

Dancing as Self-Othering – 4

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Javanese body philosophy as exemplified in shadow puppetry and classical dancing has interesting parallels to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. It exhibits in the concrete terms of these artistic and cultural forms many of the attributes that Merleau-Ponty developed for flesh and in it we can perhaps more clearly see the intertwining, the reversibility, of the body and that which is beyond the body; or turned inward, the body physical and the body spiritual or emotional, the outward body and the inward body. Complementing the Javanese views, Merleau-Ponty provides a basis on which to develop a philosophy of dancing that is exciting in opening our understanding of dancing to deeper and more profound levels. There is a chiasm between the two.

Returning now to the issue of how classical Javanese dancing exhibits the body philosophy of shadow theatre, our consideration of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh helps prepare us. In Javanese court dancing the thing seen is the dance presenting the characters of the *lakon* as though projected on the bodies of the dancers. In village trance dancing the thing seen is the dance presenting the spirit being who is possessing the dancer. But, to extend the analogy of dancing with *wayang kulit*, in these dances where is the light? Where is the puppet? What is manipulated to present the appearance that is nothing, that is only because of some occlusion? What in shadow puppetry is so neatly and unambiguously distinguished—puppet and shadow—are collapsed and inseparable in dancing (and in life, by the way), yet the fundamental structurality remains. The dancer and the dance corresponding with puppet and shadow are distinct, yet inseparable being of the same body. Amazingly, and distinctive to dancing, the thing made by the body never leaves the body, yet in some sense it seems to transcend both the body and the dancer. Dancer and dance, as puppet and shadow in *wayang kulit*, are clearly and easily distinguishable, yet utterly inseparable; they both are the same feeling moving body.

In dancing, dancer and dance are separable, yet intertwined even reversible, as are touching and thing touched. Yet, whereas one hand touching the other where both hands are of the same order (touching and being touched), dancing exhibits a structurality of the reversibility of two different orders (one immanent the other transcendent) and two different processes (dancing and being danced). Thus dancer-dancing is itself in a chiasmatic relation with Merleau-Ponty's principal flesh analogy in that it offers clarification and extension to his ontology of flesh, while in turn, his flesh ontology inspires a deepening of our understanding of dancing. To view dancing in light of the ontology of flesh causes a bursting open, a dehescence, a flowering, putting a smile on the face of our understanding of dancing. Let me continue to show how dancing—comprised of the intertwining of dance and dancer, dancing and being danced—exhibits and is more deeply apprehended when understood, when seen, in the terms that emerge from Javanese body philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology. Dancing is chiasm. Dancing is flesh.

There is a Christian theological understanding of chiasm, as there is a chiasmatic understanding of Christianity. The central Christian symbol, the cross, is a chiasm exhibiting the transcendence of verticality and the immanence of horizontality. Christian theology, as exemplified in Christ and the

Christ event, holds that god is spirit and flesh. Jesus died, yet he lives. He is transcendent (God), yet he is immanent (Jesus, the human). He was crucified yet he was resurrected; more amazingly, bodily resurrected. In its devaluation of the body and its radical separation of body and spirit, mind, soul, Christianity has in a sense largely abandoned the aspect of the chiasm exemplified in Christ. That dancing is or can be spiritual is an occasional view in the Christian West. One reading of this statement, the one I believe dominates in the West, is to be able to value dancing only with a corresponding devaluing of the body. How else can this be understood when the contextual system of values radically separates body and spirit and holds the body suspect. In valuing dancing as “spiritual” (in the context of Christian Western terms), it seems we are saying that in dancing one transcends oneself, including one’s body, thus entering the realm of spirit. Curious.

Merleau-Ponty’s flesh ontology and Javanese philosophy inspire the construction of a fresh and powerful understanding of dancing. Dancing can be considered a making, a kind of creating. Here I am not thinking of dancing as a work or doing work. Many contemporary Western dancer choreographers emphasize that they are “making work” and refer to dances as “works.” In a culture that generally opposes work and play, it is fully understandable that this attitude is part of an effort to justify dancing as doing something, producing something. A dance is a work of art. The message: An artist actually works to make this product, thus, the work is worth buying and the worker ought be paid like any other worker. Yet, as the view of dancing I am developing emerges I believe that to call it work is a culturally and historically narrow understanding of dancing. More so, to use this terminology hides what we all know, but won’t say, of dancing (ritual, too, I think) that it is in a tacit sense anti-work, anti-production. Dancing absorbs efforts to make because the thing made is always inseparable from the maker, thus it is ephemeral. Here I am particularly interested in just these qualities, how dances come to be, what characterizes them as creations, as makings.

