Virtuosity and the aesthetic ideals of Japanese dance and virtuosity and the aesthetic ideals of western classical dance

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Professor Gunji:

The fundamental concepts underlying dance in Japan fall into the same categories as those which underlie most of Asian dance in general, taken in large perspective. But even though Japan is part of Asia and Japanese dance is one aspect of Asian dance, certain unique and characteristic aesthetic ideas, conceived during the long history of the Japanese people, have been nurtured as well.

I should like to remind you that when we say "Japanese dance" (Nihon Buyo) without any other qualifying remark, we usually mean the dance element of Kabuki theatre, which may also be called Kabuki Buyo. In this paper however I shall refer to other forms of dance and theatre in Japan in addition to Nihon Buyo in order to pinpoint the basic principles of Japanese aesthetics. Although No and Kabuki involve other elements in addition to dance, and may be considered theatre forms, dance is an integral part of both these forms of theatre. Thus, by "dance," as used in this paper, I refer to dance movement as found generally in Japan, not only in Nihon Buyo but in other genres, including dance in dance-theatre forms.

Bugaku in antiquity, No in the Middle Ages, Kabuki in the early modern period—each of these forms was brought to a high point of development and each has been handed down in Japan from one generation to the next up to the present day. Since each of these classical forms has its own aesthetic ideals, and since these differ from one another to some extent, it is rather risky to generalize on the subject. However, one can perhaps summarize some of the fundamental concepts which these genres share in common. It goes without saying that what constitutes the ideal of the beautiful as shared by all these forms is related to what constitutes this ideal in all other forms of Japanese art as well.

If we think of dance as a quest for beauty of movement, then Japanese dance seeks ultimate beauty, not in lively motion or soaring leaps, but rather in forms of expression the exact opposite of these. For example, one ideal of Japanese dance is expressed in the paradox ugokazu ni man, literally "to dance without moving." This ideal is found principally in mai, dance which attained perfection in the Kamigata region of Japan around present-day Kyoto and Osaka where traditional culture still remains comparatively strong. This does not mean that there is no movement at all in mai, but rather that the movement is extremely restrained though full and unceasing. The impression conveyed by this movement has its ideal in the feeling conveyed by the placid surface of a body of water; the water, though constantly in motion, seems not to be moving at all. It is this type of minimal but concentrated, centripetal movement that mai sets as its ultimate ideal of beauty.

Consequently one of the conventions of the mai type of dance in Japan is that the smaller the performing area the better. Traditionally it is considered ideal if mai be performed without moving outside the area of one tatami mat, which covers approximately the area of six feet by three feet. Perhaps the implication is that the performance area or stage is a symbol for the earth, and that the magical powers gained by dancing in this area extend to the earth itself and spread outward from there. Hence, the smaller the dancing area, the higher the degree of abstraction. This concept seems to have been inherited from the beliefs underlying Kagura, a type of religious dance dating back to the ancient period. Within a confined dancing area, the presence of the spirits was invoked and their powers appeased; all of eternity was represented, and peace for the spirits of human beings was thought to be preserved.

From this idea of pacifying the spirits and preventing them from flying aimlessly around was developed one of the distinctive forms of artistic expression in Japanese dance, known as ashibyoshi. Ashibyoshi is a characteristic technique of stamping. Various forms of ashibyoshi have been developed over the years, but we can consider all of these as artistic expressions which originated from a desire to pacify the spirits by stamping on a delimited, symbolic space. In theatre and dance, this symbolic space becomes the stage. The ranbyoshi, a specially choreographed passage of stamping in an irregular and difficult rhythmic pattern, which occurs near the beginning of the dance by the female character in the No play, "Dojoji," is always performed with the utmost care. This is because this sequence preserves the original symbolic meaning of ashibyoshi, which is closely connected with the story of "Dojoji." For the performance of Japanese dance and theatre, a special platform known as a shiki butai is often installed on top of the ordinary stage floor in order to emphasize the acoustic effect of stamping. For No drama several big jars are buried beneath the stage so that the sound of the symbolic stamping will be particularly resonant.

