

LITURGICAL ORDER AND DANCE NOTATION

By Father, Professor Marcel J. Dubois, op.

Perhaps you are astonished that a blackfriar, a priest and a monk, participates in a congress of which the subject is dance and choreography. I must confess that I myself am astonished. While looking at the different papers on dance notation which were delivered at your conferences and workshops, I felt an admiration as great as my incompetence!

Certainly, I am aware of the important place of the art of dance as an expression of humanism and culture. It has always been a fascination for me. I am too young to have known the enthusiasm caused by Balanchine and the controversies about Isidora Duncan. I entered the monastery at the time when the star of Serge Lifar was rising. Later, some friends, passionate ballet lovers, told me about Jean and Nathalie Philippart. I followed with great interest, but from afar, the debut of Zizi Jeanmaire and Roland Petit (it is one of my Dominican friends who blessed their wedding). I was intrigued by Leslie Caron. I could no longer ignore Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. The personality and the art of Maurice Béjart, I would say even his metaphysics, obviously did not leave me indifferent. And at present I am anxious about the artistic destiny of Baryshnikov, now that he appears on Broadway.

But I can not hide from you the fact that the art of dance remains for me full of unknowns and questions. Of course, as a professor of philosophy and above all as a historian of Greek philosophy, dance is for me an object of particular interest. Without going so far as to place it, as did the French poet Paul Valéry, at the center of my ethics and my symbolism, I am obliged to consider this particular mode of expression, in which the body seems to escape its own weight as if it were freed by the soul which inspires it. As a philosopher I cannot not ask a fundamental question: the happiness or ecstasy which dance procures is it that of the dancer or that of the spectator? To whom does the Muse of Dance bring catharsis? Furthermore, as a monk and as a theologian, I cannot refrain from asking, as did Bossuet, criticizing theater and condemning actors under what conditions can the dancer maintain his lightness I mean his spiritual lightness, the transparence of his soul? What are the requirements of the spirit, so that the body which it

puts into movement, taking it, so to say, out of time and space, does not become a screen between the dancer and himself, between the dancer and God?

Therefore, it is not as a balletomane that I address myself to you. I participate in this congress because our friend Hassia Levy has asked me a question. Admiring as a choreographer, the order, the harmony and the beauty of Christian liturgy, she asked me if the evolutions, the movements, the gestures of liturgical prayer were the object of some dance notation. Are there librettos for liturgy as there are for ballets?

I have been struck and intrigued by this question because it springs from a very accurate perception. Hassia Levy is right when she considers the order and measure of liturgical celebrations, that of the Mass in particular, as a sacred choreography.

This question could, at first sight, seem strange, since we all know the verse of the prophet Amos about ceremonies including chants and music: "Take away from me the tumult of thy songs; and I will not hear the canticles of thy harp" (5, 23). Surely the prophet reacts against the frenzy of certain sects or against pagan influences which threatened the purity of the cult of God, the Most High. It is certain that, neither in Jewish nor in Christian liturgy, which stemmed from it, do we find properly speaking, any ritual or sacred dance. (Let me remark that today this poses considerable problems for the inculturation of Christian liturgies in countries where dance is a traditional sacred language, in certain parts of Africa or India, for instance).

Nevertheless, it is clear that the prayer of Christian communities like that of the Temple and of the Jewish community, involves the two elements which constitute the essence of all poetry and all dance: enthusiasm and measure. The French poet Saint-John Perse defines poetical art in terms which suit dance admirably. He wrote: "Rite and measure against the impatience of the poem". The impatience is the enthusiasm of David dancing before the arc, scandalising Michal, who would undoubtedly have

preferred a more sober ritual. It is the Halleluiah of Passover and Easter. Measure is the scrupulous arrangement of Leviticus, of which the Christian liturgical tradition has kept the concern for rigor and precision. For the Greeks, the *strophe* and the *antistrophe* of the poem or the chant measured the movements round the altar, first in one direction and afterwards in the opposite direction. Thus, in the same way, it is a sacred choreography which is described in Psalm 26: "I will compass thy altar, O Lord", in a verse taken into Christian liturgy in the prayer accompanying the washing of the hands (*lavabo*).

