Signs, Symptoms and Symbols

Dancing is essentially the active termination of a symbolic transformation of experience. Speaking is also a symbolic transformation of experience. The terminal symbols of speech are expressed in words, sentences and paragraphs, the terminal symbols of dance in gestures, poses and movement phrases. The terminal symbols of speech are often considered to be symbolic in quite different ways from the terminal symbols of dance, and we will now examine a few of these differences.

Both kinds of symbolic system, movement and language, share the function of meaning, for that is what any symbolic system is about, and meaning is based in both systems upon a condition which is logical, although meaning has both logical and psychological aspects. Logically or psychologically, utterances in either medium, just as items of stone or other materials which are to have meaning must, in the first place be employed as signals or symbols, then they must be signals or symbols to someone or a group of people.

To illustrate: until the item or the utterance is employed as a sign or a symbol, it is Nature. When it is thus employed, it becomes Culture. The item has got to have undergone this kind of fundamental transformation. The movements we perform in such fundamental acts as relieving ourselves or in eating, dressing, running, etc. are not dance movements, nor, in the terms of this argument, are they symbolic, although they are definitely symptomatic and could therefore be called signal in that they may be interpreted as signs of various activities, needs, situations, etc. Non-dance movements may be symptomatic of physiological or emotional states or they may be artificial socio-cultural signs of states of affairs.

The problem with symptoms, signs and symbols for the anthropologist when dealing specifically with dance or generally with movement is one which in a larger sense turns around the notion of 'expression'; a much used, — and misused, word, in relation to dance. The word expression points to a concept with which Suzanne Langer has dealt very sensibly: the important point she makes is that when we see a dance, what we are seeing is not a symptom of the dancer's feelings but a symbolic expression (better called exposition) of the composer's or participants' knowledge about all human feeling. Equally, we may say that Macbeth, for instance, is not a symptom of the actors' or Shakespeare's feelings but a symbolic expression of his and their knowledge of human feelings.

Dances may be symbolic expressions of diverse kinds of knowledge. They need not have emotions, the term most frequently associated with 'expression' in dance, as the main axis around which their subject matter turns. A dance may involve emotion but not be about emotions at all. Frequently, states of greater muscular tension or increased speed of movement are wrongly interpreted as 'emotion' of some kind. An outstanding example of an 'emotionless' system of movement, that is, one which does not include any of what we commonly think of as 'emotional expression' at all, is the ancient Chinese exercise technique Tai-Chi-Chu'uan, developed in the sixth century A.D. in contrast to the then prevailing system of movement, nearly universally used in China,

called Shao-Lin. Many dances from India and Africa are more usefully classified as highly disciplined rehearsals of socially sanctioned and correct attitudes. Still others are of a distinctly historical nature. All dances, however, convey meaning, including those which are considered by some to express 'pure beauty' or to project some vaguely defined aesthetic phlogiston. Sometimes the meaning is banal, trivial and superficial but this does not alter the fact of the symbolically expressive nature of the system, nor does it alter the validity or logical characteristics of dance gestures. Similarly, the existence of nursery rhymes, just-so stories and trashy novels and comic books in no way alters the unique syntactical or grammatical character of the English language or any other language.

It is worth quoting Mrs. Langer at length regarding the concept of symbolic expression in dance because her succinct statement helps to clear the notion of so many received ideas about it:

> As soon as an expressive act is performed without inner momentary compulsion it is no longer self-expressive; it is expressive in a logical sense. It is not a sign (underline supplied) of the emotions it conveys, but a symbol of it; instead of completing the natural history of a feeling, it denotes the feeling, and may merely bring it to mind, even for the actor. When an action acquires such a meaning, it becomes a gesture....[1]

Philosophers tell us that we can say at least two things about symbols: we can say that a certain symbol means an object, concept or idea TO a person or that a person means an object, concept or idea BY the symbol. In the first instance, meaning is treated in a logical sense; in the second, in a psychological sense. We can, in view of this distinction, say with impunity that when an Indian dancer assumes a Krishna pose in the Kathak idiom; that is, when the right hand is in a gesture near the mouth 'holding the flute' and the left is extended fully to the side in the ahamsa position, that this gesture (plus the total bodily posture) means the whole tale of the time when Krishna held up a mountain on his little finger thereby saving the Gopis from a flood; that this total bodily gesture IS a symbol in the logical sense, for it is but one posture employed within the total idiom which means that story to a significant number of Indians and all non-Indians who have studied the Kathak idiom.