We can surmise that it was at least partially from the posture assumed when stamping out the ashibyoshi that the basic posture of Japanese dance developed, a position known as koshi o ireru, where the muscles of the buttocks are tensed and the knees are slightly bent, resulting in the torso being inclined forward a little, keeping the center of gravity low. Hence the basic position of Japanese dance is exactly the opposite of that found in Western dance, which seeks to stretch the body upward as far as possible. Perhaps here lies the basic difference between the concepts which support Western and Japanese dance: the one aspires to heaven, while the other is firmly rooted in the earth. This posture of Japanese dance may have some relationship with the traditional everyday posture of the Japanese people who, for many centuries, spent their lives cultivating the rice crop. (A variation of this basic posture is that of the onnagata or female impersonator of Kabuki; although the torso inclines backward rather than forward, the knees are still bent and the center of gravity is kept low.)

The nature of mai also expresses itself in the technique known as suriashi, the exact opposite of leaping, for here the ideal is to move as though gliding without lifting the back of the foot or the heel from the floor, except as needed to transfer the weight, which is done in a stylized manner. This technique finds its perfected form in the suriashi of No. There is a close relationship which connects the walking style of suriashi, the basic posture known as koshi o ireru, and the symbolic stamping or ashibyoshi. All these relate to the fundamental concepts underlying mai, which reached its perfected form by the Middle Ages.

In contrast to the placidity of mai, dynamic movement constitutes the essence of odori. The original meaning of mai is "to move in a circle," while odori means "to leap or jump." Mai

became a presentational art in the early period, and was associated with the upper classes. Odori developed from within the masses as a form of group expression, and became especially popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It reached its highest point of development in the dance element of Kabuki theatre, or Kabuki Buyo. The word buyo is a compound word composed of the Chinese characters for mai and odori. However, as dance continued to develop as an art form, and as an integral part of Kabuki theatre, odori conceded the supremacy of mai, and odori became the exception that proves the rule.

There is another basic difference between dance in Japan and Western classical ballet. In Japan a dancer can be a hundred years old and still be called a virtuoso performer. Unlike Western dance which, because it emphasizes perfection of physical technique, fixes the limits of a dancer's career at the limits of his or her physical capability, the basic tenet of Japanese dance is that virtuosity can be displayed right up to the moment of death. This ideal is expressed in the phrases rani ("the attainment of supreme excellence") and kareta kyochi ("the state of refinement"). By the time this stage has been reached, mere technique has been mastered and transcended and the problem becomes a purely spiritual one. Virtuosity in Japanese dance is not regarded as only perfection of physical technique; such perfection is not the ultimate goal. Consequently, Japanese dance is a discipline that continues until the end of one's life.

A more subtle but related idea is that absolute perfection is to be avoided; this aesthetic concept relates to mai and odori, as to all other arts in Japan. The very fact of imperfection, of incompleteness, is thought to mark off what remains on the path to perfection. It is through such imperfection that one is able to conceive the idea of eternity. This tenet has something in common with the Zen ideas of mu ("nothingness") and ku ("emptiness"). It is these most beautiful and most complete forms of incompleteness or deficiency that leave their fragrance behind and are able to suggest the vast world of freedom they represent. The stance of facing toward an eternal perfection and denying a perfection one can see with human eyes forms the underlying aesthetic ideal of all Japanese art forms, including dance.

Dr. Cohen:

Western classical dance seems to lack the great stretch of historical continuity that distinguishes the dance of Japan. While we can trace a continuous line of descent from the dances of the Renaissance courts, we are concurrently aware that each generation, along with receiving the traditions of the past, has added something of its own to those traditions. An essential characteristic of Western dance since the Renaissance has been its encouragement of innovation. In a culture that invites change, where the art now exists in such a multiplicity of forms, is it possible to summarize, as Professor Gunji has done, the "fundamental concepts" which these dance types "share in common"?

Even limiting ourselves to classical dance requires qualification of the subject, since ballet has undergone considerable expansion of its vocabulary, as well as a number of vicissitudes of style, in its four hundred years of existence. While its aesthetic ideals have been enunciated in somewhat similar terms over these centuries, the actual meaning of the terms has varied extensively. In 1725, Pierre Rameau designated in his Le Maitre a danser the desirable qualities of the dancer: nobility, precision, grace, and lightness. Most—though not all—styles of contemporary ballet dispense completely with the first requisite. Precision certainly remains, but precisely what did Rameau mean by grace and lightness? His baroque manner seems overly ornate for our definition of grace, which implies an absence of superfluous motion. And surely he did not have in mind the ethereal lightness of the Taglioni sylphide, who could never have given the impression that she was skimming over grass without bending a blade of it were she dressed like Rameau's lady in her full, stiff skirt and heeled slippers.