Dancing, seen as creating as making, holds, I believe, a fundamental and foundational place among all human makings, indeed, among all human experience. What is made in dancing, unlike the making of other artifacts, is of the body of the maker. In some sense it sets apart the thing made—we can point to something and call it dancing—yet this thing made remains identical with the maker. The dancing body makes otherness, minimally in the sense that we can discern something on and of the dancer we refer to as a dance or dancing rather than the person dancing; it is something other. Dancing is making art, artifice. It may be representational, a function dancing often serves, yet it need not represent anything, do anything. Dance is both made and made up. Dance is other in some respect; dancing is making otherness. The dancing body is bent upon achieving what in some sense it seems it should be incapable of doing, making itself up, making itself into something it is not. Without ceasing to be one body, the body we point to to indicate self, dancing makes the body into an other. In this sense, dancing is a fundamental paradigmatic human experience and action that grounds our capacity to extend beyond the boundaries of body and self. Dancing both gives rise to the very idea of otherness while it also grounds our connection with the other. Dancing is the human action and experience that resolves what in a philosophical perspective is the issue of surpassing self, psychologically the establishing of a sense of self as distinct from other—that is, differentiation. Rather than the tendencies of developmental psychology to see self as not other, dancing provides the bootstrap that allows one to experience

othering—the experiential feeling kind of knowing of other, otherness—dancing as self-othering—yet knowing all along, in some sense, that this other is a construct—it is not self, but it is self—it is other, yet it is a made up or false other. Dancing gives the fundamental experience of making in the sense that the making is contained in the body. Dancing provides bodily experience of the structurality of reversibility that non-propositionally, that is, experientially, grounds the concept of other thus allowing one to move beyond the isolation of self, to project sentience to something constructed while also knowing that the other is construction, artifice.

The dancing body is always a sentient body; a living, feeling body. Dancing is flesh, dancing is the play of the double, the möbiatic play of multiple bodies that are yet one body. The *dancer*—that is, the named human body with distinctive personal history and physical appearance—imagines or embodies a dance. The imagined dance is of the internal body of the dancer. The dance exists as gestural patterns inscribed in the very tissue of the dancer’s body. The *dancing body*—that is, the body of muscles, blood, and bones—physically makes the dance. This is the agentive aspect of the gestures as bodily movement. The *danced body*—that is, an often costumed moving sentient form—is the dance, the thing made, the fiction, the other manifest both to an audience and proprioceptively experienced in the body of the dancer. Each of these three bodies can be isolated as can the shadow and the puppet of *wayang kulit*, but all of these bodies are as inseparable one from another, even more than shadow is inseparable from puppet, because, from a naive perspective, they all three are physically identical.

The process of making that is dancing is the play among the several bodies distinguishable as constitutive of the dancer and the play between the dancer and the world beyond. The modes of making appear to include a movement from inside to outside the dancing body and the complementary process that appears to move from outside to inside. These modes are reversible, möbiatic, that is, while we can analytically separate them, they are seamlessly continuous with one another; they are of one flesh, chiasmatic.

Perhaps the most common folk theory of dancing in the West today, far less representative of other cultures, is that dancing is a form of personal expression;¹ dance expresses or communicates inner feelings. This understanding is quite limiting, yet in one way it is helpful to think of dancing in terms of a movement from inside to outside, from imagined dance to the performed dance. From a gestural perspective this would be to see dancing as the manifestation of gestures based in, embodied as, sensorimotor programs. The relationship between inside and outside is key to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of reversibility. Further, Elaine Scarry, in her book, *The Body in Pain*, holds that the “intention of all human making is to distribute the facts of sentience outward onto the created realm of artifice, and it is only by doing so that men and women are themselves relieved of the privacy and problems of that sentience.”² The ordinary artifact, as a thing that in its completion is separate from the human body, is capable only of the appearance of sentience. Scarry shows³ that while an artifact can never perceive, never be aware, its design nonetheless bears the structure of that perception or awareness.

1These ideas are discussed more fully in “Language”.

2Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 288.

3Ibid., pp. 285-306.

