

THE METAPHYSICS OF DANCE³⁶

The day the first man danced was the day of the first revolt, the revolt of humanity against its destiny of being mortal. It was a revolt against time, which passes rapidly, slowly, but always implacably. Revolts are always made by man for ephemeral aims and this revolt also served only to give him the illusion of dominating time.

Thus man first danced slowly, then ever more rapidly, then lessening his pace until the movement became again very slow, even ceasing for a moment and in doing so commanded the rhythm of time.

Later, man fooled himself into thinking that he belonged not only to the earth but to the entire Universe while dancing, for the revelation came to him that he could exist whilst barely touching the ground with the tips of his toes and finally, oh joy!, could detach himself from the earth, if only for a fraction of a second.

In this way man got to know the cosmic sentiment of dance. This is the reason why religious cult has its origin in dance, which among many primitive peoples consisted in religious dances executed by a priest and the faithful. Whilst dancing, primitive man felt nearer to the gods and intuitively felt that the man who dances is less terrestrial than one who does not dance. When dancing man dominates time, imposing his rhythm by the cadence of his movements; this domination is the most marvellous that he could ever have hoped to achieve. Human nature is proud and the dancer was not content only with the strong but evidently intimate joy that dancing gave him, he wanted to perform before spectators, to be a principal figure and not only one who served the gods; he wanted to be admired, to become a demigod himself; a demigod, dominating time with such command of his body that he became almost unreal in the eyes of the beholder. Thus the dancer became an acrobat. The word “acrobat” comes from the Greek: *akro* “tall” and *batein* “to command”. *Akron* also means height and has the same root: to walk high, to be on top, higher than others, superior to others. These words perfectly express the sentiment with which an acrobat inspires his spectators. The fact that an acrobat walks on a tightrope at a certain height above the ground was only an evident and exterior reason for suggesting the name “walker on high”. The term above all had a symbolic significance.

The true feeling the acrobat provoked in his spectators corresponded to the word “high”, meaning superior, otherwise the more logical name would be dancer on a rope, *seiltänzer*, as it is in German. The sentiment of superiority the acrobat inspires is just; the dancer-acrobat while dancing is a superior being, almost unreal, almost a demigod. The absolute mastery of his body, the domination of his nerves and muscles make him legendary and immaterial while dancing, free as only the soul can be, a soul carrying the body along in its rush to merge itself with Universe. How beautiful the movements of the human body are when giving full value to the many gifts nature has granted it, a human body that the will of spirit has liberated from the chains of physical laws. Many years of hard work, study and fatigue are needed before the body is able to follow the elasticity and independence of thought. The dancer-acrobat who has worked hard from childhood to conquer all difficulty in order to achieve complete mastery and liberty of movement, a dancer for which the law of gravity only exists in order to bring him back to earth after a prodigious leap, is amply compensated for his efforts by the pleasure that dance gives him, a pleasure that is neither physical nor spiritual, but something more, that is the sensation of the All as he unites himself with the Universe. For a dancer whose body weight is inexistent when dancing, there is no effective barrier between earth and paradise; there is only the cosmic consciousness of the Universe that frees him from the sensation of being mortal. The music guides the dancer;

36 G. de Chirico, *Metafisica della danza*, signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 217-221. Published in English here for the first time.

he delights in it and understands it absolutely and completely with every fibre of his body for the music is he himself. He becomes one with music as he expresses it, renders it visible and plastic. The world and he have become one, and men, where are they? Very far, down below; he does not see them, he only knows that they exist. But what he has forgotten are human sentiments, that is, the instincts, sensations and thoughts of his human nature; he has cast them down, perhaps into the hall where the spectators are; and free and happy he unites himself with the music and dances savouring cosmic voluptuousness with each one of his movements.

It is only to a dancer-acrobat that classic dance can procure these sensations, for to feel them the dancer, man or woman, must not encounter any technical difficulties. Only then can dancers abandon themselves in a natural way with body and soul to the joy of dancing. The movements imposed by the choreography unite and merge with the music and become spontaneous; dance arises from music and he who dances is no longer in need of memory.

The dancer, inebriated and inspired by musical sounds, interprets them in plastic representations and his task is great for music essentially represents the idea of creation, ideas not yet realised in matter. The ideas conceived by the Spirit of the World on the first day of time were destined to announce themselves by means of sound and to fill the Universe. The first bass note arose from the bowels of the earth. It was a low note, scarcely perceptible, expressing the beginning of creation on our globe after having formed it. The idea of future creation appeared, sprung from the depths of the earth; the first sound was expressed by the deepest bass in a very dull tone, for the idea was but scarcely detached from the earth. Fatality, still distant, is silent, for it has not yet been decided whether or not the first creative idea would be compelled to return to the bowels of the earth and create no more.

