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Exemplification and the Dance

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Abstract: I argue that dance embodies and conveys understanding. To understand a work of dance, spectators must understand the genre's or choreographer's idiom; they must know how to read the dance. In order for the dance to convey understanding of something beyond itself, spectators must have reason to accept or believe what the dance conveys. I argue that dances exemplify literal and metaphorical features that they share with other aspects of reality. They thereby make those features salient and afford epistemic access to them. I contrast classical ballet, modern dance, and postmodern dance to show how, and to what end, dances exemplify. Among the features exemplified, and sometimes problematized, are philosophical features, like the relation between mind and body, and political features like autonomy, democracy, interdependence, and elitism. In exemplifying such properties, a dance draws attention to them and stresses their significance. It thus equips us to recognize them when we see them again and intimates that we would do well to attend to them. In some cases, we remain bewildered. We have no idea why these people are doing those things, why anyone would consider what is going on art. Then we can make no sense of the work. Then our advance in understanding is Socratic. Knowing that you do not know is the first step to knowledge. The critical point is that an encounter with dance can not only change the way we see the world; it can improve the way we see the world.

Introduction

Swan Lake is beautiful. It is delicate, graceful, enchanting. Martha Graham's *Night Journey* is not. It is riveting, harrowing, horrifying, often ugly. Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* isn't even that. Being utterly pedestrian, it does not play on the emotions at all. But it is intriguing. Taken together these three dances raise questions: What is dance up to? What does it do and how does it do it? *Night Journey* discredits the thesis that the end of dance is beauty. *Trio A* discredits the thesis that the end is affective engagement. Possibly dance as such has no end. Different works and different genres pursue different ends. But whether or not dance has a telos, questions arise: 'What does this particular

dance do? How does it do it? And why?’

My thesis is that dance embodies and conveys understanding. Beauty, ugliness, motion and emotion are among the means it uses. I am not claiming that dance has only cognitive functions. We may value dances for their own sake, or for the pleasure they give, or for other reasons as well. What I am claiming is that one important function of dance is cognitive. Dance enriches our lives at least in part because it enables us to understand things differently than we did before.

Understanding is an epistemic achievement. To understand something is not just to have an opinion about it, or even a constellation of interconnected opinions. It is to have a constellation of epistemologically well-founded, interconnected opinions that are suitably backed by reasons, and enable inference, argument, and sometimes action regarding the subject the understanding pertains to. Needless to say, all of this needs spelling out. But we need not worry too much about the details here. Enough has been said to indicate why the contention that dance embodies and conveys understanding is tendentious.

Like Goodman, I believe that dances consist of symbols.¹ This claim not, on the face of it, problematic. Dance critics regularly speak of a genre’s vocabulary or idiom. If this way of speaking is accurate, choreographers draw on the resources of a symbol system to create their works. In that case, to glean an understanding from a dance, spectators must interpret those symbols correctly. They must recognize what the dance symbolizes. They must know how to read the dance. If they do, they understand what the dance conveys. But in order for the dance to convey understanding, rather than merely to be understood, more is required. The spectators must also have reason to

accept or believe what the dance conveys.

This is problematic. How can dances provide such reasons? Even if dances are comprised of symbols, they present no arguments. They do not make statements, express propositions, or assert that the world is this way or that. Some, like *Swan Lake* and *The Firebird*, have a narrative structure. But they are fictions. And fictions do not make literal assertions about the way the world is. Moreover, in such works, much of what seems significant does not figure directly in the plot. So, evidently, something else is going on besides telling a story. Other works, like *Trio A* and Merce Cunningham's *Points in Space* are non-narrative. They do not stand in a representational or denotative relation to the world.

To establish my thesis then I need to undermine the idea that only such symbols as figure in arguments – that is, only symbols with propositional structure – can advance understanding. If non-propositional items can advance understanding, then the thesis that dance advances understanding has some chance of being correct.

Let's look at some cases.