For example, we may make a coat. We describe it as having arms, a neck, and a body. Though it has the appearance of a body, a projection of it, the coat still is incapable of feeling the cold that our arms, neck, and body feel or of knowing that it does so. Yet, Scarry argues, the coat can be recognized as mimetic of the body that feels cold. Thus we refer to a heavy coat designed to keep us warm as a warm coat, as though it, like us, feels warmth. Making participates and enacts the flesh of the world, maker and thing made are of the same flesh, reversible, both grounded in body.

Dancing, as a process of creating artifact (dance), is distinct among all forms of making and is, in an important sense, more fundamental, even elemental. To the extent that we can imagine the non-sentient world as sentient, as being aware and feeling as we feel, the dancing body can manifest this awareness in sentient living movement by creating artifact, the dance. Since the thing made, the dance, is of the moving gesturing body we subjectively and proprioceptively experience this otherness, this thing made. We may imagine rivers, trees, and machines as well as gods, spirits, and mythic characters as sentient. Our dancing bodies project through gestural movement our human sentient experience onto aspects of the imagined non-sentient, yet this projected sentience is actually experienced in the dance all the while knowing, experiencing it as artifice, as made up. This is the distinction of dancing; dancing itself powerless is the source of great power. The non-sentient becomes sentient as the dancing body becomes other, becomes that which it is not. Because the danced other shares the body of the dancer, it is understood as capable of feeling as we feel; giving feelings physical form. Though a made up form, artifice, the dance is always sentient in that it is the living body of the dancer. The danced tree not only has the structure of sentience; in being danced it also actually feels, perceives, and shares the dancer's awareness of aliveness. The quality of projecting sentience is an important distinction of dance creations, of dancing.

The dancer—by depicting some qualities of say a flowing river, a machine, a god, a mythological character—actually gives sentience to the non-sentient and in reciprocation, dancing body extends itself into the world to overcome the seeming limitations of bodily physicality. Dancing robotic movements, for example, does not make the dancing body into a robot or machine, though this seems literally what the dancer is attempting to do. Rather it allows us to experience the machine as capable of feeling. The robotic dance movement fascinates not because the dancer becomes simply unfeeling and mechanical, but rather it fascinates in the play of the sentient and the non-sentient which we know to be mutually exclusive, yet which, in dancing, we experience as of one flesh, the flesh of the world, we know it to be in möbiatic play.⁴ The dancing body is at once self and other. Dancing the gods gives the dancer and the audience the felt experience of the attributes of gods who reveal themselves to the human world through the dancer. The dancer is often considered possessed by the deity, the spirit comes into the dancer. But it is also insightful to recognize that the dancer is making the god by portraying him or her

⁴Dancing robotics suggests to us why cyborgs and robots are so fascinating. While we may experience ourselves, in some sense, as cyborgs, all the examples we know of them are fictive constructs—beyond our bodily experience—yet, dancing creates the experiential base even for these. Of further interest is that robots don't dance, being usually depicted in our creations of them as stiff, physically awkward, machine-like. One thinks of robocop, the various terminators, certainly Frankenstein's monster, and even Star Trek's Data who had his own difficulties learning to dance.

in the dance, by creating an artifice of the deity. And in doing so, dancing gives sentience to the god, whose existence otherwise is but imagined. As the Yoruba say, referring to their dancing of gods, “without human beings the gods would not exist.”⁵ In this reciprocation between outside and inside, our bodies and the distinctiveness of our sentience are extended throughout the world, both real and imagined. It is in appreciating this aspect of dance-making that we grasp more fully that it is the source of creative power; the source in which is based the power of the making of all artifacts that exist separate from the body. In being both inseparable from the body and wholly other, though made up to be so, dancing projects life, and the awareness of life, the capacity to feel, to the world beyond us and it does so in a way that we can directly experience and thus know with certainty. Dancing, more than any other kind of making, I believe, relieves the problems of isolation and privacy. It is no surprise that dancing is a common religious action, an action through which the gods create the universe, a familiar metaphor for life itself.

Thus dancing, the making of dances, can be seen as a movement from inside to outside, a projection of what is inwardly felt and imagined outward onto the body as a dance, a manifestation in movement of gestural patterns born in the very tissues of the dancer, but with the powerful effect of extending the sentience of the body throughout the real and imagined world. Dancing effects a realization of body that not only gives continuity between inside and outside bodies, but extends the body by the projection of its imagination and sentience into the world beyond the limits of the skin to the flesh of the world.

