DANCE THEORY

Source Readings from Two Millennia of Western Dance

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY BY

TILDEN RUSSELL

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To Dominique
and to the memory of the four Finneman sisters:
my mother Stella, and aunts Gertrude, Rose, and Blanche

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Preface

This book began in 2014 as an introduction to the book I was then writing about a small group of dance theorists—five Germans and an Englishman—and their treatises published between 1703 and 1721: obviously a very narrow conspectus in subject and years.[1] The aim of the introduction was to place these largely ignored writers (especially the Germans) in a broad historical context that would demonstrate how essential and pivotal they were. As I read further in dance theory, I found more and more sources on the subject that turned out to be far more interesting and complex than I had originally imagined. The introduction kept getting longer, until it became an albatross on the book's actual text, not only because of its ever-increasing length, but more gravely, because I had assumed it would trace a teleological ascent in dance theory culminating in my authors and their works, followed by a degenerative aftermath. This tendentious viewpoint threatened not only to deter readers from a sympathetic reading of the book as a whole; it turned out, the more I read and learned, to be simply wrong.

The history of dance theory, as I gradually came to realize, is too interesting and important to be exploited for spurious purposes. Also, it's an untold story. Dance historians are familiar with many or most of the authors and titles, but not what they have to say about dance theory. That's the part usually at the beginning of books that is skimmed through in order to get to the more urgent preoccupations of historical dancers and dance historians: performance practice, reconstruction, technique, and repertoire. Viewed superficially, moreover, it can seem as if the same self-evident and obligatory themes keep getting repeated like clichés in these sections under the general rubric of theory: a definition of dance and/or dance theory, or at least a list of their basic components; the relation of dance to the other arts and other areas of knowledge; dance's origin and history; and its utility (i.e., health, social conduct and success, recreation).

Finally, and contrary to what I had long believed, dance theory is not dead. In fact, it is thriving in the twenty-first century. Yes, I was fully aware that

something called dance theory was being copiously written and talked about, and that "theory" and "theorizing" and "theorist" had become wildly ubiquitous in dance scholars' lexicon, but I believed that what they were talking about was no genuine dance theory, had no kinship with what was historically accepted as dance theory, and did not meet the criteria of what a theory should be. I was convinced that what I considered dance theory had been swept away in the iconoclastic, irreverent, and nonconformist spirit of postmodernism. Luckily, early readers tactfully convinced me to address my folly. As I wrote, I learned. Writing this book has already served as a textbook in my own learning experience.

There are some excellent compilations of readings in dance history. The common format is to devote each chapter to a historical period, with an introductory essay followed by relevant readings. The number of readings tends to increase as history marches on, peaking in the nineteenth century. A sampling of such compilations follows. Each book differs from this one in different ways, but in general, and by intent, none of them does everything this book sets out to do: treat theory in depth and as a discrete topic; treat theatrical and social dance equally; include readings dating from classical Antiquity to the twenty-first century; and link the readings, through brief introductory essays, from end to end by a narrative thread based on salient topics as seen from evolving perspectives.

Selma Jeanne Cohen's *Dance as a Theatre Art: Source Readings in Dance History from 1581 to the Present* is the classic scholarly compilation.[2] It was designed for use in college dance history classes, for which no such textbook yet existed, and is still useful and relevant. It includes twenty-seven readings, from the Renaissance to Meredith Monk. While Cohen pays some attention to dance theory, composition, and criticism, her principal focus, as indicated in the title, is on theatrical dance performance.

Five compilations published between the 1980s and now exemplify the different target audiences, time frames, and thematic emphases of the present book's more recent predecessors.[3] Jack Anderson's reader is intended for "students and inquisitive dancegoers" (p. xii); the time frame is from Homer to Pina Bausch (d. 2009); and the emphasis is on theatrical dance, classical ballet, and modern dance performance. Elizabeth Aldrich's entertaining reader aims at a general audience; her content is limited to "ballroom dance in the United States during the 1800s, with an emphasis on the Northern states" (xviii). Allison Thompson's intended audience is both scholarly and generalist; her time frame is ca. 1600 to the mid-twentieth century; and her focus is on social dance, with readings taken mostly from nondance, literary sources. Maureen Needham focuses mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries and predominantly on vernacular dance as practiced in different social contexts and cultures in the United States; only her section on modern dance deals with dance as a creative, high-culture, artistic endeavor. Marie-Joëlle Louison-Lassabliere's sources come from a period of approximately two and a half centuries; they are all of French origin, written in Latin and French; they represent many genres: treatises, dictionaries, histories, drama, poetry, and memoirs, and they are not presented in strictly chronological order.

