The Solitary Dancer: A Problem in Aesthetics

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THE SOLITARY DANCER

by

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Music is an art, and so is poetry: there is an art of sculpture, and an art of dancing. But how is an art possible? How is it that a painter or other artist, seeking only to be true to his own unique vision, can in doing so produce something that he and others will recognize as a work of the well-known art that he practices? The question seems at first to be hardly a challenging one. One might as well ask how authentic speech and morality are possible. How is it that a person, seeking only to express his own unique thought, can be understood by others as speaking in a familiar language? How can a person of moral autonomy and integrity, taking responsibility before all the world for his unique life, yet be seen to be doing something that is not only recognizably human but characteristic of members of a specific human community? In those two cases, one know what to say. The model was articulated at least as early as Aristotle. A child learns the forms of the language his family speaks, comes to grasp the grammar of that language, makes its principles his own and then uses them spontaneously to frame thoughts uniquely his. A child first does as he is told, then comes to see why he was told that, makes the underlying principles his own, and in accordance with these principles fashions unselfconsciously the style of his personal life. There is no way to speak or to live without speaking some language or manifesting some form of culture; to purport to speak or to live otherwise is not integrity but idiocy. Rational autonomy is not arbitrary but rests on the recognition of rightness.

In articulating his primitive version of this model, Aristotle himself used as analogy what I began by asking about, the learning of an art. Specifically, his analogy was the process of learning to play a musical instrument. The novice moves his fingers as his teacher tells him. In the course of practice, he comes to recognize why it was right to move them so. That recognition is what learning to play really comes to, what enables him to play new pieces, and pieces of new sorts. The student introjects the principles of musical order and value, and having made them fully his own can make music freely. There is really no other way to learn music: the only alternatives are to do it fast and well, or to do is slowly and badly.

We have thus already at our disposal a persuasive model of what makes an art possible. A child, exposed to poetry at school, learns from existing poetry not only that poetry is possible, but what possibilities are known to be open to poetry. A child who becomes a poet does so by making the possibility of poetry his own, and making some part of the range of specific possibilities his own; then, as he matures, he extrapolates and interpolates with increasing sureness and boldness new possibilities that are his alone. Moreover, once this pattern of mastery, exploitation, and origination is grasped, new arts can be created on the model of old arts, as has happened with film. It is even possible, as recent decades have shown, to take the extrapolation one stage further; to envisage the idea of art in general, and become the artist of no particular art. But that is another story.

Art, then, is possible as language was possible. There is no language without languages, no art without arts, and no expression without one or the other of these. Tradition is not the enemy of originality; rather, without tradition originality cannot be differentiated from random trifling. In fact, the very idea of originality requires the idea of tradition: an origin requires a determinate point of origination,
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and cannot be an origin unless it admits of a definite continuation.

The model that yields this easy answer to how arts are possible also enables us to see how it is possible to practice an art. If every work of art is an entirely new and free creation, answerable to no law but its own, it is strange that most such works are produced by artists, people who make a regular practice of making them, who are committed to that practice and build their lives around it. What could such a person be undertaking to do, and how could he be sure of doing it? But now, thinking of the implications of our model, we can see that anyone who takes up the practice of an art will do so because he has some interest in that art. This interest can only take the form of an unusual susceptibility to at least some of the effects specific to that art. Either he will be more strongly affected by them or he will be able to differentiate more precisely among them, or he will simply take them more seriously, than other people. Whichever be the case, the precondition of his taking up the practice of his art is that he is a more than usually committed and adept member of the public for that art. That will hold true even if the practice of the art is hereditary in his community, for in that case he will have had the products and problems of the art thrust unavoidably on his attention from childhood. The artist, then, having first learned from others the possibilities of his art, is equipped and disposed to monitor his own performance as his own first audience. He has no need to sacrifice his integrity by striving to please his public; he need not think about them at all, because he cannot but be one of them and what satisfies him will of necessity satisfy the most discriminating connoisseurs of his art. That applies even to the artist "ahead of his time," the solitary genius like Schoenberg. The mastery of an art, as of a language or the folkways, starts from imitation of surface phenomena and proceeds through experimental extrapolation and interpolation in the light of hypotheses about the underlying rules to the mastery and introjection of the actual formative principles, and so onward through ever more recondite principles and remote analogies. Schoenberg himself insisted that his most revolutionary and least appreciated procedures were logical applications and extensions of the principles that already lay beneath traditional practices, but at such a depth beneath them that they escaped recognition. Provided, then, that the revolutionary artist can really appreciate, genuinely feel and see the rightness in, what he is doing, he can be confident that others will also be able to appreciate it, for his new principles and new taste were reached by following out the inner indications of existing principles and existing tastes, indications that were there for anyone else to see. The continuity of his new valuations with existing valuations, and hence of the value of his new work with that of accepted masterpieces, is guaranteed by the necessarily exceptional nature of his knowledge and interest, and itself guarantees that others could come to appreciate what he is doing. That remains true even if, as often happens, no one ever does come to appreciate it because no one cares to follow up the possibilities he has chosen to explore.