- Consider first that favorite device of philosophers, the counterexample. If Mike asserts, 'All swans are white', all that it takes to refute him is one black swan. No words need be spoken. The bird alone is enough. The black swan contributes to Mike's understanding of ornithology by demonstrating to him that his belief about swan plumage was false. It may, of course, do more. Perhaps it has a ripple effect, prompting him to revise a cluster of associated beliefs.
- Another cognitively useful device is a perspective. By adopting a different perspective, we come to see familiar items in new ways. We thereby appreciate

relationships between them that we previously had overlooked or underemphasized. For example, the shift from a third-person to a first-person perspective is crucial to appreciating the close connection between belief and assertion. The assertion ‘It is raining and Kate does not believe it is raining’ is unproblematic. There are, after all, many facts that any given person does not believe. But ‘It is raining and I do not believe it is raining’ is Moore’s paradox. It is not something I can reasonably assert. The first-person perspective, but not the third person perspective, thus affords reason to think that assertion is intimately connected with belief.

- A third case is pattern detection. Even if all the evidence is in hand, understanding is enhanced when a pattern emerges. In such a case, although the facts were known, the relations between them were not perspicuous. One of the great discoveries in epidemiology came about when John Snow plotted cholera deaths on a map of London that showed water sources. The plot made manifest that virtually all the cholera victims got their drinking water from a single source.² It led to the obvious, but at the time radical, conclusion that contaminated drinking water was spreading the disease.

One might object that all of these *can* be captured in propositions. So, one might think, there is an implicit argument. It’s not the black swan, then; it is the proposition: ‘Here’s a case that shows that your hypothesis is false: [insert black swan].’ It’s not the perspective then; it is the proposition ‘Looked at from this point of view, you will see that the following is unassertible [insert an instance of Moore’s paradox].’ It’s not the pattern; it is the proposition ‘This plot shows that the data cluster around a single point [insert map]’. Although one can frame such arguments, they do not paraphrase away or

capture in propositions the items in question. Those items have been embedded into propositions. But they do their cognitive work independently of such embedding, and are only worth embedding because of their prior cognitive status. In Wittgenstein's terms they show rather than say.³ In Goodman's terms, they do so by exemplifying.⁴

Exemplification

Exemplification is the device by which a sample or example refers to whatever it is a sample or example of. Although I speak of exemplification as pertaining to properties, in my usage the term 'property' is a bland, neutral term that comprehends conditions, states, relations, actions, processes, traits, characteristics, and so forth. A fabric swatch exemplifies its color, pattern, texture, and weave. An example worked out in a math textbook exemplifies the inference patterns the students are supposed to learn. Being a telling instance of a property, an exemplar affords epistemic access to that property.⁵ That requires both instantiation and reference. So a swatch of pink watered silk cannot exemplify 'pale blue brocade', but a pale blue brocade swatch can. But merely being an instance is not enough. Besides being pale blue and brocade, the swatch that exemplifies 'pale blue brocade' has a vast number of other properties that it does not exemplify. It is, perhaps, a 6 cm. square. It has ragged edges. It was made in Brooklyn and shipped to France last week. It was never in Nebraska. The full list of its characteristics extends indefinitely. The swatch does not afford epistemic access to all of them. It points up its being pale blue brocade, but not its having never been in Nebraska or arriving recently in France. To exemplify a property, an exemplar must refer to it. It must single that property out for attention. It does so by downplaying, sidelining, overshadowing or marginalizing other features. By drawing attention to its being pale

blue brocade, it draws attention away from features like having ragged edges and never having been in Nebraska. Exemplification is selective.

What a symbol exemplifies depends on how it functions. Context is often critical to fixing function. Exemplars like fabric swatches belong to regimented symbol systems with standardized functions. Being acquainted with such systems, we know which properties we are usually supposed to attend to. But in a suitable context, a fabric swatch could exemplify other properties. It might, for example, be used in a trade show to exemplify products of Brooklyn or exports to France. Moreover, not all exemplars are so regimented. It may not be obvious to the student which features of the sample problem she should be attending to. And in different textbooks the same problem and solution might exemplify different properties.

Exemplification is crucial to the way scientific experiments function. An experiment is expressly designed to bring certain features to the fore – to make them manifest in ways that ordinarily they are not. To determine whether water conducts electricity, a scientist would not attempt to measure the current in a local lake, stream, or puddle. The water in such places contains impurities. Instead, she would attempt to induce a current in pure, distilled water. By manipulating circumstances so that, as far as scientists can now tell, nothing except the water could be the conductor, she can safely conclude that any current she detects is conducted by the water. The experimental result then exemplifies the conductivity of water.