Briefly, it is correct to consider liturgy as choreography, that is to say, a collection of gestures and movements, assembled according to certain rules, in order to express fervor, lyricism, enthusiasm of prayer, praise, worship and offering.

There is an admirable text of Saint Hippolyte of Rome, from the second century A.D. which would suffice to justify this intuition. It addresses itself to Christ and it says: "O crucified, leader of the divine dance! O feast of the Spirit! Divine Easter which descends from heaven to earth and from earth rises up again to heaven! O new solemnity! Assembly of all creation O universal joy, honour, feasts, delights, by which dark death is destroyed, life, given with abundance to all creatures, the gates of heaven opened!"

Leader of divine dance! Feast of the Spirit! Solemnity! It is true of Mass, first of all, but it is equally true of the whole liturgical celebration of which Mass is the center. The choral service and the monastic service in particular, which give rhythm to the day in the same manner as the Jewish prayer from which it took its structure, transforms time into a choreography of days and season. Vigils, lauds, vespers, all apportion prayer to night time, dawn, dusk, like the movements of a ballet encompassing life entirely.

Furthermore, the entire monastic life, by its rhythm, its movements, its rites, its signs, appears also as a choreography of which all the details are specified by the rule that transforms the banality of daily actions into a symphony of symbols whose order and measure are assured by the precision and rigour of tradition.

Are there librettos for the liturgy which is celebrated in the Church or for the gestures and movements of everyday life of monasteries, analogous to dance notation? To a certain extent, yes. All this choreography is codified by what we call rubrics. And this answer confirms the soundness of the question asked by Hassia Levy. The rubrics are to liturgy what dance notation is to ballets. (May I remind you, that

the word *rubric* comes from the Latin *rubrum*, red, and it refers to the texts printed in red letters, inserted between the prayers, indicating the attitude or the gestures that accompany them). The only difference is that the movements are not – or very rarely so – graphically or geometrically indicated. They are described or explained. But the function is the same.

It would be interesting, even exciting to read through the great books of traditional liturgy, the *sacramentarii*, and in particular the Pontifical and the Missal, in order to discover in them, notations which are analogous, as far as content and precision are concerned, with those of the choreographers. It will suffice here to quote a few examples, which I shall take from the tradition which is mine and which I know best, namely that of the Roman liturgy. An exhaustive enquiry which would extend to Eastern liturgies, that of the Copts or that of the Ethiopians, in particular, would be extremely fruitful and suggestive. And even in the West, the Mozarabic liturgy, or that of Lyon, for instance, would bring forth numerous interesting examples. A pontifical high Mass of the rite of Lyon is indeed with regard to the number of its participants, the variety of their roles, the arrangements of their evolutions, organized like a vast ballet.

Let us remark, first, that like all dance, liturgy takes place in a certain space. The scene where the liturgy is performed is the sanctuary. And it is precisely so that the liturgy which takes place in it may be seen by the faithful not as a spectacle, but as a mystery or a sacrament, that the space which surrounds the altar is elevated. It is like a podium. One has to climb stairs in order to reach it. You are certainly acquainted with ancient churches where the elevation of the sanctuary was the occasion of splendid realizations of architecture. Thus, that which we could call the geometry of liturgy finds its place, like every dance, in a delimited space. It often happened when I was in charge of the ceremonies at my monastery, that I would use a blackboard in order to explain, before the service, the diverse movements of the celebration. I was, unknowingly, practicing dance notation.