Rameau makes no mention of virtuosity, for the age that lauded the accomplished dance technician had not yet arrived, though it was near at hand. The year after the publication of Rameau's treatise, Marie Camargo made her debut as the Paris Opera and soon thereafter shortened her dancing skirt in order to display her brilliant technique. The length of Camargo's skirt, however, would hide much of today's virtuosity, which involves the execution of movements probably undreamed of by the eighteenth-century balierina. In the little more than two hundred years that have elapsed since technical expertise became important to the Western dancer, the nature of that expertise has changed drastically. Camargo's dainty entrechat quatre no longer elicits applause—unless, perhaps, it is performed in an extended series. The thirty-two fouettes, which only Pierina Legnani of all women in the world could perform in 1895, can now be seen in any advanced ballet class, and the ballerina who wants to exploit the step today has to embellish it in some manner—with whirlwind speed or perhaps with a sprinkling of doubles or triples—in order to attract much attention.

The exact configuration of Western virtuosity changes, then, with the times. However, the general principles underlying any specific instance may be more consistent. Virtuosity in dance cannot, after all, be understood in isolation from the aesthetic ideals that define the genre under consideration—as Professor Gunji has shown. He has called Japanese dance the "quest for beauty of movement"; Andre Levinson has spoken of ballet as the "desire to create beauty." Both East and West, then, see the art in terms of process, of becoming, in relation to the activity of striving to attain a goal. And both are concerned with beauty. Nevertheless, quite different concepts of beauty are involved.

Professor Gunji suggests that balletic virtuosity focuses on lively motion and soaring leaps in contrast to the Japanese ideal of "dancing without moving." Surely this is true of our most familiar forms of virtuosity—the animated jumps, the rapidly spinning pirouette—these are the conventional applause-getters. Still some connoisseurs like to draw attention to their admiration for the lyrical adagio, with its soft folding and opening of the limbs, its extended balances, its gentle melodious undulations, its serenely legato phrases. Even Professor Gunji's "dance without moving" is not unknown to ballet: witness the ravishing Fonteyn arabesque which, while remaining still in measurable space, appeared vibrant with ongoing motion. Admittedly, though, such instances are comparatively rare, and their recognition for the true virtuosity they are is rarer still.

Generally, Western dance does tend to be more spacious than Japanese; we are accustomed to outstretched limbs, to steps that carry the performer through space, preferably even giving the illusion that he has covered a greater expanse than he actually has. Yet we should not ignore the brilliance of petit batterie, breathtakingly swift as only small movements can be swift. Then too there is the special dazzle of turns like fouettes performed without moving from a single spot.

Actually, the ideals of ballet are not single. Rather they emerge from tensions created by such polarities as motion and stillness, spaciousness and confinement. The former set give the dance its dynamic quality, but without the latter their energy would be dissipated. Like the Japanese spirits who must be prevented from flying aimlessly around, the liveliness of Western dance must be anchored in form. The child leaps with unbounded joy, but his activity is more delightful to himself than to his observer (unless the latter is a fond parent), for he is likely to create only a hodgepodge of murky shapes, possessing neither clear visual focus nor rhythmic pattern. The dancer's exuberance, on the contrary, pushes outward against the constraints of form. How far can he go without destroying that form? Poised on the brink of artistic disaster, he thrills the audience with his daring. Virtuosity at its greatest fuses personal audacity with the demands of external discipline in a moment of artistic triumph.

Professor Gunji associates Western dance with a single area of concern: he describes ballet as "aspiring for heaven," while he finds his own dance "firmly rooted in the earth." But unless we are rooted in earth, we would not have to aspire to heaven, for we could reach it easily. Yet Professor Gunji remarks that Western dance aspires, that it "seeks to stretch upwards"-which implies attempt, effort. And he is right, because gravity tries to claim the Western dancer as much as it does the Japanese; but where the latter acquiesces, the former fights. The common assertion that the movements of the ballet dancer should appear completely effortless deserves further investigation.

