

## BLACK BUTTERFLIES

SADAKICHI HARTMANN

**B**LACK butterflies against a gold brocade background. This will serve as a symbol of the art of dancing as well as any other.

It is the image which two Russian dancers (during a rehearsal in a *pas de deux*, both performers dressed in black gymnasium suits) suggested to me by their special choregraphic faculties—a combination of the old and new, richer in actual dance forms than Isadora Duncan's style, yet applying the same wilful method of interpretation.

For what is dancing but a scripture of corporeal forms against space, of blurred ever-changing silhouettes against some unobtrusive scenery, and within these contours a rhythmic display of lines, shapes and colors?

The old ballet was calligraphic, obeying certain set formulæ and canons of beauty: the modern dance resembles individual handwriting, which is wilful and impressionistic. Whether one can be considered more beautiful than the other is a matter of taste. Toe-dancing of the Beauchamp-Noverre tradition (which had so many illustrious exponents), with its *battements*, *Camargo entrechats* and *pirouettes à quatre tours*, is surely more difficult to execute than mere improvisation, and possesses its own charm of grace and artifice, even to silk tights and ballet skirts, in no way less æsthetic than the nude legs of the Russian dancers. The loyal votaries of La Scala, perhaps, depend more on skill than temperament; the modern dancers more on temperament than skill. The latter have invented a new code of natural movements, of steps and alluring sways of limb and body, derived from classic examples, paintings, statuary, Delsartean studies and reminiscences of national, historical and religious dances. Their movements are more plastic, less academic and acrobatic, but deprived of set forms not necessarily more expressive. If at a certain climax the toe dancer, standing on the toes of one leg, spins three times around herself, the modern dancer unable to compete with this skill can produce a

comparative effect only by increased velocity or the introduction of some dramatic expression. The one advantage dancing has gained by the innovation is a greater independence; it is no longer a mere accessory to operas, to Eden and Alhambra shows, but a performance *per se*. To fill an entire evening's entertainment with the terpsichorean endeavors of one dancer is a recital-privilege of the day (if such it is).

And what rules nowadays this excessive agility of the body? How is this confusion of visual appearances governed?

By letting the sounds of music flow through the body and by improvising in action what each bar suggests. Absorb the sounds, and motion will take care of itself. That is the new problem. To dance means to be light of foot, to have complete control over torso and limbs, to express grace and fluency of motion, to portray elemental emotions, to scatter garlands and nosegays of sentiment into space with the gestures of hands and arms, with the swing and thrust of feet and knees, and the undulations of the body. The dance measure sets the body free: the tempo determines the rapidity of motion, the rhythm controls the sway of action, the melody forces out the sentiment, and the accompaniment figures suggest the detail-embellishment. Variety of movements is the soul of this style of interpretation, and to use the same gestures in Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* as in the *Blue Danube Valtz* (as some dancers do) is an incongruity that only an ignorant public can excuse.

The themes of the modern school are rich in artistic association, poetic, scenic, musical, even philosophical. I fear, however, that the modern Taglionis and Elsslers take their art a trifle too seriously.

Vestris, the great dancing master of Louis XV, said that "a dancer must be virtuous." This is true only in so far as all arts are supposed to be above the purely sensual, i. e., they should have nothing in common with the vulgarities and monotones of life. What an artist in his private life does, or leaves undone, should not influence the public's estimate of his art. Few arts depend so much on experience as dancing, and it is physical experience, or rather the memory of experiences transferred to physical

movement. Herod's erotic acrobatics must necessarily be the result of erotic imagination and adventure.

Dancing is the most fleeting of all arts. It is like perfume, fugitive like the odor of fading roses, unsteady like words of love that youth whispers into willing ears. Nothing remains. It is naught but a flash of color, a sudden movement, the twinkling of limbs, an evanescent attitude—a momentary feast for the eye. For one moment it is all motion, joy, ecstasy, delirium, thereupon merely an intangible souvenir. What do the names of Taglioni and Fanny Elssler mean to our æsthetic consciousness? With what high degree of gratification have I not seen dell' Era and Cornalba dance, and yet my word-art would yield scarcely more than a dozen adjectives and half that number of metaphors to describe those past delights. No other art is so completely dependent on momentary inspiration and influences. And in that sense—and that sense alone—every dance-figure is subtle and complex. Yet it has little to do with sober logic. When once the body has learnt to obey, when the characteristics of a dance are known, it is largely an *improvisatore tour de force*. The glance, the smile, the advance, the retreat, the triumph, make the story of a dance, and it can be told as variously as there are dancers to tell it.

For that reason dancing may easily become too intellectual. We have read of Pylades and Bathyllus, dancing legends and mythological incidents, of Vestris dancing the Cid of Corneille, and of Louis XIV appearing as the Roi Soleil in the Ballet de la Nuit. Goethe has penned for us the classic poses of Lady Hamilton. And some of us have seen Isadora Duncan essaying Omar Kháyyám, endeavoring to carry out in poses the meaning of those wine-stained and rose-scented quatrains.

All these efforts, no matter how well executed, approach pantomime. They deprive dancing of its finest essence.

Pantomime means to show, by more precise attitudes and more pronounced facial expression, human emotions, passions and aspirations in a more realistic manner than dancing. Pantomime tries to prove the superfluity of human speech, and represents the first principles of the dramatic art, for there is at times

no deeper pathos than silence. But it adds a historic element that does not help movement.