Science manifestly constitutes an understanding of the way the world is. So if exemplification figures centrally in science, then the contention that exemplification is a device for embodying and conveying understanding seems established. This does not, of

course, demonstrate that exemplification *in dance* advances understanding. But it does establish a connection between exemplification and understanding which makes the issue worth investigating.

Exemplification can be literal or metaphorical. A sloppily scribbled proof on a crumpled piece of paper can metaphorically exemplify elegance. A literally flat painting can metaphorically exemplify depth. So although an item must instantiate a property in order to exemplify it, this restriction does not unduly narrow exemplification's range. For every item has the potential to exemplify any of the vast number of properties it literally or metaphorically instantiates. Not all have verbal labels. We can say, if we like, that a dance movement exemplifies angst, but in reality it is likely to exemplify some far more precise and nuanced species of angst. Words frequently fail us. The words at our disposal are too coarse grained to mark out the distinctions needed to say exactly what exemplars show. So a dance or other exemplar can exemplify something that we lack the verbal resources to put into words.

Exemplification in Dance

My thesis is that works of dance advance understanding by exemplifying some of their properties. Dances highlight certain properties, rendering them salient, and thereby affording epistemic access to them. Classical ballet, for example, literally exemplifies properties such as grace, delicacy, and beauty; and metaphorically exemplifies properties such as love and longing, weightlessness and ethereality. Martha Graham's works metaphorically exemplify psychological properties such as grief, regret, horror and hope. They literally exemplify that the body of the dancer has a certain weight – that it is subject to literal as well as metaphorical gravity. George Balanchine and Merce

Cunningham, choreographers who bridge the modern/postmodern divide, created works that exemplify properties of dance itself, movements of dancers in time and space. They also exemplify properties like vitality, dexterity, and sinuousness. The works of the choreographers in the minimalist, postmodern Judson Dance Theater exemplify properties of ordinary or pedestrian movement. Rather than exemplifying properties stereotypically associated with dance, they exemplify walking, running, carrying a mattress, and the like.

I have characterized the properties dances exemplify using monadic predicates. This might suggest that they can be instantiated in an instant. But as they figure in dance, they are typically dynamic. They emerge and develop over time and across space. Jocasta's convulsive grief, Odette's ethereal grace, Cunningham's jittery counterpoint, and Paxton's prosaic walk are spatiotemporally extended. This, I suggest, is crucial to their cognitive functions.

A Look Back

Let us begin with the Judson Dance Theater. They were a group of minimalist postmodern choreographers who sought to pare down dance to what they took to be its essence: human bodies moving in space. They sought to democratize dance, to eliminate its elitist, distancing, off-putting qualities. They had no interest in story telling, in transcendence, in illusion of any kind. Their dances consist of mundane, pedestrian, non-stylized, uninflected movements of the sort you can see on the street. Yvonne Rainer expressed her choreographical ideals in her over the top 'No Manifesto' of 1965:

No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe
no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-

heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style
no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to
eccentricity no to moving or being moved.⁶

Once all these aspects of dance are excluded, what is left is, the minimalists maintained,
the essence of dance – movement as such.

What might be the value of such a dance? We see people walking, running,
climbing over barriers, carrying loads every day. Why should we go to a performance to
watch them? Sally Banes suggests that the answer lies in defamiliarization, a process by
which what is familiar is rendered strange.⁷ The idea is this: when something is familiar,
we are so accustomed to it that we do not look at it or attend to it. A passing glance
enables us to recognize it as what it is and then move on. Defamiliarization heightens
awareness of things that are so obvious that we routinely ignore them. We walk, run,
climb and see others doing so without giving it much thought. When we carry a mattress,
we do give it thought. We are painfully aware that carrying a mattress is hard. It requires
continually readjusting our bodies to accommodate the awkwardly shifting center of
gravity of the bulky, heavy, unwieldy burden. But we are intent on the task – we want to
get the mattress moved. So we attend to the task and not to our doing of it. The Judson
Theater dancers put us in a context where we attend to the physical intelligence that goes
into such mundane activities. We notice and attune ourselves to the minute, intricate,
muscular adjustments involved in keeping one's balance while schlepping a mattress.
We notice the rise and fall, the small and large physical adjustments that it takes to walk
or run across the floor. The dances then exemplify features that mundane motion
instantiates but that we, either makers or observers of that motion, routinely overlook.