Similarly, when the leading dancer of the Ga Obonu assumes an almost kneeling position before the Ga Mantse at the beginning of the dance and the Ga Mantse then raises his right arm in a certain gesture, these gestures mean, respectively, the questions, 'May we dance?' and the responding affirmative answer. Another gesture or no gesture on the part of the Ga Mantse in this situation would mean that the dance would not proceed; that only the drums would continue. No doubt most anthropologists are familiar with similar uses of gesture in other parts of the world, among the Navajo,[2] the Mohave,[3] the Balinese,[4] Anglo-American speaking peoples,[5] the Poles[6] and others. It would merely be tedious to summarize or re-state all of the ethnographic evidence which supports the thesis of the logical characteristics of gesture and hence, much of dance movement.

Then why dwell upon the point? When we regard gesture in this way, we are looking at it in a logical, near-discursive sense and few would deny the distinction or the supporting evidence. When, however, we lapse (as so frequently happens) into talking about what the dancer may be feeling or what his private meaning may be for the gesture, when, in other words, we focus not upon the symbol but upon the actor, we are in dangerous territory indeed. It is commonly accepted among dancers that little or no personal feeling or emotion is experienced while they are dancing in any case.

Many, although by no means all, of the ways in which dance has been accounted for by anthropologists, aestheticians, psychologists and even dancers themselves are couched in such subjective terms. If such subjective terms are not used, then dance is treated, even by semiologists, as primarily symptomatic or signal rather than symbolic, which only compounds the confusion. Yet both logical and psychological descriptions are related, but only if we view meaning, as Mrs. Langer so rightly argues, as a function of our terms and not as a property of them.

The distinction between signs and symbols is of paramount importance then, if our aim is to discover the foundation of the relation between dance or movement and society. It is indispensable if we are to disentangle movement-which-is-dance from other movement phenomena. For those who might find such a distinction arbitrary or over-scrupulous, considering that these words, 'sign' and 'symbol' are commonly used terms, it may be useful to look upon the following material as operational definitions. This makes it possible to withold judgment as to the value of the exercise until a later stage of the inquiry.

A sign, thus operationally defined, indicates the existence; past, present or future, of a thing, event or condition, --- wet streets, the sound of hail on a roof, smoke, dawn, the presence of palm trees instead of pine, spruce or tamarack, etc. These are natural signs. On the other hand, a person squatting by the roadside in Africa is a socio-cultural sign, perhaps of weariness, perhaps that he is defacating, or, in combination with other objects, that he is selling cigarettes. Following Mrs. Langer, I also take 'sign' to mean a symptom of a state of affairs.

The logical relationship between a sign and its object, she tells us, is simple; they are associated in such a way that they form a pair and they stand in a one to one relationship or correlation. One of the examples she gives is interesting: a white mark on a person's arm as simple data is not very interesting but that data in relation to the past, which discursively tags it as a scar, is interesting. A white mark on a person's arm, to an anthropologist, might include the simple data she mentions plus other much wider, more complex connotations: a white mark on the arm of an African, for example, would not in the first place be a scar, but might indicate some special inner state or condition which in turn would be connected with a socio-religious status of some kind such that, as a sign, we might more usefully think of it like a badge or emblem of some sort, rather than as a sign of a past event in the personal history of the individual.

Train whistles, black arm bands, traffic lights, the streaks of white clay mentioned above, in contrast to the natural signs previously mentioned, are not natural: they are artificial socio-cultural signs. They are not necessarily nor even usually a part of the event or condition they signify although the logical relation is still one to one. A symbol has a more complex frame of reference. Langer says that

> Symbols are not proxy for their objects, but are vehicles for the conception of objects.[7]

There are three, not two terms involved. To conceive a thing or a situation or a cosmos, a 'role' or a 'status' is not the same thing as to react towards it overtly or to merely notice its presence. Langer says that words normally evoke behaviour towards conceptions. Movement symbols also evoke behaviour towards conceptions, especially outside of Europe, England and North America. It seems necessary to make a distinction between, for example, Africa or India and the West in this connection, not because many westerners do not perceive what we know as 'artistic symbols' in this way, but because in general, our societies have become so specialized and our artists are in such distinct and usually relatively marginal social categories that we have minimized or reduced our awareness of these facts. We are not a 'people-who-dance' and therein, perhaps, lies much of the difficulty in communication between the minority group of specialists who do and the vast majority who do not.