Following this, a capital decision was taken. The Idea of Creation creates other ideas; it is thus that all ideas are born: the idea of plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, lakes, seas, instincts, animals and even man. Sounds mount, become clearer, more sonorous, higher; then are born the ideas of sentiments, conceptions, sensations; they form musical scales, harmonious chords, joyful or sad; then the sound becomes thinner, losing itself high up, disappearing into regions too distant for the ear and spirit of man to perceive. This is how ideas, which are the most sublime and pure among other things, took hold of the dancer by way of sound and music. This evidently occurred without his noticing, for he feels only exceptional joy. In fact, a dancer who dances without music is no longer a magical character, a demigod, an inspired moving plastic image of music, but a simple gymnast incapable of subjugating our spirit and our sentiments.

In dance, naturally accompanied by music, which is its very soul, all is beautiful and perfect when the execution is faultless, that is, when carried out by great artists. This is also true for the idea of love (in dancing, not pantomime), which remains in a state of a sentiment barely outlined. In dancing love is not the nonsensical sentiment felt by terrestrial creatures and is a phenomenon that has nothing to do with the one that constrains and obliges creatures down here to perpetuate their race without considering the uselessness of such an aim.

Sadness and despair in a ballet are but languor, accelerations or the speeding up of rhythm, for composers of a ballet want at all costs to give dance the resemblance of their own logic by inserting factors from human life such as sadness and desperation. Death, whenever it does appear, is but the end of enchantment and a return to the human sphere, as dance has ended.

I have spoken of the mysteries of dance, which only great dancers can have touched upon and felt, but now I want to explain to the spectator what dancing, evidently created to be danced and not contemplated, really is. But as spectators can only attend a performance, I would like to tell ballet lovers what a miracle they are actually seeing without even realising it.

Ballet as all theatrical art is in full decadence. In saying this I exclude Russia where the theatre in general and the ballet in particular play a great part in national life. The ballet in Russia has reached and still preserves a truly remarkable excellence of execution. There is no doubt that ballet is a very difficult and complicated undertaking. For a country to possess a first class ballet substantial material means are needed and only the State can meet such expenditure. First of all, a school of dance must be founded like the one in Russia, a very serious school, where future male and female dancers under the guide of excellent masters begin their studies at the age of five and continue them systematically for twelve years to become accomplished dancers. One must not forget that the classic ballet is above all acrobatics and that in classical dancing there can be no improvisation.

The ballets represented on European stages are not classic ballets but instead danced pantomimes. Pantomime and ballet are totally different things. Pantomime, even when most animated, always remains firmly attached to the ground whereas in the ballet the dancers give the impression of being detached and independent from the ground, that they are flying through the air rather than moving on the stage. In a word, ballet must be danced more in the air than on the ground and have the lightness which it demands, inasmuch as it is the moving image of music.

Evidently these conditions are very difficult, or rather, impossible to fulfil without a serious and lengthy training. Otherwise said, to execute a ballet a real troupe of acrobat-dancers (male and female classic dancers) is absolutely necessary.

Thus in dancing, as in painting, the new tendencies were caused by material impossibilities. In the case of dancing it is good human material that is lacking.

Modern choreographers finding themselves lacking true means, caught on to falsely intellectual ones and turned to subterfuge which in this case consisted in various sorts of pantomime. In reality, everything that has been attempted, notwithstanding aesthetic and complicated theories, theories that tried to justify these attempts, was not at the height of true dancing. These theories, which by the way are still applied today, change nothing in the fundamental fact that pantomime has taken the place of dance which means that dance has been deprived of the essence and metaphysics that made it a magical and elusive phenomenon. The basic difference between pantomime and ballet is the following: pantomime must express the sentiments and actions of the people on the stage through gestures and facial expressions, which means that pantomime is something concrete whereas dancing is an abstract phenomenon having nothing in common with acts and sentiments belonging to the reason and logic of man.

In reality, modern ballet trends with their pantomime systems are proof that the modern spirit, notwithstanding its avowed fondness for "spirituality" and "metaphysics" has not understood a thing about the metaphysics of dancing, nor felt the essential abstract aspect of dance, which is absolutely outside of human logic.

Dancing has no need to be renewed, nor can it be; it can only be enriched by the creation of new movements created spontaneously by the talent of a great dancer.

New forms of modern ballet are attempting to take the place of classic ballet. But notwithstanding this apparent and wilful madness (for it is through bizarreness and originality that one hopes to renew the ballet and theatre in general), these new forms get their inspiration only from reason and current logic and not from the "metaphysics of dance".