The exemplification is literal. The dancers exemplify features of walking by walking. They exemplify features of climbing by climbing. On the one hand, their message seems to be ‘What you see is what you get’. On the other hand, they set the spectators in a context where they can ask, ‘Well, what do we get?’ and, perhaps for the first time, see what was before their eyes all along. By making us aware of the physical intelligence of ordinary, mundane movement, the Judson Theater’s dances increase our awareness and advance our understanding of ourselves as organisms capable of locomotion.

Arguably, they do something more. Although many of the discrete, component movements in Rainer’s *Trio A* are ordinary movements that pretty much anyone could do, it is not the case that the complex movements that they are part of are things that just anyone can do. As Jill Sigman says, ‘Moving a head one way and feet another is difficult enough, but switching quickly from head to feet to other body parts is even more challenging. . . . Furthermore, some of the movements are simply difficult to accomplish. One passage requires slowly rising into relevé on one leg and repeatedly alternating legs. Another involves squatting and extending the left leg fully to the back, then bringing it under the torso and through to the front without losing one’s balance.’⁸ This undercuts the idea that the uninflected, unvirtuositic dances are just ‘slices of life’ brought indoors and presented in such a way that we can attend to ordinary movement for its own sake. Nevertheless, the dances exemplify ordinary movements, and present the more complicated movements in the same uninflected way as they present the ordinary ones. Perhaps they thereby exemplify that the ordinary is continuous with the extraordinary, or that the ordinary is itself extraordinary.

According to the ideology of the 1960s minimalists, there is something phony or

inauthentic about dances that purport to be something other than what they are. So it is perhaps not surprising that exemplification figures prominently in their works. Since exemplification requires instantiation, a symbol can exemplify only what it is – that is, only features it has. But this ideology suggests that what is characteristic of postmodern minimalist dance might not be characteristic of other forms of dance.

Ideologically, Merce Cunningham and George Balanchine are not all that far from the minimalists. They too eschew narrative and psychological expression. They too want to pare dance down to its essence. But rather than taking the essence of dance to be human bodies moving in space, they take it to be *dancers* moving in space. So their works exemplify features of dance itself. Dancerly forms, movements, and patterns are exemplified in their works. *Points in Space*, Cunningham maintained, is about dance; it is not about anything else.⁹ Unlike the Judson group, Balanchine and Cunningham do not purport to restrict their range to movements anyone at all could do. They recognize that dancers have extraordinary physical and expressive abilities, and are willing to use the full range of those abilities. Thus they take properties like grace, virtuosity, suppleness and the illusion of weightlessness to be suitable candidates for exemplification. So are abstract geometrical and kinematic patterns that can be realized only by trained, talented dancers.

Again, the question is what is the cognitive value of such a dance? Well, a dance about dance could embody and convey an understanding of the art form. It could show what dance (or perhaps ballet, or perhaps a certain style of modern dance) as such does and how it does it. It could make manifest that dance is not just, or not mainly, a sort of entertaining pantomime for telling fairy tales without words – for conveying something

that could be better done in words. They seem to suggest that classical ballet starts, ‘once upon a time, there was a prince who fell in love with an enchanted swan . . .’ Now take away the prince, take away the swan, take away the love and betrayal, take away the enchantment, and what do you have left? The answer to that question, arguably, is what Balanchine makes manifest in his ballets.

Still, there is something irritatingly self-indulgent about artists’ talk of exploring the limits of their medium. One wants to reply, ‘Yes, yes, I can see why artists working in a medium and art students studying a medium need to care about the limits of the medium. But why should the rest of us care? What sort of understanding does such an exploration yield for us?’ Later, I will suggest reasons to think that Balanchine, Cunningham, Rainer and their colleagues provide acceptable answers to these questions. For now, however, let us look at their predecessors.

Modern dance tends to respect nature. Human bodies present themselves as human bodies, not snowflakes or swans or ethereal spirits. They are subject to the laws of physics and psychology, and sometimes ground down to the earth by the forces acting on them. Modern dances are more likely to present dancers writhing on the ground than leaping improbably through the air. Psychology is central. In Martha Graham’s works we see the outward manifestations of inner states, expressing fear, joy, elation, and revulsion. Rather than relying on established conventions, as classical ballet does, they create their own meanings – they constitute the symbols that convey their content.