As to the movements and the figures which they bring into being, it is clear that all liturgical action – I mean the acts and gestures of the participants – is composed like all dance and ballet, of elementary attitudes and movements which it would be easy to represent as in dance notation, by means of abstract signs: half and full bows, genuflections, prostrations, processions, circumambulations, etc., which are to the liturgical expression what *entrechats*, *assemblé*, *balancé*, *coupé*, *pirouettes*, *two-steps*, *toe-dancing*, *quadrille*,

are to dance. The moments in which these gestures are performed differ with the text they accompany or the circumstance of prayer; the way in which they are done changes according to the rites. These gestures are nevertheless like the elementary vocabulary of liturgy, or if you wish, its grammar. These signs are used or effected according to a certain order.

Ordo Missae is what we call the ritual of the Mass. Order. *Ordo*, like the Jewish *sidur*, which fixes the order of succession of prayer. The movements of the priest and of his assistants are carefully indicated: genuflection before the altar, bowing in front of the cross, bowing during confession, a place assigned for the reading of the epistle or the gospel, gestures of the offertory, the order of the distribution of communion. It is this order which assures at once the rigor and the transparence of the signs of the mystery, which they have to represent and signify. This mystery is so high, so holy, that for certain gestures, such as those of consecration, the exactitude of their realisation is a condition of their validity.

It is easier to grasp this arrangement of gestures and signs in the order of a High Mass. The procession of the gospel, that of the oblation, in Eastern liturgy, the censing of the altar, are movements in which every participant — the priest who conducts the service, the deacon, the acolytes, the candle-bearers, the incense-bearer — has his place and role. The function of each one, his location in the sanctuary, his movements back and forth, are defined and indicated by the ritual. Their disposition in space sometimes has a symbolic significance. Thus, in the Dominican rite, until not long ago, for the chant of the gospel, the deacon, the candle-bearers, and the incense-bearer (thurifer), were placed around the pulpit in the form of a cross.

We could quote a great number of similar details, accurately and rigorously indicated, in the Byzantine and other Eastern liturgies. The Latin liturgy is known for being more sober. It does not lack lyricism, but its lyricism is more rational. The examples that I am going to quote are therefore more striking.

In the liturgy of Good Friday, for instance, the ceremony of the adoration of the Cross is organized like a real choreography, in which the gestures and movements are indicated by the ritual.

First, the unveiling of the Cross. This Cross is introduced in procession, covered by a veil. One sings for the first time: *Ecce lignum crucis*, (this is the wood of the Cross) at the bottom of the steps of the altar, on the side, and the priest

unveils one arm of the Cross. One sings for the second time: *Ecce lignum* as the celebration goes up one step, getting closer to the center of the altar, and he uncovers the other arm. For the third time, he goes to the center of the altar, and uncovers the Cross entirely.

Then begins the ceremony of adoration. Two deacons sing in Greek: *Agios o Theos*, (O Holy God) three times, making a genuflection at every *agios*, and getting up. The whole assembly answers in Latin: *Sanctus Deus*, executing in turn, three times, the same movement.

Then comes the procession, in which every one of the participants, beginning at the far end of the sanctuary, dances in the direction of the altar, bending his knees three times, at the entrance, in the middle of the sanctuary, and at last at the feet of the altar, where he lies prostrate on the ground in order to kiss the Cross. In this procession each of the priests and the faithful, one by one, bends his knees where he stands, at the same time as the one who precedes him. Obviously, for a crowd of the faithful, unaccustomed, this synchronisation of movements is rather difficult. But from out point of view it is clear that the rubrics which indicate the order and arrangement of these movements, play the role of dance notation.

We could make the same remarks about the liturgy of Paschal Night. The benediction of the new fire, the procession of the Paschal candle, the lighting of the lamps in the church, proceed like a ballet. The deacon precedes the community carrying the recently lit and benedicted candle; entering the church he proclaims: *Lumen Christi*, (The light of Christ). The whole crowd kneels and on rising answers: *Deo Gratias* (Thanks be to God). The same movements are repeated in the center of the church and again, for the third time, when the deacon enters the snactuary.