The very fact that we as audience see in the body of the dancer a replica of our own is at once a reminder that effort has had to be exerted to achieve the soaring leap, the vertigo turn, We do not respond with a similar thrill to the cat—from floor to top of bookcase in a single, glorious spring. Still less do we respond to the acrobatic gyrations of the puppet. In the case of the dancer we know that the body, like our own, had to be coaxed, trained, finely tuned, and finally conquered.

On the stage, the performer need add no special reminders of battles past. We admire the feat that is not preceded by an involuntary intake of breath, a tensing of muscles, a display of trepidation that makes us worry about the outcome to such an extent that success can mean only relief. The effect of virtuosic achievement is exultation. Effort, however, may be deliberately exploited as a sign, not of incompetence, but of humanity, and this was the device of the early modern dance, which focused more on the noble labor of the feat than on the achievement. Again, the effect was to minimize virtuosic brilliance.

On the other hand, an apparently effortless execution lacks that certain spark of excitement. The casual attack lessens our appreciation of attainment and consequently our enjoyment of virtuosity. We may smile at the off-hand approach, but we are not thrilled. True virtuosity thrills.

Akim Volynsky in his Book of Exultation wrote of the balletic flight that is "bold and audacious." Unless we are aware that the dancer is by nature rooted in the earth, we cannot fully appreciate his conquest of the air. But we must sense the conquest too. Because we perceive kinesthetically the recalcitrant flesh, the pull of gravity, and because—like the dancer—we long to transcend them, we rejoice with him in his triumph. A part of us has triumphed too. There seems to be something beyond the conquest of a physical obstacle.

Professor Gunji remarks that the Japanese are averse to perfection, while many texts on classical ballet invoke the concept of perfection. John Martin notes the "will to archetypal perfection," and Volynsky cites "the willful perception of the mountain peak." The dancer wills a height beyond that which he can attain; perhaps our empathy is the greater because he does not achieve it; we share not only his achievement, but his aspiration. A state of perfection, in which nothing is left to be desired, is after all a dull situation.

The most exciting exhibit of virtuosity, then, is the one in which the dancer, possessed of a body similar to that of ordinary people, accomplishes with grace a feat that is—or seems to be—beyond what is possible to an ordinary body, but leaves the impression that his aspiration is to reach further still. Part of the thrill results from the extraordinary accomplishment, part from the tension subsisting between the actual accomplishment and the ultimate vision.

Is such virtuosity purely physical? Robert Browning wrote in "Andrea del Sarto," "a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" Classical ballet does indeed aspire to heaven, even while knowing that it lies beyond our reach.

Professor Gunji:

I should like to add some points to my original remarks, referring to Dr. Cohen's presentation.

As Dr. Cohen has mentioned, Japanese dance in the larger sense has had a very long history. However, if we consider the dance element of Kabuki (and Kabuki is probably the most popular today of Japan's traditional theatre arts), we find that it has a history of some four hundred years, roughly equivalent to that of Western ballet. A comparison of these two forms may be enlightening. Dr. Cohen has said that Western classical dance experienced change according to the taste of each historical period. It is interesting to note that Kabuki dance has also undergone changes which involved a variety of style and fashion. Perhaps the means for surviving through the ages has been much the same in both ballet and in Kabuki dance.

As Western classical dance has been based upon its fundamental ideal throughout its history, regardless of variations in the style and taste of each period, dance in Kabuki has also been essentially quite faithful to its original ideal, adjusting itself somehow to contemporary fashions. One may say of Kabuki dance, as of other dance forms in Japan, that it is based upon the general concepts of Japanese aesthetics which have been defined by a number of Japanese artists. Basho, one of the greatest of haiku poets, articulated one of these aesthetic concepts; he said that the haiku is founded on the principle of combining mode with permanency. Such a principle might well be applied to Japanese dance.

While the striving for beauty of movement may be similar in Occidental and Oriental dance, the difference between them may be found in the direction of their development. Although both ballet and Kabuki dance long ago divested themselves of the religious burden, we must not ignore the notion of God which has ever influenced the persons who have created within these dance forms. In the West, there is a constant longing for an almighty God seated high in the heavens; the Japanese people, on the other hand, expect their God to come down to their world to be celebrated by them. Generally speaking, the Western idea of God is a superior being who receives adoration from men, while the Japanese God is often regarded as the incarnation of some earthling who participates in the daily life of human beings.

