a work of literature written some time ago, and experience its singularity — its difference from all other works we know — this comes across as otherness, as a resistance, however slight, to the familiar norms by which we see the world (the comparison of 'summer' to 'grief', for instance). It also comes across as inventiveness, as the inventiveness of the author, whether this is historically accurate or not. (It would not change the poem's inventiveness to discover that it was actually written by Lavinia Dickinson — though anyone who had studied the work of Emily Dickinson in relation to her biography would find their view of the poem inevitably changed.)

This question of temporal distance is really only a part of a wider question, which we may term *cultural distance*. In this case, the distance is produced by time, but the same issues arise in reading contemporary

work from a different culture. If I read a novel by Haruki Murakami and experience its inventiveness, I automatically ascribe this inventiveness to Murakami — but for all I know what I am responding to in this way is purely conventional within Japanese norms, and I am missing what is inventive according to those norms.

The point is that I can respond only from my own situation, which is to say from the historical, cultural place I occupy — and that place is determined by my own trajectory through various overlapping, often contradictory, cultural formations. I call this nexus in the web of cultural determinations my *idioculture*, just as my idiolect is my individual mode of speech, absorbed from a number of different language communities in which I have lived.

There's likely to be some cultural continuity between my situation and that of most of the works I find myself reading. Thus seventeenth-century London educated culture has many affinities with Leavis's or mine, including the internalisation of certain poetic forms, uses of humour and irony, responses to sexual desire, etc. This means that a large part of Donne's inventiveness is accessible to me. And in 2008, global culture is such that Murakami and I also share many mental frameworks: for example, we have probably read many of the same novels. However, we can never rule out chance effects. A work of art may *become* inventive in a new cultural context, just because it happens to speak inventively to that context. The self-reflexive irony of *Tristram Shandy* may be more fully appreciated in the age of postmodernism than in the more rule-conscious era of the later eighteenth century. There is a degree of contingency in the historical process, rendering some works especially visible at certain times while burying others.

What, then, is the responsibility of the reader or critic? First of all, to be attentive to the event of the work: to give oneself to the unfolding of its forms (linguistic, generic, semantic — all the ways in which its meanings are staged and relayed), something which presupposes a degree of formal and linguistic literacy; and to bring to bear on it all the resources of one's own *idioculture* (including one's ethical values and one's hopes for the future), which presupposes an understanding of and sensitivity to one's own situation.

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Then, to enhance one's reading, to narrow the cultural gap between oneself and the work in its moment of production (and of course there is always a gap, even if it is only a small one) — not only to get a stronger sense of the work's originality in its time, but also because its newness in the present will be enhanced by increased knowledge of the conventions within (or against) which the work was written, of the linguistic usages of the time, of the events, places, customs, personages referred to, and of other works from the same time and place.

Of course, literature can be the object of study in many other important ways. It can serve as a historical index, providing information about an earlier period or a faraway place; it can be scrutinized as evidence for ideological assumptions and political pressures; and it can provide material for biographical or psychoanalytic analysis of the author. What I'm suggesting is that these approaches treat literary works as something other than literature; and that, if we attend to the experience of newness or inventiveness that characterises the best of living art, we will be more likely to do justice to literary works as distinctive interventions in cultural history, and as valuable resources to draw on in our own engagements with the ethical and political demands of our time and place.

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Endnotes

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by R. W. Franklin, variorum ed, 3 vols (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), II, p. 860.

² Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³ Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 486–522.

⁴ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 29, pp. 13–14.

⁵ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 18.

⁶ John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 60.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other,' *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 310–43.