One way is through narrative. Knowing, as we do, the story of Oedipus, we have resources for interpreting the gestures in *Night Journey*. But *Night Journey* is no mere pantomime of *Oedipus Rex*. It presents Jocasta’s mindset at the moment of her suicide,

something Sophocles left out. It reviews the joys and sorrows and eventual horror of her life with her son/lover/husband Oedipus. It displays the guilt, revulsion and self-loathing that make suicide the only option. It does so through tensions and releases, conventional gestures and newly invented ones -- motions that express tenderness, repugnance, love, and profound regret. The dance intimates that the true tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* is Jocasta's. To have borne a son and, loving him, to have (inadvertently and with the best intentions) brought it about that such a horrifying fate could befall him is to have utterly betrayed one's obligation as a mother. To have loved a man and put him in a position where all he could feel for you or himself is loathing and disgust is to have utterly betrayed one's obligation as a lover and a wife. *Night Journey* enhances our understanding of *Oedipus Rex*. It presents the story from a novel point of view, and reveals features that are not salient in Sophocles. It modulates and elaborates the understanding we glean from the play, convincing us that there is more to the story than the fate of one man with a tragic flaw. Whatever insight into the human condition we gain from the fiction is extended and ramified through this new interpretation.¹⁰

Modern dances, such as *Night Journey*, are not insular in the way the works of Rainer, Balanchine and Cunningham are. They point beyond themselves and appeal to resources drawn from the outside. They refer to things that are apparently not integral to dance. They tell stories to express feelings. They elicit and express emotions. According to Mary Wigman,

[t]he primary concern of the creative [modern] dancer should be that his audience not think of the dance objectively, or look at it from an aloof and intellectual point of view, -- in other words, separate itself from the very life of the dancer's

experiences; -- the audience should allow the dance to affect it emotionally and without reserve. It should allow the rhythm, the music, the very movement of the dancer's body to stimulate the same feeling and emotional mode within itself as this mood and emotional condition has stimulated the dancer.¹¹

The focus on emotion is not antithetical to my position. I have argued elsewhere, emotions exemplified in the arts are vehicles for understanding.¹² But Wigman assumes that the emotions in question are the ones that the dancer experiences. This may be problematic. For it seems that Martha Graham could give an utterly compelling performance of *Night Journey* even if she happened that day not to be feeling the amalgam of love, regret, revulsion and self-loathing that the work expresses. The emotions expressed by the work are evidently not necessarily the ones felt by the dancer.

This, however, presents a difficulty for my position. Exemplification, as I keep insisting, requires instantiation as well as reference. If the dancer does not experience the emotions in question, how can the dance instantiate them? This is a tricky question that, I will argue, reveals something about the philosophical significance of dance. But before I take up the problem, let us take a brief look at classical ballet.

Classical ballet is practically the antithesis of Judson Dance. It says 'yes' to many of the items listed in Rainer's 'No Manifesto'. Yes to spectacle, illusion and make believe. Yes to magic, virtuosity, glamour, transcendancy of the star image. Emphatically yes to the seduction of the spectator. Classical ballets tell stories, magical stories about enchanted princesses and evil magicians. They rely on a fixed, regimented, vocabulary of techniques, positions, and steps that conspire to present the illusion of weightlessness, of ethereality. Classical ballet looks outward. It is about something other

than dance. Still, it hardly seems to open a window on the world. It portrays fairy tales. It is populated by enchanters and their victims, by wizards and magical creatures. If there is a message here, it may be that ballet seeks to enchant, but we should beware of being enchanted. Although ballets are about something in the sense of being comprised of representational symbols, there is, evidently nothing in the world they are literally about. They are fictions. While telling stories about nutcrackers or firebirds or enchanted swans, they exemplify features like grace and delicacy, fluidity and transcendence. They make manifest how beautiful, light, and ethereal human beings can seem.

Dance in or as Philosophy

This cursory reverse history of dance in the west shows a paring down, a stripping away. Each genre I mentioned took its predecessors' works to contain excesses that needed to be eliminated, leaving only what was essential to dance. The move away from balletic spectacle was a progression toward the exemplification of only what is essential to dance. Philosophically, this is interesting. Who would have thought that dance is a hotbed of essentialism? But this trajectory leaves open an important question. Dance consists of human bodies in motion. So on this essentialist account, dance should be restricted to what human bodies in motion can exemplify. What is that? We know that an item can exemplify only properties it instantiates. So the question is, what sorts of properties can human bodies in motion instantiate?