It must be possible to practice an art, because people do practice arts; and something like the foregoing account must be right. Any alternative either makes artistry more arbitrary than is compatible with the relative stability of artistic practices, or more rulebound than is compatible with the creativity we demand of art. None the less, there are three familiar objections to the thesis that an artist can effectively monitor his work as his own first public and critic. The first objection
Francis Sparshott points out that, since the artist already knows what he is trying to do, he cannot effectively distinguish between what he intended and what he has managed to achieve. He cannot help seeing the pattern he has built into his work, but others may not notice it because it may be confused with or overlaid by other structural features. Other aspects of the work, which the artist dismissed as negligible or did not even notice, may dominate the perception of those who do not share his preliminary bias. Since the artist can never know that this is not happening, he can never assume the position of disinterested observer or fair-minded critic.

The second objection is that an artist cannot but see in his work the outcome of the process of creating it. He must apprehend in it the vectors that brought it where it is. But spectators and critics come at the work cold, find it having the form that it has: the only processes it can embody for them are those whereby they discovered its form, and these are virtually certain to be quite unlike those by which it was built up. The work as the public knows it is not therefore accessible to the artist, who again cannot serve as a sample of his own public.

The third objection is one argued by Sartre in What Is Literature?: a novelist can never read his own novel, because the essence of reading is the free movement of the mind in the face of a story that unfolds in a way that on first reading is unforeseen and even on re-reading represents a sheer factuality that the reader did not devise and cannot control. This essential experience of confrontation is one the author cannot have; he cannot therefore be his own first reader, and must await the exercise of another’s freedom for the realization of his work.

Some theorists make much of these three objections, but they are trivial. They point to important truths, but the truths do not affect the basic position I have outlined. The first two, at least, raise merely practical difficulties. Certainly they entail that an artist may miscalculate and misjudge. And so he can, but what of that? The successful practice of an art does not require that the artist be infallible. Infallibility is not a human trait: Homer nods, Shakespeare goofs. The difficulties raised are of a sort that an artist should be aware of and try to allow for. It remains true that the work he produces belongs to an art in which he takes more than common interest and of which he has more than common knowledge. This knowledge and interest do not magically abandon him. He knows what it is to be a member of the public for a work not his own; this stance remains normal and habitual for him, and when monitoring his own work in progress or completed it will be the stance most natural for him to adopt. Of course he has a special bias which he needs to discount. But this bias is not more severe, but only more systematic, than those which threaten the perceptiveness and impartiality of critics and public, each of whom remains in the face of the work the quirky individual he inevitably is.