The inside to outside movement of dancing is doubled and reversed, that is, dance making is not simply an expression, a gestural manifestation, a movement from inside to outside, it also moves from outside in. This effect of dancing is easily demonstrated in a number of ways. From a psycho-biological perspective we know that dancing changes the way we feel. This is a principle of dance therapy. The rote embodying of fictional forms of movement has predictable effects on feelings. Whirling movements tend to entrance; jumping and bounding movements tend to quicken, brighten, and energize. These are more or less hard-wired effects. From a neurophysiological perspective, we know that dancing is bodily technique born in the sensorimotor system that integrates in movement the nervous system with the muscles and bones.

We might understand this outside to inside movement in the broader frame beyond individual expression by recognizing that the dancing body is a construct of its historical and cultural experience.⁶ And from the perspective of gesture, this inscription on the body occurs at the level of physical tissues.

⁵Dancing created by Rhoda Grauer, PBS video series. Volume 2: Lord of the Dance. 1993.

⁶It is common now to refer to this shaping of the body in terms of writing metaphors. That is, that the dancing body is the site for cultural and historical “inscription.” See for example Michelle Heffner-Hayes’s dissertation on flamenco dancing, “Bailando la Historia/Flamenco Bodies in History and Film,” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1998). I’m avoiding this metaphor for many reasons which will pile up throughout this work. Immediately I don’t want to think of the dancing body as a surface for writing or a surface that can be read. This engages a hermeneutics of text, literacy, masculinity, and so on that are at the core of our impoverished views of dancing.

That is, the dancing body is one medium that cultures, as interacting groups whose members share common traits, use in self-construction and thereby the movement conventions, the gestures, of dance traditions are shaped by cultural and personal history. The Javanese hold that comporting the outer body or *lahir* in culturally defined movements of refinement (*alus*) results in the refinement of one's inner body or *batin*. That is, insinuating Javanese gestural patterns in the tissues of the dancing body is one way in which Javanese culture makes itself and provides an ongoing evolving reference to its distinctive cultural traits and values.

In the modern West dances are often identified as the expression of a choreographer, a virtuoso dancer, or a night club reveler, yet throughout most of the world dances are commonly identified with culture or tradition. Despite ballet being commonly seen as “*the dance*,” that is, the measure and prototype of all dancing, there is no form of dancing free of culture and history, and this is because dance is body and body is always culturally and historically constituted. This is why, for dance traditions the world over, there is regular debate over origin and authenticity. Dancing is a powerful way that individuals and groups obtain and maintain identity.⁷ The authenticity of dances is defended because the cultural, historical, and personal identity of the dancers depends on it. Dance traditions are constituted in the actual elements of the dance, the gestural techniques forged in its cultural history. It is sometimes possible to even directly read this history in gestural elements of the dancing. For example, in the hand gestures of Javanese and Balinese dancing we see traces of Indian influence, the mudras of Indian classical dancing. In the upright posture and stiff torso of tango we see traces of Paris (France is after all strongly connected with ballet). Tango costuming is Parisian vintage clothing. Argentine tango was transformed from a dance of bawdy houses of lower class Argentines with African influences, with its “get down” posture, when it was introduced to Parisian society early in the twentieth century. Later returning to Argentina, it was finally accepted by higher Argentine society. Yet, the sexy tango embrace and the macho attitude of the male lead remain as traces of the late nineteenth century development of tango in Buenos Aires. Further, the longing and sadness of tango lyrics and the use of the argot, *lunfardo*, evidence its rough porteño origins. Spanish flamenco is imprinted with Indian influences (*kathak* or perhaps *bharata natyam*) traceable, depending on who is presenting the history, either to Gitano (gypsy or Romani) travels from north India beginning a thousand years ago, or to some ancient Andalusian connection to south India perhaps through Greece. Culture and history are deeply embodied in dancing not only shaping individual identity in outward body comportment and habitus, but, in turn, also shaping the internal body of experienced identity.

⁷Dance scholars often get drawn into these debates, wanting to resolve these conflicts once and for all on clear academic grounds. This is a folly in at least the sense of misunderstanding central aspects of the debate.

Whatever the history, in terms of documentable history, of a dance, when people gain identity through dancing, their identity depends on holding that it is in origin their dance and that they determine authenticity. Dance history scholarship is about something rather different, often about given identity to the dance scholar, but not by the identity of his or her dancing.