Tentatively, we might assume that culturally organized form, whether idioms of dance, paintings, sculptures, drumming, etc. are ways of abstracting and/or conceptualizing, which is what I believe we may take Levi-Strauss to mean when he speaks about the face painting designs among the Caduveo. For purposes of clarity in relation to gesture, we might keep the following illustration in mind as a kind of 'shorthand notion' of some of the major differences between symptoms, signs and symbols relating to movement which have so far been indicated: a thumb in a baby's mouth may be symptomatic of an inner condition of hunger or a sign of some physiological or biological condition for which sucking is a necessary accompaniment. A thumb in an adult's mouth may be a symptom of regressive behaviour. A thumb-nail flicked against the teeth in Italy (or a thumb pulled quickly out of a sucking position in the mouth in Milwaukee, Wisconsin) is a socio-cultural sign of abuse and may lead to a fight. The baby's thumb sucking is a natural sign which is perhaps symptomatic, the adult's thumb-sucking is clearly symptomatic and the Italian's thumb gesture is a socio-cultural sign of impending violence.

A dancer who employs the Italian gesture of abuse in a dance is not 1) completing the natural history of his feelings, as is the man-in-the-street who does it and 2) he is not making the gesture under the stress of momentary inner compulsion. He is making the gesture because it has been employed as a symbol in the dance to convey a conception about violence, perhaps, or a concept of an abusive person or group of people or something of that nature. Peter Janiero's masterful handling of movements and gesture for the Puerto Ricans in West Side Story is an excellent example of what is meant. In a dance, the gestures become vehicles for the conceptions of people, objects, attitudes or situations. Exactly the same things could be said of the rude or abusive gestures which

are incorporated into the modern Ga dance 'Kpanlogo'; these gestures, which out of context of the dance might invite immediate and perhaps violent responses do not do so in the context of the dance.

Nothing has been said so far about the real differences inherent in the techniques involved in various kinds of systems of symbolization. For the moment, it will suffice to mention the major difference between discursive and non-discursive symbolic systems. Mrs. Langer sums it up neatly in one sentence:

> We cannot talk in simultaneous bunches of names.[8]

She illustrates this proposition with the contrasting images of the layers of clothing which we wear everyday hanging side by side on a clothes line. Non-discursive symbolic systems deal with symbols which have the quality of simultaniety; musical chords, paintings, Grässer's sculptures of Morris dancers, -- the list is nearly endless. Like these, the dance gesture or symbol has diverse meanings, multiple simultaneous impacts on many levels. The movement symbol, in other words, is semantically very dense indeed, hence the dancer's traditional dissatisfaction with words, which often seem so tedious largely because of their linear quality. Words seem to lack the specificity that gesture has to the dancer. While it is true that degrees of emotion, for example, can be indicated verbally, they can never be denoted with the degree of sophistication and refinement which can occur in a dance. On the other hand, a choreographer is wise not to create a dance work in which the plot or the meaning of the piece hangs upon the fact that one of the characters is someone's sister-in-law, unless his idiom provides specific conventional gestures having that kind of referential value, or unless he includes paragraphs of program notes which 'explain' such a plot.

The over-riding difficulty, the big problem which Mrs. Langer posed, and in my view answered, once and for all, is the one which Nelson Goodman calls

> ...the domineering dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive.[9]

'On the one side', he says, 'we put sensation, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless affective response, liking and loathing.'

Both philosophers whom I invoke have recognized this problem and to them in particular and to philosophers in general what follows may appear to be a revival of exhausted arguments but what may be an exhausted argument in formal philosophy still seems to have strong currency as an argument in other disciplines: to the extent that a brief re-examination of some of these paradigmatic problems may be justified. For it would seem that many of the explanations of dance, theories about dance and definitions of dance are, after all, only based upon an a priori assumption of this dichotomy, which in the end does involve the logicians and philosophers who have investigated the limits of language.