The third objection, the one I raised in the name of Sartre, is of a different order. It purports to be not a psychological problem but a difficulty in principle; that the experience of the public is essentially that of one who is not the artist, but whose freedom confronts the effect of another’s freedom as something fixed and alien which he must incorporate into his own life as he incorporates other matters of fact. But Sartre himself soon came to see that the difficulty was illusory. What I have done myself becomes, as part of past reality, no less and no more alien to me than to anyone else. Once again, all we have really to take into account is the
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artist's need to establish a little distance between himself and his work, to imagine and anticipate as best he can the separateness that time will in the end achieve.

A much more radical critique of our standard explanation of how it is possible to combine integrity with reliability and accessibility and thus to practice an art was mounted 50 years ago by C. J Ducasse. He rejected the whole model out of hand. The model supposes that, when an artist learns his art by studying the works of others, what he learns is a repertoire of methods for achieving a range of effects, within and beyond which he develops his own methods and effects. But this, says Ducasse, is not what we think of as art at all. It is mere technique. Art as we understand it is not manipulation but expression. What existing art confronts a budding artist with is successful expressions of experiences, and what he learns from them is the possibility of expressing oneself in an art. The works of others were not made for him but for their own sakes, as achieved expressions of their artists' visions, and his interest in art amounts to a developed appreciation of such achievements. He cannot, then, consistently assess his own work as member of the public, for he must know that works of art are not made for publics. As artist, the criterion by which he monitors his own success is fidelity; whether what he has done answers precisely to what he had in mind to express--or rather, since a work grows in the mind as one makes it, whether it exactly expresses what in the process of creation he has come to have in mind to express. The question he asks of his work as an artist is not whether it will satisfy a public, or whether it is beautiful or a good piece of work, but always: Is this just what I meant, and mean. Is it exactly right?

But the criterion of rightness, the only one by which an artist as such can judge his work not only makes neither direct nor indirect reference to the perceptions of a possible public, but is one that no one other than the artist either can or should apply. They should not apply it, because whether the work is what the artist meant is something that concerns only the artist himself and his mother; and they cannot apply it because they have no other appropriate source of information about what the work was meant to express than the perceptible properties of the work itself. Public and critics, thus cut off from the only relevant criterion for judging and appreciating works of art, rightly go by whatever criteria they please: their own enjoyment, conventional canons of beauty, political orthodoxy, or whatever else comes to mind.

Ducasse's position, like many philosophical positions, is at the same time irrefutable and preposterous. It is preposterous because the situation he describes is one in which artists use one criterion of success and critics and public have indefinitely many other criteria of success, criteria which have nothing in common except that the artist's criterion cannot be one of them. Yet Ducasse does not and cannot deny that the public is the public for the art and the critics are critics of the art; he cannot deny that, because the very notions of a public and of a critic require it. Nor can he deny that artists spend much of their lives in the service of an art for which there is a public and of which there are critics. How could this intimate symbiosis occur, if the two sets of standards are related only by being mutually exclusive? Ducasse does not explain. In fact, he seldom shows himself aware that such a symbiosis exists. Usually, he mentions artists only to complain that they know nothing about art, being preoccupied with irrelevant matters like technique.
A true work of art is most likely to be produced by a novice and appreciated by an ignoramus. Ducasse does not say that in so many words, but it is in fact what he argues, and it is the only position he can consistently take.

It is easy for us to see what has gone wrong with Ducasse's argument, and how it is to be put right, because in stating his position I falsified it by supplying the required answer to a question he never thinks of asking: namely, how does a naive person who produces a work of art acquire the idea of art in the first place, and what is the idea he acquires? The appropriate answer for Ducasse has to be the one I put into his mouth: that the novice finds himself in a world in which people are expressing feelings and thoughts, and picks up from them the notion that expressing feelings and thoughts are things a person can do. But if that is so, Ducasse is quite wrong in saying that critics and the public are cut off from the only appropriate sort of standard for assessing art. He has to be wrong, or his readers would be unable to understand what he is saying. To understand him, we have to know in general terms what it is for an idea or a feeling to be expressed, and it is this knowledge that supplies the appropriate standard for appreciating art. Ducasse is right to say that we cannot know and should not care whether what an artist expresses is what he wanted to express; but that by no means prevents us from telling whether something has been given adequate expression. The solidarity of artist and public is sufficiently secured, on Ducasse's terms, if the common humanity of artist and audience assures that what is especially meaningful for the one could be especially meaningful for the others. From there one can proceed in various directions, and theorists both before and after Ducasse have done so.

