

Martha Hill - June 1933

SYMPOSIUM ON MODERNISM IN THE ARTS

THE DANCE

Dance is an art which makes meaning evident through movement. True, any art derives part of its meanings from motion or motionlessness. Motion and motionlessness, like sound and silence, enhance each other. Sculpture and painting use these negative and positive poles in their motionless masses or flowing contours. These arts suggest movement without employing actual movement. On the other hand, the cinema, the drama to a lesser extent, and the dance above all, use actual movement to make manifest their meanings. The dance then is truly a movement art: its medium is movement; its instrument, the human body.

To understand dance, one must be sensitive to the meanings of movement. In all people there is laid down through biological and racial inheritance the equipment by means of which one responds to movement. However, we have lost our birth-right in the matter of the appreciation of human movement. It is true we do not deery things of the body as did the medieval world; but the mechanization of the modern world has been effective in changing the functional importance of the body. Also, in a civilized world in which the face and body tend to assume the immobile and guarded mask of emotionlessness or the mannered and imitative mask of the favored mode of contemporary society, movement as a clue to inner meaning is well-nigh lost. But let a situation arouse the strong, primitive emotions of fear, intense joy, or anger, and the age-old racial patterns of spontaneous expression by means of movement flash through the veneer which has been effortfully acquired. This disciplining of outer appearance is apparent in the savage only when he meets a person or thing that he can not trust. It is protective coloration in meeting other human beings; or in the case of approaching his gods, propitiation. So too are civilized man's masks made from the substance of fear and distrust--fear of ridicule and distrust of the construction which would be placed upon an unguarded response. Herein lies a great problem for the dance. The integrity of the dance demands that the embodiment of its clear meaning be in terms of authoritative movement.

The ephemeral quality of dance, the fact that it exists only during the moment of being danced and that there is no adequate way in which one may record it; the fact that dance has gone through many periods in which it has lost all semblance of form and meaning in terms of its own identify or when it has appeared only as a hybrid form; these facts, together with that of a partial atrophy of a human movement-sense, explain in part the status of the dance as an art today.

The negative statement of what dance is not may be clarifying. First, it is not a narrative art. Ridiculous as this may sound, a great proportion of the dance audience looks for "a story" in a dance. Radio City felt it necessary to announce or print a would-be synopsis of Martha Graham's and Harold Kroutzberg's dances. True, music and other arts are subjected to the same humiliation; the lurid word-images of radio announcers as they invent programmatic meaning for absolute music are insidious in the same fashion. The province of dance being that of meanings which may be made explicit through movement, meanings which can be communicated more effectively through words should be treated in the form of

poetry or prose and not in the form of dance. Story and dance may be combined, it is true, but then one has a hybrid form--a pantomimic dance or a story told in dance form. A contemporary artist working in this particular field is Angna Enters. She does not call her Episodes in Dance Form dances. They partake of all the theatre arts and as such are not pure dance.

Dance is not music interpretation. This too as a statement appears ridiculous. No one would characterize one art as the interpreter of another art. However, this erroneous idea concerning dance is fairly prevalent. The early efforts of the modern dance to establish itself without music or any other form of accompaniment appear as a revolt against this particular concept of the dance. There can be dance without music. As a personal opinion, it seems that the unaccompanied dance would inevitably lead back through the stages of a purely rhythmic percussion accompaniment to the eventual addition of melodic line and to a form of music. Perhaps there would be evolved a new kind of music, functionally related to the dance. Just as children in their counting out rhymes add to their rhythmic drone the rudimentary rise and fall of the simplest melody, so might dance find itself again retracing steps similar to those already taken in the common history of dance and music. The dance should not interpret music--music needs no such gratuitous service. Music and dance when used together should be fused into an organic whole. This immediately implies a most important basis for selection of music for the dance. The trend in the selection of accompaniment for the modern dance is in the direction of music composed for a particular dance after the dance has been composed; music composed in the periods prior to the development of the classical forms of music, since those forms have no counterpart in movement; music of the contemporary period; and folk music. Percussion accompaniment also serves in the trend of the dance away from traditional accompaniment.

The dance is more than mere entertainment. There is of course, a place for such forms as precision chorus dancing but this is not the province of pure dance. The dance has something to say as does any other art. Pure dance speaks from a realm defined by the potentialities and limitations of movement as a medium and the human body as an instrument.

