

Dancing as Self-Othering - 5: Reflections on Java

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Among the most moving and fascinating dances I have experienced is the Javanese court dance “bedoyo.” The dance presents nine sea nymphs dressed as royal brides. It is an extraordinary example of self-othering. Let’s take a look at a video clip of this dance.

The presence of the “other” in this dancing is palpable. Note that the “other,” the sea nymphs dressed as royal brides, actually occludes the dancer. Yet, since we would all immediately identify this as dancing, we know that the dancer is always also there. The apprehension of this paradox is, I think, why we call some movement dancing. The danced “other” is fully present and we can both see and feel that this “other” is proprioceived by the dancer, who is occluded, but always somehow present at the occluded edges. The vitality, the reality, the being of the “other” is equal to, in fact, identical with, that of the dancer. There is a copresence of “dancing self” and “danced other” yet there is a difference, even a distance between them. The dancing self and the danced other are reversible, exchangeable, yet incompletely so, because while the dancer is occluded by the danced “other” the dancer is none the less the one that we all know will resurface when the dance ends. From the neurophysiological perspective this self-othering aspect of dancing is quite remarkable. The other made in the dancing is experienced through the same proprioceptive interoceptive exteroceptive processes as does the dancer experiences her quotidian self. That which is not dancer is experienced by the dancer in the very same neurophysiological terms as the dancer experiences herself, yet the dancer knows that what is proprioceived is in some sense not herself. This paradoxical relationship can be argued for those observing dancing as well, although that is an argument I haven’t time to develop here.

Having proceeded as though there are two sides to this process of appreciating dancing as making, it is now time to give a half twist to this presentation and stick the ends together. Dancing is the möbiatic play of outside to inside to outside to inside, with our bearings fixed only by setting arbitrary benchmarks. Our fascination with dancing is, I believe, associated with these many kinds of play, the play that seems to defy our understanding, yet which our experience confirms.

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As I approach Borobudur I know that I should circumambulate the temple, progressing through the levels, keeping the center on my right as is appropriate to the right-handed tantric method. I should study and decipher the many tales depicted in the thousands of bas relief images on the inner and outer walls of the open corridors that surround level after ascending level. Only after gaining this knowledge will it be appropriate to finally emerge at the upper open levels to suddenly experience the enlightenment of an open outward gaze. At this sunrise hour, my eagerness is unconstrainable, I ignore the imagined tradition and, somewhat guiltily, bound quickly up the eastern steep stairs, noting the portals through which I pass. Exploding onto the open terraces atop the temple I find myself among the

lattice-work stupas each containing a statue of the buddha. Most of these buddhas are without hands, all are looking outward across the expansive and varied landscape. This morning as we—the buddhas and I—look, we contemplate, they more patiently than I, the forest of palms with the occasional majestic hardwood tree rising above. The forest is afloat this early morning in a gray sea of fog; soft, calm, mysterious. I feel that I am at the still center of the universe. I sit on the upper terrace behind a stupa left open by modern reconstructors so the sitting buddha can more easily be seen and appreciated by me and my fellow tourists. Sitting here I think about the thousand years this buddha has patiently held his mudra and his gaze. I try to imagine myself a buddha sitting here for a thousand years. Though it has countless moods, I doubt the landscape has changed all that much in this long time. The buddha is calm, patient, confident. Perhaps he is telling me that life is transient—it comes, it passes away; that not even he is permanent; the best one can do is to be what one is, to be centered and calm and patient, to watch but also to be a part of the endless cycles in which one has a moment of existence; to be the stories that constitute one's existence.

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Now in the sultan's palace, having made my way through a political protest carried on by a crowd of rowdy youths dressed in blood-red head bands and tee shirts revving the engines of their smoky motor bikes and protesting through cheap crackling loud speakers, I observe the dancers. Dressed in immaculate costume, their faces utterly calm yet acutely attentive, they approach the dance pavilion and squat to enter the floor using the waddling step that shows respect for the sultan, though he is not present today. The dances are not irrelevant to the political actions just beyond the *kraton* walls, though I suspect the enthusiastic youths would have little interest in or see any relevance to these classical dances and dance dramas—at least not today. The dancers portray the timeless struggles of good and evil through dramatizations of the ancient Hindu literature. Today's troubles are new tellings of old stories. Week after week the dancers, through the perfection of their art, show that life unfolds in these simple timeless dynamics.

The dancers—as artists, media, and artifacts—comment beyond the outcome of the dramas and emotions they portray and enact. In their energized calmness, through their ability to control, in the fictions they dance, they, like the buddha at Borobudur, appear to have found the calm center of the whirling world of existence. As powerful as is the message of the great temple and as amazed as I am at the unfathomable inspiration and imagination of the temple's originator and builders, I am more deeply moved by this dancing. It is at once more accessible through the amazing skills of the dancers and the experience is even more powerful. For the dancer is the live medium of her art and her product is nothing more, nor certainly less, than herself, her body danced. The dance is entirely ephemeral, passing away as it comes into being. As fragile as it is, by giving life to the gods, the stories, and the world, the dancing shatters the cold stones of Borobudur.

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Now, far from Java, far from the still calm center, I am again churned by the chaos of the world. The way I try to express what I experienced in Java has shifted. The raw personal impressions that

dominated my immediate experience have become disguised by my dressing them in academic garments, in comparison most ugly. At a distance from their source my intensely personal experiences now support generic, comparative, and theoretical concerns. But oddly this is important to who I am and I do so in the effort to both maintain a thin thread of contact with that still calm center and also to offer my inspiration and insight and experience to others. Certainly the Javanese need not think of their dancing and theatre in such terms as Möbiatic play or flesh ontology. These are the terms of my stories, unfolding as I enact them, concocted and manipulated as shadows on a scrim to speak to the exigencies that bear upon me as I try to live in a modern, indeed postmodern, world. I often think my tales are rickety stories slapped together to be helpful to those of us whose cultural roots are weak or thin and whose principal cultural distinction is the effort to comprehend something of the many cultures around the world. Still, in some real sense, my very life depends upon them. Though I might argue that writing, theorizing, arguing is a kind of dancing, the academic rumba, and indeed I believe it is, I recognize that writing and talking about dancing is rather ludicrous, ludic. When this mood, this impatience with my academic life, overcomes me, as it so often does, I know it is time to go salsa dancing.