Meanwhile, however one works out the details, enough of our original model is back in place. We never said that an artist sets out to please his public, only that his own satisfaction in his work was sufficient guarantee that it was such that satisfaction could be taken in it. And now we can say in Ducasse's name, though against his intention and indeed over his long-dead body, that an artist's recognition that what he has done is exactly right in the light of his own vision is sufficient guarantee that there is a possible vision in the light of which a certain rightness has been attained. And we may add that the achieving of any sort of humanly recognizable rightness is no light matter. Art depends on and exploits the fact that human beings can, in virtue of their humanity, come to understand each other, though they can misunderstand each other too.

If the foregoing analysis is correct, Ducasse's objection after all poses no serious threat to our preferred model of how an art and its practice are possible. The work an artist produces is after all the same for him as for his public, materially accessible to both in the same way and ideally the same perceptible object for both. But there is one kind of case in which that does not hold. The dance that a dancer performs before an audience is a work of art that consists of the visible pattern the dancer's body makes, together with the meanings that are carried by those visible postures and movements. The members of the audience do not, of course, all have the same visual experience, for they see the dancer from different angles and distances. But visible objects are always seen from some specific angle; our visible world is one in which unvarying objects appear in varying conditions. So there is no problem in saying that all members of the audience see the same dance as well as the same dancer, even if not all see it in the same way or equally well. But the dancer does...
not see his body at all, unless quite incidentally the dance calls for bits of it to come into his field of vision. So the dancer cannot see his dance: his work of art is not accessible to him as it is to his audience. So he cannot be his own first audience. The general answer we offered to the question how it is possible to practice an art, namely that the artist's awareness of his own work is a sufficiently reliable guarantee of what an audience's awareness could be, simply does not apply to dancers. Either our account was wrong after all, or dancers cannot be practicing an art in the same way that other artists do. Which are we to say?

Sooner or later, obviously, such an inquiry will have to be pursued by asking a lot of dancers, of different kinds and at different stages of their careers, what they do and how they do it. But first we may think about the question for ourselves, if only to figure out just what questions we need to ask. Dancers as such are not theorists, and statements they volunteer about their professional activities are unlikely to perform effectively the function of responsible analysis.

Someone who is learning ballet or one of the other classical schools of dance is shown by the ballet-master the basic movements and positions of the body and its parts, and drilled and corrected until he gets them right. Presumably his body retains the feel of a movement so that he can repeat it reliably, in the way that we all learn to make any bodily movement. Presumably, too, like a pianist who acquires the ability to play unfamiliar music by generalizing his ability to play specific pieces and by applying such verbal precepts as may be intelligible and appropriate at the stage he has reached in his training, a dancer passes through successive stages at which he can perform with artistic success ever wider ranges of new dances, simply because what will look right has now come to feel right for him. And he will depend a great deal on mirrors, discovering for himself what looks right and how it feels when it is done. So, we may say, one learns to dance as one learns to do anything else. In all such learning, one comes to know what the effect of an action will be. In driving a car, for instance, one's movements are guided by feedback from the effect of the movements one has just made and is continuing to make; but in an important way that feedback is always too late. One cannot drive by making mistakes and then correcting them, because by then the accident will have happened. What guides one has to be knowledge of what the effect of one's present action is going to be. Still more obviously, a person shooting at a target corrects his aim by noting the effect of the shot he has just fired, but has to be guided immediately by a sense of where the shot he is now firing will hit. The function of the feedback is to make this anticipatory conviction more reliable. And so, one supposes, the dancer dances by an immediate feeling for what the effect of his dancing will be--just as the visual artist, in the case we began with, makes his drawing in the light of his feel for what drawings are and should be, but is immediately guided by a sense of the rightness of the line he is now drawing.