Historical and, in particular, national accuracy are desirable if introduced as mere accessories, but a too scrupulous consideration of local color, for instance in a saltarello, fandango, tirolienne or krakoviak, or historical dances like the stately sarabande and courante and the gay gaillarde and farandole, whenever it exceeds the suggestion of a mood of flavor, becomes a hindrance rather than an embellishment. Little is accomplished by reproducing Cardinal Richelieu dancing a minuet in an absurd masquerade costume at the Court of Louis XIII. And to perform an Oriental or Japanese dance accurately is almost impossible, as the Almees of Egypt and the Geishas of Japan are as rigorously trained as the ballerinas of the Paris, Berlin and Vienna opera houses.

The ballet play depicting a plot action, whether tragic, comic or allegoric (Galeotti-Delibes-Stravinsky), even if as important a composition as Beethoven's *Prometheus* and Rubinstein's *Fera-mors*, is closely related to the spectacular play where the effort is made to dazzle the eye by mass effects of motion, gorgeous costume and scenery, color and light effects. To interpret a character in a ballet, may it be Aladdin or Undine or Sardanapalus, is dramatic action and dumbshow and not dancing, although it may offer splendid opportunities for the introduction of solo dances, *pas de deux*, and manœuvres of coryphees in serried ranks.

The *Pastoral Symphony* of Beethoven, with its pictorial wealth of landscape, natural phenomena and buoyant humanity, of sunshine and gentle breezes waving across grass and grain, of the arrival of a pic-nic party bent on making merry, of dark clouds gathering in the sky, of the distress of the villagers amidst a thunderstorm, of the sun coming out again after the shower and the party resuming their festivities, would surely offer a series of fascinating stage pictures, yet only the peasant dances suggested by certain phrases in the score would constitute dancing. The remainder would represent the combined efforts of stage machinist and stage manager, and why these supers and properties, if the picture can be framed by the imaginative mind without special aid at the piano or concert hall?

The true appreciation of a relief of the human figure in motion could dispense with all accessories and scenery. In a way even the solo dancer furnishes a disturbing note. One performer is rarely perfect and entirely well formed, while the various evolutions of a corps de ballet are so blended as to confuse the eye, and in that manner offer a composite impression of beauty in which the individual disappears. The performer is forgotten in the art display.

And no music is more appropriate than those pieces composed in a dance measure. As soon as music becomes purely descriptive as, for instance, in the Prelude to *Rheingold*; touches upon big emotions or elemental conditions of a distinct composite type, as in Tchaikowsky's Symphonic poems; or remains purely structural like a Bach fugue,—the dancer can interpret only the influence of these tone pictures on other minds. A band of dancers can perform with ease a quadrille of Offenbach or Musard, a Brahms valtz, a Chopin mazourka or a Liszt Chromatic Gallop. They may indulge without disaster in idyllic or emotional episodes. A genius may succeed with the *Moonshine Sonata* of Beethoven, and even Saint Saens' *Danse Macabre*. But Haydn's *Creation*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Strauss's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and similar tonal deluges cannot be rendered as harmonious entities. Of course, the impossible can be attempted, but the meaning will remain obscure to the audience. Synopsized dancing would be more intolerable than synopsized music.

One can dance Hamlet as little as one can dance the howling of the wind, the sweep of the rain, the swishing of treetops against old gables, the low roar of the sea against the battlements of some Maeterlinckean castle; but one can express the vague lament over all earthly things, the terror of solitude, the excitement of passions, the irritation of moods. One cannot dance a sunset, but one can salute the parting sun, express weariness of the body, longing and sadness over his departure.

The finest expression of dancing would be without music. To dance with the blades of grass to the vagaries of the wind, to use the incoming breakers as an accompaniment for a stately *pas seul* on the seashore, to gambol in corybantic effusion in the

moonlight, to resemble black butterflies against a gold brocade background, in that lies the quintessence and the highest creative power of motion.

All our thoughts and sentiments are spirals that move upward by some mysterious power, and, transferred into sound and motion, lead us into a dreamland of the soul, where we forget. It sometimes seems to me as if dancing represented the never ending labor of nature, of the circling of the planets around the sun, the whirling of two souls around each other in search of earthly happiness, and the gyration of the soul around itself on to the final solution of atoms in limitless space.

## EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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**I**N the centre of Philadelphia, entirely surrounded by business, is a quiet library where there is an abundance of books. It is one of the old-fashioned libraries in which readers are allowed access to the shelves and where they may handle the books at their will. In it is an alcove of American poets with many hundreds of volumes. Many an hour have I spent in that alcove with some of the eagerness of a discoverer in thumbing over the volumes wondering when a page would turn to disclose a golden line.

It was not often that such came and usually the quest was wholly futile. Much verse there was that was merely pathetic or sadly ludicrous because of its ineffectiveness. Much there was that was more pretentious and facile in technique. It has been well said that the reading of mediocre poetry has its advantages in that it leaves the mind free and induces general reflections, and one impression that would imprint itself on the mind again and again in reading these volumes was that American poetry shows a greater gift of memory than of imagination, that even the better of it is largely a mosaic of familiar phrases and ideas that have done service with greater poets and now have a shop-worn air about them.

In reading genuine poetry such abstractions are impossible; the poet's words carry one along. A damp grey November afternoon when snow was in the air and dusk already falling has always remained distinct in my mind, for on it I came for the first time upon the following stanza:

“There is the western gate, Luke Havergal,  
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.  
Go,—for the winds are tearing them away,—  
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,  
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;  
But go! and if you trust her she will call.  
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—  
Luke Havergal.”