The postmodern minimalists maintain that bodies cannot instantiate properties like being weightless, or being an enchanted swan. So dances that portray them as such are in some respect violating the essence of dance. They object to ballet's pretense of defying gravity – of being lighter than one really is. But pretending is something

ordinary people do, and pretending to be lighter than one is is something lots of us do. They object to the grand leaps as not the sort of thing that ordinary people do. But Michael Jordan, at the height of his career, probably made as impressively graceful leaps as Mikhail Baryshnikov. Granted, Michael Jordan is far from ordinary. But his extraordinary talent has nothing to do with dance. They object to ballet's standardized, regimented symbol system, considering it an imposition of an authoritarian dance culture rather than deriving from the way ordinary people behave. But human beings are by nature acculturated. So to find that something is a product of culture is not so show that it is not natural for beings such as ourselves. And many of our cultural practices involve subjecting ourselves and each other to rigid rules. Ordinary language is a cultural construct that imposes rules on the verbal behavior of human beings. The inside/outside distinction turns out to be hard to draw.

The postmodern minimalists object to the psychological properties exemplified in both ballet and modern dance, on the grounds that they are mental, not physical. This suggests that they are closet dualists. A dualist would say that a figure bowed in grief is exemplifying a posture from which one can infer that she is grieving, and that a trembling figure is exemplifying motions from which one can infer that she is afraid. Still, grief and fear are mental, not physical properties. But according to materialism, mind and body are one. So the figure bowed in grief instantiates, and perhaps exemplifies grief. The trembling figure instantiates and perhaps exemplifies fear. No inference is needed.

This last point is critical. One way to accommodate the exemplification of emotional properties conveyed by dance is to say that they are metaphorically exemplified. One dancer droops, displaying a particular posture that metaphorically

exemplifies grief. Another leaps, displaying a motion that metaphorically exemplifies joy. This works, and it may be the right thing to say. But the materialist position might be correct. In that case, the postures and movements themselves might exemplify properties that we call mental. This posture just shows grief, that movement just shows joy. For this is what grief looks like and that is what joy looks like.

This brings us back to a question I left hanging earlier. If the dancer is not experiencing the emotions, can the dance exemplify them? The first inclination is to say ‘No’, or anyway ‘Not literally’. Emotions need to be experienced, and if the dancer is not experiencing them, who is? But the assumption that emotions need to be experienced to be instantiated is not as obvious as it looks. Although they are associated with distinctive feelings, emotions are not feelings. It is possible to have an emotion that one does not feel. This, psychologists tell us, is what happens when one is in denial. Other psychological factors override or short-circuit the connection between emotion and feeling, so that an emotion that is plainly being exhibited is not felt. It is also common in what Hume calls ‘the calm passions’ – emotions like the standing affection for a life-long friend, which has no distinctive feeling associated with it, but which manifests itself in a complex disposition to behave in certain ways toward that friend. Still, one might object, even in these cases *someone* has the emotion in question. Whether it is felt or not, it resides in someone.

Could we say, then, that the emotions exemplified in *Night Journey*, reside in the dancer? Even if Martha Graham does not *feel* the regret and revulsion and self-loathing the dance exemplifies, those emotions are manifest in the motions her body goes through as she dances the part of Jocasta. She has them, whether or not she feels them. If they

are literally characteristics of a human body, and are characteristics a human body can have whether it feels them or not, then they can be literally exemplified in the dance, regardless of what the dancer feels.

Similarly, of course, for other properties, like ethereality or weightlessness or enchantment. Real bodies cannot instantiate those properties. But they can seem to instantiate them. So they can appear to be ethereal or weightless or enchanted. And they can literally exemplify the appearance. I mention this possibility, not because I think I can demonstrate here that it is correct, but because it seems to me that dance raises interesting and important questions in the philosophy of mind. If the mind just is the body, then what dancers do with their bodies, they do with their minds. The full title of Rainer's work is *Trio A or The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1*. I am suggesting that the 'is' here might be close to an 'is' of identity – *The muscle is at least part of the mind*. I suggest then that the postmodern minimalist contention that earlier works are somehow phony or inauthentic because they go beyond what is distinctive of bodies in motion is more problematic than it looks. It involves a tacit commitment to a limited, apparently dualistic conception of the range of things that human bodies actually do. This is not to say that the postmodern minimalists were wrong to limit their range in the way that they did. Rather, it is to suggest that their understanding of the basis of the limits may be wrong. One of the ways dance advances understanding is by raising philosophical questions, like 'What exactly is the relation of the body to the mind?' and 'How does the body in motion manifest intention, intelligence, emotion, and other putatively mental properties?'