There is, however, one crucial difference between dancing and these other skills. The car driver, though sustained by faith in the movements he makes from moment to moment, is acting in the light of a continuing context of action and situation of which he is directly aware and in terms of which the success of his performance is appropriately assessed. So too with the marksman, and even with the draftsman, who, though he draws each line with unerring spontaneity, is all the time engaged in making a drawing, the whole of which he sees as he adds to it and corrects it. The
developing work of art is present to him as a visible thing, in the perceptual mode in which the completed drawing will be present to its public. But that can never be true of the dancer. Even if the dancer is working before a mirror, his image will be only fitfully present to him unless, as can seldom be the case, the dance itself demands of him a fixed gaze. Normally, he must work as it were in the dark, like a photographer who cannot see what he has done till the film is developed. A dancer can use the eyes of colleagues and teachers to supplement his own, and he can make videotapes in the light of which he can make changes. But what he can never do is use as immediate guide in the creation of his dance the continuing awareness of his work in the very perceptual mode for which it was created: that is, to be seen as a body in movement. His awareness of his dancing must be in another mode. What that other mode could be is a question I will turn to in about five minutes. But before we get on to that there are a couple of things to note about the other arts.

First, we should note that the “other mode” in which the dance is accessible to the dancer has an approximate counterpart in something we mentioned when dealing with objections to the model we began with, namely, the visual artist’s privileged knowledge of the operations of his art, the tactile sense of making the artifact and the sense of labor in invention, neither of which the public can share. The draftsman, I said, does have this sense, but he also has direct visual access to the relevant appearance of his work as the public views it. To say that a dancer’s experience of his work is different in kind from the experience these other artists have of theirs is therefore slightly misleading. It is rather that of the two kinds of experience they have he has only one directly, and the other only indirectly and partially through the use of mirrors and recording devices.

The other comment to be made here on the relation between dance and other arts is that the artist’s lack of direct and appropriate access to his work seems to be a feature common to the performing arts. One never hears one’s own voice as it sounds to others, as a few minutes with a tape recorder suffice to show; we must therefore insist that a singer cannot have direct access to the song he sings, as an audience hears it. Again, an instrumentalist in a large orchestra can seldom hear anything like what the audience hears; the balance is lost from where he sits. Yet again, an actor in a play has only limited and distorted access to the performance he takes part in, being the wrong side of the lights, and cannot observe his own performance in it.

These three cases are rather unlike each other. The instrumentalist in the orchestra is not an artist at all in the special sense we are considering here, for he does not function autonomously. His action is not guided by his own creativity but by the score and the conductor’s interpretation. Spontaneous creation by groups of musicians is confined to ensembles small enough for each member to respond to what he and each of the others are doing as individuals. The second case, that of the singer who cannot hear what others hear from him, is quite different. Though his voice as he hears it is transmitted through his headbones, he does hear it, and the variations in what he hears answer to variations in what others hear. So the difference between what he hears of himself and what others hear from him is not that important. He can in a way hear and be guided by his own singing, and his case is not significantly different from that of a painter whose studio lighting is not quite the same as that in the gallery or other building in which his painting is to be.
housed. The singer's access to his work is direct and appropriate, though imperfect.

The third case, that of the actor, is complex, and is closer to that of the dancer. An actor does have the responsibility of creating his character through a performance that forms a real artistic entity within the wider work of art that is the entire play, and this entity is inaccessible to him in just the way that in ordinary life we have no direct awareness of the impression we are making. But the actor can after all hear his own voice, with the same sort of limitations that affect the singer; and Stanislavsky based his technique as director and teacher of actors on the thesis that to concentrate on one's own performance is not the way to succeed. On the contrary, once an actor has mastered the basic means of projecting his voice and gestures, and thus as it were acquired the habit of living perceptibly, his voice and motions will automatically take on the required characteristics if he imagines with sufficient conviction and detail the situation in which he is supposed to be. This should work, because the actor's task is to impart to his speech and movements more legible forms of just those characters from which in everyday life people recognize each others' natures, intentions, feelings, and meanings. His performance need not be accessible to him, because what he is called on to do is less to build something than to live it out. His creation of his part is less like the creation of some such work of art as a painting than it is like the crafty performance of an act of motor skill, like driving in an automobile race. The idea of the character he is to be, and of his part as a whole, must be present to him as a guiding idea, as the racing driver must drive in the light of his notion of how the race is to be won, but not in any way that calls for the role in its entirety to be present. He just has to remember who he is being.