Nothing that is not 'language' in the sense of their technical definitions can possess the character of symbolic expressiveness, contrary to everything which has so far been stated in this argument, though they will grant non-discursive symbolization 'expressiveness' in a symptomatic way. We get the picture from this, as Langer says, that outside their definitional domain, their tiny 'grammar-bound island' as she calls it, is the inexpressible realm of feeling, of immediate experience, subjectivity and satisfactions forever incommunicado and incognito. The earlier Wittgenstein called it 'This logical beyond; the unspeakable.' Russell and Carnap, as she points out, regard this as the sphere of subjective experience, emotion, feeling and wish from which only symptoms come to us in the form of metaphysical and artistic fancies ! Moreover, they relegated the study of such products to psychology; the discipline which purports to deal with the inner machinations of individuals. The dance, one of the most 'unspeakable' of all the arts, ranks high in this realm of the logical beyond.

In all fairness, because the argument may now seem to tend towards being a polemic against philosophers, which is certainly not intended, it must be said that no modern philosopher would agree, for example, with Cartesian divisions between mind and body and that they would, in general, be against the kinds of emotive-cognitive distinctions which he made. While it is true, as has been mentioned before, that certain forms of positivism have been rejected within the discipline of modern philosophy during the past fifteen or twenty years, some of these arguments still have strong currency in other disciplines, including Social Anthropology, -- not totally without reason perhaps. Artists are traditionally lazy intellectually and they often seem to gain their sense of individual and social power from capitalizing upon the mystery and obscurity with which their society surrounds their activities. They respond very humanly and perfectly understandably, to their marginal social and academic categorization with further withdrawal. On the other hand, the 'domineering dichotomy' of intellect vs. emotion has a long intellectual history in the Anglo-American philosophical and academic tradition which is venerable and hoary with age. It is a very deeply entrenched notion, even if some people do think it is dead wrong.

Probably the most damaging features about this positivistic sort of dichotomy for non-discursive artists and any possible contribution which they might have to make to the general fund of human knowledge are the two basic assumptions which lie behind the contentions of the philosophers about whom Langer speaks. Interestingly, these contentions are not so different from the ones which seem to lie between the more recent 'fact-value' distinctions, which found their parenthood in the Humean 'ought-is' distinction. The similarity lies in the fact that all these kinds of dichotomies seem to be attempts to undermine the objectivity of art and of non-discursive symbol systems, not to mention ethics and morals.

The contentions which lie behind such distinctions seem to be that 1) language is the only means of articulating thought and 2) that everything which is not speakable thought is feeling. Language, according to the philosophers Langer mentions, is the limit of the expressive symbolic medium and therefore, the limit of our conceptual power. Beyond this, we can have only inarticulate feeling which neither conveys nor records anything, but which has to be, rather compulsively apparently, discharged in actions, 'self-expression' or some kind of impulsive demonstrations. In

the light of these contentions, dancers, all artists, and 'primitives' of all sorts are people who have to express themselves, preferably publicly, whether for the edification of, or to the profound dismay of, -- others.

These contentions and the axiomatic assumptions upon which they are based provide the modern anthropologist with very little in the way of conceptual tools with which to deal with the several non-discursive symbolic systems which he encounters everyday in the field, or, for that matter, those which he encounters at home. It becomes abundantly clear if one reviews the definitional problems connected with dance and examines several naive, unsophisticated theories which have been developed in various disciplines about dance, that all of these problems and theories are perhaps the inevitable products of methodology, models and attitudes which reflect the narrowness of the traditional philosophical paradigm itself.

That language has a privileged position and will continue to hold that position among human symbolic systems is an assertion that few would deny. To question the assertion does not necessarily mean that ultimately we would reject it, to question it merely means that we might enrich our ideas of the nature of its companion systems. Roland Barthes, for example, seems to feel that language is privileged because of its universality,[10] although upon reflection, we realize that speaking is not more universal than moving. Perhaps we think that language is privileged because it has been written. Because of written language we can categorize ourselves as 'literate'; we become writers instead of just speakers. This seems to mean that we can in some way confirm or affirm our existence in the past or the future or that we are then 'civilized' where before we wrote, we were not, or something of that kind. Dance, we say, is no longer an 'illiterate art' because notation systems have, since the time of Laban, been devised which are now universally used.