This general structure, fixed by the rubrics receives some modifications or special amplifications here and there. Every liturgical tradition, every religious order, has its own particular choreography. I will quote one, which is especially dear to me, because it is a custom of the Dominican ritual, and I find it very suggestive. As you might know, the Dominicans wear a white robe, but for preaching, teaching or outdoors they wear a black cape. Therefore they have been named blackfriars, which is of course an error, since their robe is white. In any case, during Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, the Dominicans wear their black cape for community prayers. Here, there is a dance notation proper to the Dominnican order and particularly beautiful. At the services of Easter vigil, at the moment we

chant the Easter *Gloria in excelsis* and while the bells are ringing, all the brothers in one movement take off their capes, and the entire choir, which was somber, shines with light and whiteness. I see in this a choreography particular to the Dominican ritual, brighter indeed than spring in its bloom!

I have quoted cases which are particularly solemn, those of the Holy Week, but I could have demonstrated the same general rule in the details of everyday liturgy. Bows, genuflections prostrations and processions accompany and underline the text of the prayers of Mass and office. One makes a deep bow when singing the *Gloria Patri* at the end of Psalms or for the doxology of the hymns. One bows at the words *Jesu Christe* of the *Gloria in excelsis*, and kneels in a vast movement of the whole community singing the "*et incarnatus est*" of the Credo. One lays down on the ground for the confession of sins or before receiving communion. The only noticeable difference between these rubrics and the dance notation is in the fact that these movements prescribed by the ritual accompany not the music but the text of the prayer and underline its significance. They are nevertheless movements of sacred choreography.

I would like to add that silence itself is ordered and measured by the ritual. There is an expression in the Hebrew Psalms which leads me to think it is an invitation to silence, namely, the word *selah* – pause – which punctuates certain verses. There is a similar kind of indication in monastic liturgy. Before the beginning of the service there is a period of reflection, during which, until the signal is given by the superior, the brothers remain bent over in a deep bow for a silent prayer. The duration of this bow is measured: the time of one Our Father, or sometimes of three, according to the ritual.

Thus, it is neither a mistake nor an exaggeration to consider liturgy as sacred choreography in which the rubrics of the ritual are the libretto. Moreover, as I have already said, the entire monastic life appears as a ballet. I shall quote only a few examples, but if you visit a monastery, if you go to Abu Gosh or to Latrun you will see that all of life, all of time, is organized according to this rhythm.

For instance, every monk has his own place in the choir, at the refectory, at the chapter, and in the processions that lead from one place of the monastery to another, in an order resembling that of a permanent ceremony. This liturgy, like a ballet, involves signs and symbols which make commentaries and explanations superfluous, because they are like a language of the body, silent, but extremely rich in expression.

If someone makes a mistake in a function of the office or arrives late at a community exercise, he lays down fully stretched in a movement called *venia* begging a pardon or apology, a movement which, while being an expression of humility is not without elegance. Among the Cistercians if someone makes a mistake in singing or reading the Psalms, he gets up and touches the ground with his fingers: a humble recognition of the mistake. And then he goes on...

Among the Dominicans, the two parts of the choir facing each other during the recitation of the Psalms, stand and sit in turn, in order to express – by a common attitude – that the vocation of the order is at the same time to contemplate, by study and meditation, and to witness, by preaching and teaching.

Even the order of meals is arranged in a harmonious style, as set down in the rubrics. The monks enter refectory in procession, two by two, *bini et bini*. In a sermon to his monks, Saint Bernard goes so far as to compare this movement to that of the disciples whom, according to the Gospel, Jesus sent two by two. Evangelical ballet! And even some gestures, like that of drinking, are ordered by a certain ritual. I have known a time when, among the Dominicans, one had to hold the glass in the right hand and a saucer in the left hand. Among the Cartusians, the cups themselves have two handles which one holds at the same time when drinking, in order to lend to this act, which could be ordinary or vulgar, a certain dignity.