Of course, Stanislavsky's method of acting is not the only one. Another school of acting does think in terms of building up a part from component gestures and bits of business, as it were externally. No doubt what most actors do is a bit of both; aestheticians of the theater have had a lot to say about the different significances of the two extremes of method, and we cannot go into that here. What matters to us is that nothing like Stanislavsky's method is available for most dancers, because the parts of dances are not the parts of natural actions. To avoid confusion, we should perhaps add that non-naturalistic forms of acting do not admit of a Stanislavskian approach and do approximate to dance; and in so far as a dance is such that its parts do approach the condition of parts of natural actions as such, that dance belongs to the form of mime that is not a form of dance but is opposed to dance.

We may sum up the effect of our digression by saying that, even if the predicament of the work's inaccessibility to the artist is to some extent common to all the performing arts, it is the dancer who suffers from it most clearly. So now let us resume our main argument where we left off and ask: how can the dancer know his dance?

If we stipulate that every work of art properly so called is a creation that is both autonomous and consciously controlled, that control cannot be exercised through a set of rules previously formulated, for that would violate the requirement of autonomy. The work itself in its successive stages of completion must be accessible so that its rightness can be directly monitored. But a dancer cannot perceive, and hence cannot check himself by, the visible dance he is dancing. It follows that if a
dance is to meet the stipulated requirements for a work of art it must be accessible to the dancer, but in some other cognitive mode. And this other mode will presumably be like the knowledge we have of all the actions we consciously perform, but shorn of the usual feedback from the ongoing effect of the action in its context.

In asking what form the dancer’s knowledge of his dance can take, there are three questions we could be asking. One is the psychological question, what form the awareness of one’s own movements and postures actually does take, the nature and reliability of proprioception. Second is the phenomenological question, what the dancer as a matter of lived experience is aware of when it is his dance as dance of which he is aware. This question, unlike the psychological one, calls for isolation of the experiential essence of dance; the science of psychology knows nothing of such essences. And third is a question couched in the mode of a more traditional philosophy: what awareness of his dance could a dancer have, that might make it possible for his dance to be a work of art, as art is generally understood? The first of these questions is for experimental psychologists to investigate; the second requires that one be trained both as a dancer and as a phenomenologist. The third is the question that concerns us now.

In what cognitive mode could a dancer have relevant access to his dance as he dances it? The likely possibilities are that his access, since it cannot be both visual and perceptual as the audience’s access is, should be perceptual but not visual, or that it should be visual but not perceptual; that it should be neither visual nor perceptual is not the kind of possibility I am going to consider unless I really have to.

The possibility that a dancer’s knowledge of his dance be perceptual but not visual is plausibly fulfilled if and only if his knowledge is kinaesthetic—that is, if his dance is available to him through direct awareness of the feeling of his body in motion. His dance as a whole would then be available to him through kinaesthetic imagination, as a sort of potential inward Gestalt. The suggestion that this is so has been very popular. The possibility is currently being examined by Prof. Sheets-Johnstone of Temple University; it would be improper for me to try to summarize her research before publication, whether I got it right or wrong. But I will make four points now. First, if the dance exists for the dancer as a kinaesthetic work, then its structural principles and its aesthetic criteria must be kinaesthetic. But the dance for its proper audience is articulated not kinaesthetically but visually, and its appropriate criteria are in the first instance visual and in the second instance expressive. It is too much to expect that every satisfactory kinaesthetic work should correspond to a satisfactory visual work; and, if it did, it is hard to see that there is any relevant sense in which the two works could be called “the same.” It is absurd to suggest, as some theorists suggested at the turn of the century in the so-called theory of empathy (Einfühlung), that our visual appreciation of a dance is based on the projection onto the dancer of a sympathetic sense in our own bodies of the dancer’s inner awareness of his body, for, as the corpulent Wolfgang Koehler complained, most of us would be quite unable to perform most of the movements a dancer makes and would be in agony if we performed the rest.

