

Sachs, Curt: World history of the dance. New York, Norton, p. 237-245

7. Europe Since Antiquity

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD Greece

The scattered elements which must be gathered from all places and periods and laboriously formed into a coherent picture are found united in European antiquity in one magnificent organism. The dance customs of remote ancestors, commonly relegated by mature cultures to a dark hinterland, are here preserved in pristine strength with the same love and protective zeal as among primitive peoples, and all those which later millenniums have begotten and brought forth flourish freely side by side with them. The progression of dance forms has crystallized into a coexistence. We find the same people circling round the sacred objects in meditation as did their earliest ancestors, imitating the ways and actions of animals, losing themselves and becoming possessed in the mask, and obtaining the power of spirits and the attributes of gods through the frenzied ecstasy of the dance. The same people re-experience in dream transports the fate of their ancestors and expand it into popular drama, into world drama—with the recognition of its relation to society in the round dance and with the stamp of individualism in the solo dance, with meek submission and with genial wisdom, solemn and grotesque, in earnest and in jest, in a boundless survey of everything human and superhuman.

The choral dance takes first place. Homer's accounts of the heroic age describe the merry choral dance of the young men, alone or together with the maidens, at marriages, at vintage, or simply to give vent to their youthful exuberance—*choreia*, the Greeks think, must come from *chara*, "joy."

"Also did the glorious lame god devise a dancing-place like unto that which once in wide Knossos Daidalos wrought for Ariadne of the lovely tresses. There were youths dancing, and maidens of costly wooing, their hands upon one another's wrists. Fine linen the maidens had on, and the youths well-woven doublets faintly glistening with oil. Fair wreaths had the maidens, and the youths daggers of gold hanging from silver baldrics. And now would they run round with deft feet exceeding lightly, as when a potter sitting by his wheel that fitteth between his hands maketh trial of it whether it run. And now anon they would run in lines to meet each other. And a great company stood round the lovely dance in joy; and among them a divine minstrel was making music on his lyre, and through the midst of them, leading the measure, two tumblers whirled."

Iliad, XVIII, 590-606.

Thus does Hephaistos picture it on the bronze shield destined for Achilles: Homer's Hellenes dance the ancient round dance out of which develop lines which run to meet each other; those in the middle turn somersaults—that is the meaning of the Greek word *kybistéres*—and the dance leader leads with song and lyre.

The Greeks must have brought round dances of this type with them from their original home. But for the particular stamp of the dance the immigrants are obligated to the Cretan and Mycenaean culture, which they found in the new country and overran. Cretan sculptures illustrate for us dances in a circle around the lyre player, couple dances connected with cults, and the close swaying dance performed by large choruses of women before all the people.

The Cretans were always extolled by the Greeks as exceptional artists and acknowledged as their masters in the dance, and the best Greek dancers in modern times still come from among the descendants of these people. The story that Theseus, on his return from Crete to Athens with the youths and maidens he had set free, danced a round dance in crane step on the island of Delos and that this dance was long preserved on the island points clearly to Crete.

It also seems to point to China. In ancient China human sacrifices were made to dead princes. When about 500 BC a daughter of Ho-lu, King of Wu, took her own life, her father buried her with great splendor and constructed an underground passage to the sepulcher. Then he ordered the dance of the white cranes to be performed and enticed boys and girls together with the dancers into the underground passage. The door closed behind them. Sacrifice to the dead, boys and girls, underground passage, and crane dance—what a strange parallel! The Chinese crane dance was, like the Hellenic, a round dance, and it belonged to the cycle of vegetation rites designed to obtain rain, fertility, and regeneration. Can we doubt a very ancient connection here?

Let us turn again to the Cretan dances among the Greeks. The Dorians were the first to come into the territory of the Cretans and they remained there longest. Mere juxtaposition would not have been enough, however, if there had not been an additional deciding factor: the Dorians, who placed more emphasis upon social order and organization than upon individual freedom, were necessarily more inclined towards the choral dance than towards the solo dance.

The Spartans cultivated with particular zeal the Cretan form of weapon dance which in Greece was called the *pyrrhiche*, “[dressed in] red”; they practiced it from the age of five on. All the various meanings expressed in the art appear together in this dance. Outwardly it belongs to the category of the strictly imitative dances: a genuine guarding and fighting distinguished from gymnastic exercise only by artistic movement, rhythm, and musical accompaniment (short, equal, metrical units). It was justly regarded as a real preparation for serious warfare. The complimentary observation was occasionally made that such and such a man owed his military successes to his skill in the weapon dance, and Socrates’s famous dictum that the best dancer is also the best warrior is understandable in this connection. The placing of fighting and dancing on the same level, which is characteristic of primitive peoples, prevails absolutely. And the tripping march to battle, which we have frequently noted among the natives, had an exact counterpart in the *embateria*, the anapaestic dance march with which the Spartans entered into an engagement. The leader of the fight was the dance leader, and was known by that name. The *pyrrhiche* did later, of course, become a pantomime and degenerated into a spectacular dance, and the old name lost its meaning.