This interpretation of the Japanese God, and the worship of ancestor deities, may be related to the special respect shown to old age. In the sphere of classical dance-theatre, such as No and Kyogen, the role of Okina ("old man") is held to be highly sacred. I do not deny that Japanese audiences appreciate young attractive dancers as well, but the final goal at which Japanese actor-dancers in these classical art forms are aiming is the serene beauty of old age.

In Japan it is believed generally that it is very difficult (though not perhaps impossible) for an actor-dancer to reach the utmost sense of beauty unless he is in his fifties, at least. Among the top-ranked dancers in Japan, some are aged over eighty years. Certainly they cannot control their bodily movements as well as when in their thirties, but, as I mentioned before, in Japan technical perfection and precision in the physical sense do not come first in the evaluation of classical dance. Rather the criterion is the atmosphere or the delicate nuance the dancers may create around themselves on the stage.

Zeami, considered to be the most outstanding figure in the history of No, used very special terms to describe the ideals of No. Hand (literally "flower") is the utmost aesthetic concept. Yugen ("unearthly elegance") is one aspect of this "flower." These are still the highest ideals of the artists in classical Japanese theatre. Therefore, Japanese dancers try to discipline themselves, aiming at Zeami's ideals and seeking the ultimate beauty of dance at a deeper spiritual level.

Dr, Cohen has stated that the length of the skirt of the ballet costume was shortened in order to display the skill of the dancers, to show their brilliant technique. We find that the Japanese dance costume follows just the opposite tendency. Kabuki tends to emphasize the ornamental effect of the costumes; in No drama, the costumes emphasize the effect created by the carriage of the body, transferring the movement of the body into the delicate movements of the costumes. The voluminous costumes of most of the leading characters do not permit spectacular leaps or rapid spins, but in any case such an obvious display of technique is usually considered rather vulgar. Similarly, in many forms of Japanese music, our traditional singers try to restrain themselves from displaying their vocal virtuosity and to concentrate instead upon expressing the profound meaning of the song. Japanese dancers seldom burst out into the great joy of victory or conquest, although this seems to be a good motif for Western dance.

In its highest form, Japanese art is supposed to conceal any satisfaction in or demand for perfection. Probably the most important motif for Japanese dance is the representation of a deep Buddhist release, a feeling of resignation, which is urged upon all Japanese people.

Dr. Cohen:

The resolution might be found in Jerome Robbins' "Watermill," a Western ballet permeated by the influence of Japan. Edward Villella indeed dances "without moving," a not-too-young man contemplating his life, until he approaches that very sphere of serenity described by Professor Gunji. For its very concentration and intensity, we call this performance virtuosic.

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Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, virtuosity was not discussed by writers on Western dance, since the technique was not sufficiently developed to inspire exhibition, while contemporary standards of decorum frowned upon personal display. As skills increased, however, and dancers delighted in using them, Jean Georges Noverre, in his Lettres sur la danse et les ballets (Stuttgart, 1760), protested that virtuosity was usurping the true province of dance, which was the expression of character and feeling. In the romantic era, virtuosity was made to serve drama (see Cyril W. Beaumont, The Romantic Ballet as Seen by Theophile Gautier [London: Beaumont, 1932]), but the skills encouraged by the period's ideals of ethereality were later exploited for their own sake, causing further condemnation of virtuosity (see C. W. Beaumont, Michel Fokine and his Ballets [London: Beaumont, 1935]). Defenders of expressive dance continued to argue that virtuosity belongs to the lesser genres of the art (see John Martin, Introduction to the Dance [New York: Norton, 1939]). Yet those who most admired its formal properties continued to favor virtuosity, as did Andre Levinson ("The Spirit of the Classic Dance/' reprinted in Dance as a Theatre Art, Selma Jeanne Cohen, ed. [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974]) and Akim Volynsky (The Book of Exultation, Petrograd, 1925; sections of his work appear in English translation in Dance Scope V(2):16-35 and VI(l);46-53, 1971-72). Most recent conceptual choreographers prefer unskilled movement (see Sally Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers [New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1979]), but Arlene Croce (in Afterimages [New York: Knopf, 1977]) finds values in virtuosity used as metaphor.