The second point is that a dancer’s awareness of his body must include consciousness of effort, strain, fatigue, and pain—effort and pain often incurred
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with the express aim of appearing to soar and float in weightless ecstasy. The viewer who is primarily aware of what the dancer is going through is missing the point of the dance, even if ignorance of what the dancer is going through debarres him from appreciating the dancer's achievement. If it is said that only part of a dancer's kinaesthetic experience constitutes his knowledge of his dance, our reply must be that this part is distinguished from the rest not by any specifically kinaesthetic features but by its relevance to the visual aspect of the dancer's movements.

The third point, an important one for which I am indebted to Prof. Sheets-Johnstone, is that the kinaesthetic body as perceived has no perspectival aspect, and therefore cannot afford an effective analog to the spatial articulation of the dancing body and cannot be an alternative means of access to the dance into terms of which the seen dance could be translated. And the fourth point, which again I owe to Sheets-Johnstone, is that we have no actual descriptions of dances in kinaesthetic terms; dancers and others who purport to describe their own relevant bodily feelings invariably do so in terms that are primarily visual. What passes for description of inner feelings and the imagination of such feeling is really, in every case, a description of the dancer's body-image. When we add to this the consideration that dance movements and positions are taught and learned visually, we may conclude that there is nothing to be said for the thesis that a dancer's dance is available to him through proprioceptive perception and imagination; rather, we shall take the view that the dancer's inner sense of his bodily posture and movement serves as information about something the meaning of which is fundamentally visual.

The other possibility we advanced was that the dancer's proper access to his dance is visual but not perceptual. That is, the dance is available as a visual idea. A trained dancer, it may be said, does not have to see himself, any more than Beethoven had to be able to hear the music he composed and, I suppose, played in his deafness. The training of a dancer's body trains his perception as well, and the training of his perception in turn develops his visual imagination to the point where he can reliably envisage his appearance. It is certainly possible that that should be the case. It may not be much use asking a dancer whether it is the case, because if we are not ourselves dancers we are unlikely to understand his answer. At least, in an analogous case, when musicians tell me that when reading an unfamiliar orchestral score they can effectively hear how the music would sound, I do not know quite what they are telling me, and in my innocence of such experience I do not know what questions I could ask that would make the matter plain to me.

No doubt different dancers have different sorts of imagination, because that is what we find in other fields. Whatever the facts of the dancer's imagination may be, though, questions remain. The cognitive relevance of different modes of imagination and different kinds of imaging remains, after much painstaking inquiry, a baffling question. If a dancer really has a visual image of his body, we may ask, from what angle and what distance does he imagine himself? One hardly sees how there could be a definite answer to that question; but, if there is not, it is hard to see how the image he has could be visual in character. Again we may ask, does a dancer's image of his body reliably answer to the way his body really appears, from any angle? If not, what it affords is not information but illusion. Even if his image does answer to the way his body really appears, it will be no help unless he can
know that it does so. But he can only know that it does so if he has some other reliable means of access to the way his body looks: and, if he has that, his image is not necessary. Perhaps what his bodily feeling affords him is a general confidence that he looks right, a confidence which he can at any time realize in a specific image of how he looks from any distance or any angle, but need not.