Many of the features exemplified in human movement are exemplified elsewhere

as well. Patterns are abstract mathematical properties. So they might be exemplified in a dance, and instantiated not only in other human activities, but in events of different kinds. The dance of the snowflakes in *The Nutcracker*, for example, exemplifies the sort of pattern one sees when snow skitters across the ground. Patterns exemplified in dance are typically dynamic. They develop over time. So they often look like the patterns one sees in a kaleidoscope. These are complex kinematic regularities. By exemplifying such patterns, dances sensitize spectators to them, enabling those spectators to recognize when they encounter them in other venues or to discern subtle or enigmatic aspects of them.

Dance frequently exemplifies political properties as well. Yvonne Rainer's egalitarianism is manifest in, among other things, a sort of democracy of the performance space. There is no mandatory center of attention. Since the actions are uninflected, all the actions of all the dancers are potentially equally significant. The dance does not impel or compel the spectator to look at one spot or another. The outfits of the dancers (if they are not nude) are pedestrian, thereby depriving the spectator of the sort of social cues that clothing often provides. Virtuosity is neither displayed by nor required of the dancers. All, evidently, are created equal.

The collaboration of Cunningham and John Cage is, on the face of it, odd. In works like *Points in Space*, dance and music were created independently. The dancers typically did not even hear the score until the first performance. So rather than either art accommodating itself to the demands of the other, each stands alone. Each is worthy of attention. And in performance either may call attention to or distract attention from the other. This is not an accident, nor, from the point of view of the creators, is it a defect. For the works exemplify the autonomy of the different arts. They also exemplify

capacity of autonomy to provide an occasion for serendipitous juxtapositions.

In classical ballet, as in many other dances, music and dance work together. Each enhances, and draws on the other. The interdependence thus exemplified allows for the heightened effects that neither alone could achieve. Classical ballet also invokes the ‘star system’ that Rainer decried. It exemplifies a hierarchy, an inegalitarianism. Politically, as well as stylistically, postmodernism and ballet seem antithetical.

It is worth remembering however that to appreciate a dance, we need not endorse its political stance. If my contention is correct, what we should do is understand what the dance symbolizes, and how it reflects on other aspects of our experience. Different dances display different values. They afford access and insight into the values of egalitarianism, of autonomy, of inegalitarianism, and of interdependence. Ordinarily, we might not think of works like *Trio A* or *The Firebird* as particularly political works. But once we realize that among the properties they exemplify are political ones, we are in a position to recognize a political dimension to other actions and institutions that we might otherwise think of only apolitically. We emerge from a performance of such a work better equipped to recognize such features in other situations where encounter them.

Understanding and Interpretation

I have been urging that dances are symbols that exemplify features and render them epistemically accessible. But how can we understand such symbols? At a very abstract level, the answer is clear. We understand dances the same way we understand other symbols – we know how to interpret the symbol systems they belong to. I can read the menu, if I understand German, for the symbols on the menu are words in German. It is plausible that ballet has something like a ‘language’ – a set of repeatable, conventional

symbols whose interpretations are reasonably clear. But when Doris Humphrey is writhing on the floor, or Steve Paxton is carrying a mattress, or Merce Cunningham is twitching in the corner, or Jill Sigman is dancing on crutches, what are we to make of it? There doesn't seem anything like ballet's regimented conventions to fall back on.

Here, I think, it is worth taking seriously what writers on the dance say when they speak of a choreographer's vocabulary or idiom. They take it that to understand a dance, we need to be able to interpret that vocabulary or idiom. There is no reason to think that this is easy or automatic. It may be that one needs to know quite a bit about what has been going on in contemporary dance in order to understand a new work. It may be that we need to know what has been done, what has been tried, and whether it succeeded or failed, to figure out what Sigman is up to. (But you also need to have studied German to read the menu.) If one has the requisite background, what is being symbolized may be perfectly clear. If not, one may wonder why, for example, the dancers are nude, or are wearing masks, or are evenly distributed across the stage, or whatever. One may wonder what the connection between the score and the dance is or why words rather than music constitute the score. There is no reason to think that the answers to these questions are obvious or are readily available to the novice spectator. We should no more expect to be able to interpret a dance in an unfamiliar idiom just by looking than we expect to be able, just by looking, to interpret a menu, much less a poem, in a foreign language.