In order to achieve vitality, depth, and a certain inevitability, an art must be rooted in and speak out of its own time and its own place; otherwise it speaks decadence.

Movement in the modern dance sounds in antithesis to that of the classical ballet and the romantic dance which directly preceded it. The classical ballets used a highly developed and brilliant idiom of movement which sprang from a negation of the limitations of human strength and skill. The beauty of the ballet lay in this very non-human approach. A dancer in this style scorned the earth as he leaped with no apparent effort. In contra-distinction, the dancer in the modern style builds into his dance the significance of the human body in relationship to its environment. The ballet was concerned with the decorative line of arms and legs. The modern dance is more concerned with the structural basis of movement--the initiation of movement in the torso and a resultant change in the whole body, this being the fashion in which the body is mechanically best adapted to move. The modern dance uses the transitional moment of movement as the ballet did not. Many compositions in the style of the ballet were made up of a series of pictures or poses. The modern dance composes from the transitional material

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of movement--the moving from point of rest to point of rest being the focus of interest, rather than the point of rest itself. The dynamic rather than the static line is the criterion of the modern dancer-composer so far as movement is concerned.

The modern dance has a new range of meanings or content as well as of form. The very breadth of range has aroused controversy. The modern dance has been attacked as being dark, tragic, and neurotic, not because its themes do not also partake of the bright but because the audience has been shocked by any deviation from the path of sweetness and light. A theme of any other color has seemed to them undance-like. This attitude grows out of looking upon dance as entertainment or diversion.

Definite trends in selection of themes for the modern dance are difficult to discern because of the catholicity of interest. Certain characteristics of the dance of this period, however, point toward a general direction of content. Dance is realizing again its fundamental importance as a communal art. Both in Germany and America, it has become in some measure an expression of a group consciousness--a group comment upon reality. Since the ritual has always been an expression of a group impulse, this may explain in part the prevalence of ritualistic themes in modern dance. Martha Graham's "Primitive Mysteries" and "Ceremonials" are group rituals. Mary Wigman's "Dance for the Earth" and Martha Graham's "Dithyrambic" are two aspects of the Dionysiac ritual composed in two styles but springing from the same concept. In these two dances the individual stands as symbol of the group.

The heroic motif is evident often enough to be marked as an idea congenial to the modern dance. Mary Wigman's "Dance into Death" and the first and last sections of Doris Humphrey's "Dances of Women" are in such a mode. Interest in the heroic is not so important in the modern dance for its frequency as for the trend it signifies. It is significant of a return to first essentials. It is an admixture of the primitive and the epic which strikes a new and profound note in the recent development of the dance.

The transitional moment of dance is an important characteristic in meanings as well as in movement. Many dances in the modern style appear as glimpsed fragments from dances which have been going on and will go on; it is as if the audience chances upon them only for a short span of their entirety. A dance is not self-contained as to meanings; its identity is established by relationships. It presents the momentary as a clue to the universal--the dance itself as a microcosm.

The three foregoing points: dance as a group comment upon reality; as moving toward the primitive and the epic; and as a microcosm of meanings revealed through the transitional moment, are indicative of the temper of the modern dance. This temper represents a fundamental desire to value past styles of dance as important as expressions of the persistent impulse to dance, but related to the modern dance only through this basic impulse. We must build our own style, our own forms. We must say those things which are valid and important for us to say. The modern dance attempts to preserve its identity as a fundamental mode of expression; and in order to maintain that identity, it must be a part of its own time and place, it must be aware of its own nature as an art; and in any deviation from that essentially pure form, it must recognize the by-path for what it is.

In summary, perhaps the best single thing that could be said, and one which implies all else that has been said, is to make reference to Martha Graham's repeated comment on the modern dance. Using the American negro and the American Indian as contrasting figures, she points out the difference between dance as escape and loss of self, exemplified by the dance of the negro; and dance as awareness and discovery of self, exemplified by the dance of the Indian. The belief out of which she dances is akin to the latter. She conceives of the modern dance as a dance of integration and inner concentration which creates energy, not as a dance coming out of an excess of feeling which must find release. This point of view stands as a keystone for the integrity of the modern dance.