In any case, however, the analogy we suggested between the unseeing dancer and the deaf composer fails. Beethoven, like many composers who are not deaf, composes in his head or on paper. He has no need to play his composition out on the piano: and, if he did, his playing would be relevant only in so far as it was audible to him in the same way that it would be audible to anyone else. Thus, the real analog of the composer is not the dancer but the choreographer. And as soon as I say that, it becomes clear that throughout this talk I have really been considering a very special case, that of someone spontaneously creating the dance he is dancing, by dancing it. Quite different are the situations of, on the one hand, a member of the corps de ballet whose task is to perform precisely and in unison with others the movements he has been taught, and, on the other hand, a choreographer working out a dance by trying out steps for himself and trying them on others, in a process to which it is quite incidental whether his own body is one of those he uses. The case of the merely executant dancer, like that of the orchestral player we considered earlier, is not an example of art in the special sense that alone concerns us here; and the case of the choreographer does not raise the problem of the artist’s perception of his work, because what he is doing is having the dancers come to perform just those movements the audience will see in the completed dance. The only problematic case, it seems, is that of the solitary dancer creating a dance which is to have the status of a work of art, but which no one will ever see. In the heroic days of modern dance, the pioneers devoted themselves to their new art for which there was no audience, laboring to perfect dances without regard to the possibility of anyone seeing them. What is one to say of such people? One could argue that they are beguiled by the idea of “art for art’s sake”, their inner motivation derived from their self-image as devoted artist rather than from any strictly artistic satisfaction to be found in the dance as experienced. But one need not. To envisage clearly the possibility of a work of art is in a sense already to have created it; to dance unseen is to achieve something that has choreographic meaning, and to have rehearsed a possible dance, even if on reflection we should have to deny that the dance dance as dance has not yet been fully achieved in any appropriate medium.

What does seem to follow from what we have said is that to improvise a dance in solitude can only have the status of preparation, or rehearsal, or testimony, or reassurance: that to take aesthetic satisfaction in dancing for oneself alone involves some self-deception. But then, so do many popular activities. It may be because of this wide difference between the performer’s access and the audience’s access to the dance that solitary dancing figures in popular mythologies as a symbol of relations between the human and the divine. On the one hand, we have the jongleur de Dieu, the mute acrobat dancing at night before the altar in the deserted church; on the other hand we have the God who creates the universe by dancing it into existence, as among the Dogon of Mali God’s son the Jackal, wearing the fibre skirt imbued with the first word revealed by his father, dances out the world and its future. In this latter case it is precisely the discrepancy between the inner access to the
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meaning and the outer evidence of the movement that symbolizes the ontological gap between two levels of reality, between the essential world gods know and the existential world they create.

What, finally, has become of our initial question? It certainly appears that the idea of an art as a kind of activity which the artist can practice successfully because his own appreciation of his work is homogeneous with and reliably predicts the appreciation of others is somewhat shaky when applied to the performing arts, and shakiest of all in spontaneously creative dance. But no clear-cut alternative suggests itself. Perhaps the truth is that no general account is possible: that in different arts different relations between artist's experience and public's experience are possible, and that different artists are differently guided by what they can know of what they are doing and of what they are doing and of what others can know of that. It is, after all, preeminently true of living things and of human beings in particular that they are resourceful in meeting similar predicaments in a variety of ways. Artists and publics know of each other that they are human, and they may also have a general notion of what a given art is all about. Within those large understandings there is ample room to maneuver.

NOTES

1 Ducasse's position must be based on the supposition that every percept is the adequate expression of something or other, so that sheer expressiveness as such cannot serve as a criterion. He does not argue for this position, however, or even state it. To assess its merits would require a very elaborate discussion.

2 The reference in the text to "two kinds of experience" is a gross oversimplification, running together an undetermined number of ways in which a person can have knowledge of what he is doing in doing it. But the simplification does not affect the argument in any way: what is relevant is that the dancer differs from others by lacking something crucial that they have. The argument in the text is also misleading in that it implies that different kinds of experience coexist in the mind as different birds coexist in the bush. Presumably all realistic accounts of experience are holistic. But, once one has made that point, there is nothing to be done about it.