Furthermore, until a rather recent time, the Trappists, in order to maintain silence, did not speak but communicated through signs. This is the reason why the Israelis call the monks of Latrun, *Shatkanim*, the silent ones. The habits and customs of the Cistercian Order evolved into a vocabulary and even a grammar of signs, as precise and rigorous as dance notation and which one could call, indeed, a choreography of silence. I could cite many more examples, because the entire monastic life is organized by the rule like a vast liturgy which sanctified every gesture of the day, every moment of time. However, since I say these things in Jerusalem, I think it is not difficult to convince you. This aspect, both liturgical and choreographic, of a life in which one refers and directs all one's actions to God, through thanksgiving or benediction, is a heritage of Judaism. The ritual of the *Kiddush*, that of the lighting of candles, that of the *Havdalah* and so many other gestures of Jewish life, appear too as actions in a choreography of which the notation is contained within the ritual. The *Shulchan Aruch* could also be considered as a dance notation of sorts.

So far I have spoken as a monk and as a theologian, happy

to find in my own experience something which resembles yours. Allow me to conclude these reflections with an observation which will be more that of a philosopher or at least of a historian of philosophy. One finds in Aristotle a detail of vocabulary which could help illuminate the significance of your work as choreographers, compared to the dancer who performs the movements and the spectator who contemplates the figures.

In order to explain what, in his system, is form, or the formal cause among other causes, Aristotle juxtaposes rather often, in the stream of his writing, two expressions: *edios kai morphe*. These two words are synonyms, they both designate the essence of the thing, the answer to the question: What is this? The two words are synonyms, yet their reference is different. The *eidōs* is the form of the *species*, the universal and theoretical model, quite close to the platonic idea. By the way, it is from Plato that Aristotle has taken the word. The *morphe* is a concrete form of the real individual, the measure of its actual perfection. Although the intelligible content of these words is the same, the *eidōs* emphasizes the theoretical and abstract, while the *morphe* involves the realism of what is engaged in existence, the configuration of the material thing, that which appears to the senses, elaborates the *eidōs* of the ballet, its design in its abstract and quasi-mathematical form, while the role of the dancer is to accomplish the *morphe* of the corporal realization, that which appears to the eyes of the spectator.

This distinction allows us to understand both the beauty and the danger of your profession. The danger is evident. It is that of separating the *eidōs* from the *morphe*, of dealing with the figures of the ballet as with purely abstract forms, as a computer would do. This kind of danger could also threaten a liturgist or a canonist who tended to consider the rubrics of the ritual not as a ceremonial, but as a series of theoretical and cold rules. Rite and measure, certainly, but without consideration for the poem! Order which is forgetful or even ignorant of enthusiasm...

Of course, your work, like that of the musician or the architect, is a work of reason. But it is reason within a dream, reason in the service of the Muse; better still, reason in the service of spirit. That is what Paul Valéry profoundly perceived. I quote him, even if his expression is a little bit pagan: "Dream, dream, but a dream which is penetrated with symmetry, all order, all acts and sequences. Who knows what august laws dream here, that they have taken on clear faces, and that they agree in the purpose to manifest to mortals how the real, the unreal and the intelligible can melt and combine according to the power of the Muses". I would say: according to the power of the

Spirit.

Therefore, you can guess what the beauty of your role is: to foresee and to organize the movements of the *morphe* through the rigor of the *eidōs*. As a good musician already hears the orchestra while looking at the score. Even in the depths of his deafness, Beethoven perceived, from within, the sound of the works he was writing. So the choreographer must be able to see the living harmony of the curves, figures and movements from which he draws the kinetics.

Rite and measure, indeed, but never forgetting the impatience of the poem.

Lines and curves, but as a canvas for the expression of enthusiasm.

Likewise the rules of the ritual would not have any significance were they not signs and symbols of praise and worship.

So, comparing, as I have done, choreography with the rubrics of liturgy, we could apply to your work what the French writer Saint-Exupéry said about life itself: "My constraint is the ceremonial of Love".

May the constraint, the rigor and the precision of your notation be opened to the living ceremony of love, of life, to the expression of the spiritual. ■

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Reconstruction of historical dances (A. Meiroz)