But this gymnastic stage is not the original one. Close beside it and clearly

recognizable is the magic stage. A Cretan-Greek story relates that the Zeus child would have been captured by Kronos had not armed men danced around the infant striking the shield with their swords. The frightening away of spirits, a motif which is still incorporated in the late European sword dance, is unmistakable here. This is obvious not only from the fighting but also from the apotropaic noise created by beating bronze on bronze. And the clash of the weapon dance sounds over dead bodies; we are familiar with this magic custom from primitive peoples too. In later antiquity the *pyrrhiche*—especially in Sparta—was also performed by women and, as spectacular dance, by professional dancers. The magic, the gymnastic, and the imitative—all these entities are closely related.

With the *pyrrhiche* three other choral dances entered—they are said to have been brought in by Thaletas of Crete—the *paians* to Apollo, the god of healing, which were originally magic dances against sickness and death; the *hyporchemata*, also dedicated to Apollo, in which the gestures and rhythm rendered the mythical action of the text; and the *gymnopaïdai* performed by naked boys in which the dance form was based on the motions of wrestling.

All these dances encroach on the field of the *emmeleia*, the round dances of devout and solemn character sedately performed in honor of the gods, which Plato contrasts sharply with those of a stirring, warlike nature. No wonder, then, that the *emmeleia* devolved mainly upon the women—it is the old distinction of close and expanded movement. Festive processions to the shrine and fluctuating circles around the altar are the forms these dances take. They have come down to us most beautifully in the marvelously preserved *partheniads*, in which the virgins, hand in hand like Graces, worship the goddess to the sound of hymn like songs. Here we have magic elevated completely to worship, to devout celebration.

From divine worship in the narrower sense, from the mutual, popular veneration of the supermundane, the choral dance enters into the domain of family life: in the female rites on the tenth night after the birth of a child, in the ceremonies attending puberty, in the merry, mocking chorus of maidens at the door of the bridal chamber, and in the wailing procession to the grave.

If we wish to form a clear conception of these old Hellenic choral dances, we must take note of the dances which are still to be seen on Easter Monday in Megara near Athens. Not only does the devout earnestness with which they are performed, or rather celebrated, point to very old tradition, but certain peculiarities of form and position are depicted on a whole series of antique reliefs. In these *tratta* the women walk close together and take hold of each other crosswise: the first one grasps the hand of the third over the breast of the second; the second grasps the hand of the fourth over the breast of the third, and so on. And in this firmly linked chain they move, under the direction of a male or female dance leader, slowly and sedately, without rocking to and fro and without distorting a feature. The left foot crosses the right, the right steps aside towards the right, and the left is brought up with it. Then the right steps back obliquely to the right, the left crosses behind it, and the right again moves forwards obliquely to the right. Four women form the end of the chain without dancing: they sing in unison or two at a time in strophe and antistrophe.

If we seek the sharpest contrast to the *kalokagathia* (harmony) and *sophrosyne* of the *emmeleia*, we shall find it in the cult of Dionysus and the other deities who for the Greeks personified the earth and vegetation. Ecstatic liberation from the self is as strong here as ever in any primitive people. The sacred madness lays hold upon the Greek women. Called by the voices of spirits, they leave their homes, ascend without stopping into the wilderness of snow-covered mountains, and rave for many days and nights in wild intoxication. They are maenads—"mad women." On hundreds of vases and reliefs we see the frantic stamping, whirling, and flying of the afflicted of God, and the spectator experiences the whole gamut of dance ecstasy from the blood madness of the human being become animal, who hurls the dismembered kid through the air like a discus, to the rapture of the transfigured saint who in the blessed choral dance has lost the earth and found her God (Plate 12).

From this wild activity artistic form slowly evolved, and finally drama. The writers reveal that Attic maenads conducted dance exercises according to the rules of Athens and Delphi in preparation for the Bacchanalia, and the vase painters were fond of showing how women with the distinguishing mark of the cult of Dionysus received instruction in the dance. The Dionysian cult itself conformed to the vintage festivals and permitted the men to take part. Disguised as satyrs and *sileni* with long beards, tails, and phalli, and accompanied by shrill oboes and inciting rattles, they appear in the vase pictures, completely abandoned to the god in drunken dance ecstasy, or tripping lasciviously around the resisting maenads. Here we stand midway between the mask dances of the Stone Age cultures and the unbridled Bacchanalia of imperial Rome, from which, by way of the infamous Lupercalia, the road leads down to the modern carnival. The name still indicates its venerable ancestry. For a *carrus navalis*, a ship on wheels, used to carry the chorus and dance leader of the dithyrambs in Greece, when he re-created the life, death, and return of Dionysus; and it was a *carrus navalis* on which in the year 534 B.C. the dancer and singer Thespis, with his chorus, answered the call of Peisistratus to Athens and in the singing dance of the goat's mask created the "goat song," the *tragodia*.