Certainly, most social anthropologists, as well as many modern philosophers and linguists would agree that there are grounds for reasonable doubt that spoken language is the only means of articulating thought or that it represents the limits of human conceptualizing power.

To conclude: we must summarize the distinction so far made between sign, symbol and symptom. On a basis of this distinction we must then distinguish two kinds of intention which are involved in movements, actions and dances. Expressive gestures or actions can be either signal or symbolic. They are signal when they complete the natural history of feelings and symbolic when they are performed without inner momentary compulsion; i.e. when they denote feelings, emotions, ideas, situations, etc., even for the actor. Quite simply, symbols are taken to be characters which bestow conceptual identity upon an event, object, situation or group of people and signs are characters which do not bestow conceptual identity. I believe that de Sassure meant something very similar when he made a distinction between signs and symbols as well. Gesture or action which is signal may also be symptomatic, on the one hand of inner states or conditions, which is to look at them in a purely psychological sense, or they may be symptomatic of states of affairs, which is to look at them as socio-cultural signs.

Our essential distinction; that between signs and symbols, seems to lead in the direction of being able to postulate both private and public intentions in relation to the 'language' of movement. To pursue this line of thought points towards what modern philosophers, including the later Wittgenstein, would postulate about spoken language; that language has agreed public meanings and interpretations which are often distinct from private interpretations or meanings. de Sassure went a little further, perhaps, when he said that all means of expression are based on collectively agreed upon interpretations, by which he meant conventions, and he said that it was the conventional rules, not the intrinsic value of the signs, symbols or characters of whatever sort that obliges us to use them. In dancerly terms what this means is that it is not possible to create a dance which anyone is going to understand if, for example, the dance is about God and all the gestures are towards the ground.

Modern philosophers argue that language has the characteristic of publicity because people do intend to communicate something when they use language. It is important to note, in connection with this point, that, contrary to Prof. Strawson's recent criticism of Noam Chomsky,[11] the latter does take account of the intentions of native speakers of the language because he presupposes that people intend to communicate something by virtue of this system of sounds. This public character of spoken language is, by definition, conventional.

If we are to look upon the dance, even partially, as having the characteristics of a language, then we must grant that it also has characteristics of publicity and I would submit the ethnographic evidence already cited to support this claim. Private gesture languages, like private verbal languages are largely irrelevant to the social anthropologist, although they may be of paramount importance to the psychologist or to the medical doctor. And this does not mean a commitment to the position that the artist, who is often conceptualizing ahead of his time or in a manner similar to the Buryat shamans described by Humphries,[12] is expressing a 'private language' and that his insights and activities are therefore to be discredited. To speak of the public and 'private' intentions of discursive or non-discursive symbol systems, does not mean that only the artist or the shaman will understand. We do not involve the artist or the shaman in this kind of private fallacy. Any language is, as everyone knows, open-ended. We are always involved in the tension between the prevailing cultural canon and current innovation which is based upon these canons. Real innovators are those who can function within the canons and then take us beyond. The reference here is to artists like Picasso, whose innovations were in part, surely, accepted because he could paint supremely well within the framework of the prevailing academic canon of his time. He didn't paint as he did because he <u>couldn't paint</u> representationally, but because he could and moreover, could then lead us beyond that.

Signs and symbols both indicate intention; what is important in considering symbolic systems of dances, is whether or not the emphasis is upon the subjects and the inner states of the subjects or whether the emphasis is up on the publicly agreed upon interpretations of the signs and symbols. That is to say, we must emphasize what the symbols mean to a given people. We need to be very careful that we do not impose technical terms

onto their symbolic systems which distort their publicly agreed interpretations of phenomena; i.e., calling a trance state an hysterical fit and things of that kind.

It will be clear by now that the discussion has so far been chiefly on a syntagmatic level, but dance movements are symbolic both as 'utterances' and as a total apparition. We have so far not discussed dance on a paradigmatic level. We might ask, at this stage of the inquiry, are we to understand, then, that every movement in a dance has the kinds of referential meanings attached to them as does deaf-dumb language ? Is dance to be understood in exactly the same way as spoken language, the only difference being that it is mute ? The answer is, of course, no. We can only understand from the exposition thus far that dance movements have logical and denotative aspects which make the total system potentially a symbolically expressive one and that we distort matters severely if we confuse movement which is symbolic with that which is signal or symptomatic.

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