Confronted with an alien dance form, we may initially be bewildered. We venture hypotheses and test them to see whether they make sense of what we are seeing. There are many modes of access, so we may find that we have relevant background resources to build on. We might, for example, appeal successfully to our knowledge of

other arts or of popular culture. In some cases we will formulate plausible hypotheses that assign to a work an interpretation that accounts for the features we find salient. Then we have insights to export to other aspects of experience, and to bring to the interpretation of other works of art. The interpretation we venture may or may not stand up to further scrutiny. If, for example, it yields a reading that makes a new work anomalous, when it seems continuous with the choreographer's previous works, we have reason to doubt its adequacy. If the insights it leads to seem banal when the work seems exciting, then again we have reason to think our interpretation is inadequate. If, on the other hand, it makes sense of the factors we find salient, and illuminates other aspects of experience, it is a *prima facie* plausible interpretation.

I claimed earlier that dance has the capacity to embody and convey an understanding of the wider world. I argued that this capacity is largely due to exemplification. We can now see what this involves. Dance, like other arts, exemplifies properties that are instantiated elsewhere but that may fail to be noticed or properly attended to in the blooming buzzing confusion that regularly confronts us. In exemplifying these properties, dance draws our attention to them and stresses their significance. It thus equips us to recognize them when we see them again and intimates that we would do well to attend to them. In effect then, dance may be a source of working hypotheses. Obviously, not all such hypotheses are sound. An insight we attempt to export from a dance may fail to illuminate anything significant about other aspects of experience. Many dances are banal. In this they do not differ from other symbols that purport to reveal things about the world. Many putatively informative conversations, and many scientific experiments are banal too. But when a dance is

cognitively effective, it reveals something to us. We come to see the story of Oedipus in a new light, or come to appreciate the complex physical intelligence of ordinary movement, or come to realize the precarious of what we standardly take for granted.

In some cases we may remain bewildered. We have no idea why these people are doing those things, why anyone would consider what is going on art, or dance, or the sort of thing anyone would want to do in public. Then we can make no sense of the work. But even this may be an advance in understanding. This is Socrates' point. Knowing that you do not know is the first step toward knowledge. Appreciating that you do not know why this sort of thing constitutes art is the first step (or at least an early step) toward figuring out what makes art art, and what makes dance dance.

¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1968.

² Edward Tufte, 'Visual and Statistical Thinking: Displays of Evidence for Making Decisions', *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*, Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics, Press, 1997, Chapter 2.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.

⁴ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp.45-71; Catherine Z. Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 170-183.

⁵ By 'property', I mean that which members of an extension have in common. On this usage, an item has a property for every extension it belongs to.

⁶ Yvonne Rainer, 'Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses called Parts of Some Sextets' in Mariellen R Sandford, ed. *Happenings and Other Acts*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 196.

⁷ Sally Banes, 'Gulliver's Hamburger: Defamiliarization and the Ordinary in the 1960s Avant Garde,' *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s*, Sally Banes, ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, pp. 3-5.

⁸ Jill Sigman, 'Ordinary People: *Trio A* and How Dances Signify,' in *Bodies, Souls, and Ordinary People: Three Essays on Art and Interpretation*, Dissertation, Princeton University, 1998, pp. 164-165.

⁹ Merce Cunningham, interview, *Points in Space*, CD, Kultur, 1986.

¹⁰ For a discussion of how fiction advances understanding, see Catherine Z. Elgin, 'The Laboratory of the Mind,' in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, ed. Wolfgang Huemer, John Gibson and Luca Poggi. London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 43-54.

¹¹ Mary Wigman, 'The Philosophy of Modern Dance,' in *What is Dance?* Ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 306.

¹² See, Catherine Z. Elgin, *Considered Judgment* pp. 146-170; and 'Emotion and Understanding' in *Epistemology and Emotions*, ed. Georg Brun, Uvli Dogouglu, and Dominique Kunzel. London: Ashgate, 33-50.