These things are not quite clear. It is certain that the choral dance with which we are dealing here, the dithyramb, is referred to from the first half of the sixth century on. Originally it was a circular dance of fifty garlanded dancers in the service of Dionysus, but also in the train of other gods. It was obviously a more lively dance than the *emmeleia*, for its special name *tyrbasia* means violent movement. From the very first these dances seem to have been dramatic: the dance leader in the center is the god Dionysus, who with the vegetation of the earth lives, suffers, sickens, and dies and at a given moment awakens anew, like Osiris in Egypt and Attis-Adonis in Asia Minor; and in the circle surrounding him the fifty choral dancers share his fate, interpreting, suffering, and rejoicing with him. A relic of this dithyramb has been preserved in Sardinia.

The choral dance of the drama, to be sure, was not circular but linear in form: the chorus of the tragedy and of the satyric drama appeared as a rule in three rows of five singer-dancers, the chorus of the comedy in four rows of six. It seems clear, therefore, that the transition to the spectacular dance necessarily disrupted the vague circular formation. The chorus, upon which more than half of the drama frequently devolved, was stationed in the semicircle in front of the stage. Singing and dancing, it was the

absolute monarch of the lyric interludes between the dramatic episodes, and now and then took part in the action.

So large a share in the drama could be possible only if the dance itself were possessed of dramatic potentialities. And this we know to be true from all that the Greeks have written about their dance. How could it have been otherwise in a people so exceptionally endowed with the visual faculty! Even the earliest forms of the imitative dance managed to survive into the classical period, animal dances in which the movements of bears, lions, foxes, and birds were imitated. If these were dances apart, dances of every type were subject to the domination of the *phorai* and the *schemata*: the *phorai* were gestures for the expression of emotions and actions; the *schemata* were gestures which expressed the essential character of a person. Many of these gestures, the *cheironomia* or "measured motion of the hands," are recorded for us: the hand on the head expressing grief and suffering; the stretching forth heavenwards of the hands to signify worship; the thrusting forward of the swordsman, and a hundred others. Such gestures must make their appearance wherever by virtue of a visual and muscular predisposition the imitative dance is cultivated. But when the espousing motif is expressed by putting the hand above the eyes, we are reminded of exactly the same movement in the Hindu and the Japanese dance. Our glance wanders involuntarily over these three high cultures and will not come to rest. They seem to have more and more in common. Not imitativeness as a whole, to be sure—that, of course, depends upon race and culture. The strong preference for the play of hands, however, is not matter-of-course, and the reduction of it to a system is still less so. Are there connections from people to people here? The connections between India and Japan are proved and acknowledged. But they seem to have spun their web across to Greece too. In India the ritual language of the hands is an ancient possession; the Veda requires it. One would certainly not wish to deny the old Greeks the gift of gesture—they belong to a Mediterranean race and to a race of peculiar histrionic ability. Nevertheless, the classical period became notoriously sparing in the use of gesture; decorum demanded that the hand should not be drawn out from under the upper garment on the street. Not until the Alexandrian period does gesture seem to have become freer and more significant, and then the door had opened wide to Oriental influences.

The stream of Asiatic dance which burst in at this time must have colored the whole domain which we include under the term *komos*: the entertainment of guests, when the food is cleared away, the wine poured, and paid singers, jugglers, and dancers, mainly female, enter the room. Countless vase pictures illustrate these dances: girls in all the positions and poses of the old fertility rites, well-known dances which, divested of their religious significance, have degenerated into the exhibition of bodily charms and the calculated provocation of male desire. This one theme glimmers through all kinds of performances from the distorted love antics of lascivious dwarfs to the judgment of Paris on the naked beauty of the young dancers. And if the statue of the Venus Callipygos is really a bayadere, as she is described for us in a similar pose in Alciphron's hetaeric letters, the divinity of the dancer unintentionally sounds forth once more in the midst of all this debasement.

The history of the dance in Greece, then, has as little to record of actual invention as that of any other culture. All that it offers in theme, type, movement, and form has been anticipated by primitive peoples and by the advanced Asiatic cultures. We find here the

same groups of ideas—initiation, fertility, marriage, war, and death—and by the same association of ideas, war dances at funeral ceremonies and in later times at fertility festivals. There are the same types: abstract and non-imitative on the one hand, and concrete and imitative on the other, animal dances, masquerades, and pantomimes. There are the same movements: expanded movement with leaps and throws and close movement with wrenching and whirling. There are the same forms: circular dances with either or both sexes and line dances in which a row of men is drawn up opposite a row of women, labyrinths, processions, solo dances, and at a late period couple dances.

One would naturally expect that with so individual a culture and so pronounced a talent for dancing the Greeks must reveal their distinctive qualities in this field also. Nowhere is their distinctive character more completely expressed than in the choral dance. When the Oriental peoples arrive at an art form of the choral dance, they extract the ultimate from its ecstatic nature: the individual mind and will of the dancer are extinguished, everything personal is wiped out, and he moves in strict conformity like a puppet controlled by the strings of an invisible master. But when the Greek sculptors have carved in marble the lineaments of a choral dance, the observer admires the joyous rhythm which binds together, into a harmony more than personal, movements that arise from an inner compulsion and accord with the law of the dancer's own body.