Two other books—neither of them selections of readings—have been especially inspirational to me in the conception of this book.

Vom "Affect" zur "Action", by Stephanie Schroedter, is the first study to present the early eighteenth-century French, German, and English theoretical sources in their proper historical and intellectual context.[4] Though not a book of readings, its generous and lengthy quotations could easily have been collected as such, had the author not provided such a wealth of history, commentary, and insight within which to situate them.

Gustave Reese's *Fourscore Classics of Music Literature* is really just a ninety-one-page booklet in a category quite different from the preceding titles.[5] Its topic is music, not dance, and it contains "thumbnail sketches" (about one per page), not readings. Its subtitle sums up its focus and format: "A Guide to Selected Original Sources on Theory and Other Writings on Music Not Available in English, with Descriptive Sketches and Bibliographical References." As a work devoted to the history of music theory, it provided me with an intellectual template for a similar approach to dance theory.

Like Cohen's *Dance as a Theatre Art,* Reese's book is written for advanced college students—graduate musicology students, in his case. Reese describes eighty works dating from Greek antiquity to 1927. With the exception of four sources in a chapter on "Islam and the Orient," all the works are European in origin and are described in chronological order. Aside from very brief and general introductory statements, there is no narrative thread connecting one source to another. In inverse relation to the collections of dance readings, the number of sources diminish as they approach the nineteenth century, with only eight sources after 1800; the reason is not that there were fewer sources, but that the number of sources written in or translated into English has radically increased in the last two hundred years.

In sheer numbers, *Fourscore Classics* hints at the wealth of music-theoretical sources, especially considering how many hundreds or thousands of additional sources had to be excluded by Reese's criteria. It is easy to deduce that music theory's historical development benefited from continuous dialogue and the steady accretion of knowledge—an observation highly pertinent to the work that follows.

NOTES

1. Tilden Russell, *Theory and Practice in Eighteenth-Century Dance: The German-French Connection,* Studies in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2017).
2. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.
3. Jack Anderson, *Ballet & Modern Dance: A Concise History,* 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1992 [1st ed. 1986]); Elizabeth Aldrich, *From the Ballroom to Hell: Grace and Folly in Nineteenth-Century Dance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991); Allison Thompson, *Dancing Through Time: Western Social Dance in Literature, 1400–1918: Selections* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998); *I See America Dancing: Selected Readings, 1685–2000,* ed. Maureen Needham (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Marie-Joëlle Louison-Lassabliere, *Feuillets pour Terpsichore: La danse par les textes du XV^e^ au XVII^e^ siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).
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I deeply appreciate the trenchant and sensitive comments of my anonymous readers, who allowed me to see the book as others will see it, and to reflect in time on how to improve it.

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Introduction
Dance Theory as a Problem in Dance History

. . . the Muse who has assumed everything rejected by the higher Muses of philosophy and art, everything unfounded in truth, everything which is merely contingent but which also reveals other laws: the Muse of history!

—Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive* (trans. Peter Collier [London: Penguin Books, 2003]), 640

In 1852, dancer, choreographer, and theorist Arthur Saint-Léon envisioned a dance theory that would be "indestructible, immutable, respected like laws."[1] Seldom if ever in the dance world has a more futile wish been uttered. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, as this is being written, the concept of dance theory is more elusive than ever. There is no article titled "dance theory" in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance,* a valuable and authoritative scholarly source in the field of dance studies, and the first and still only publication of its kind in our time.[2] A full-length history of dance theory as a discrete subject, from Plato to the present, has yet to be written.

Dance theory does have a history, albeit disjunct and short of memory because the writers in every age theorized prescriptively, according to their own needs and ideals. It is hard to detect a continuous discursive tradition between sources through commentary, translation, innovation, and refutation. Brilliant episodes found few successors to build upon and surpass their achievements. Moreover, a definitive break in dance-theory discourse occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when, thanks chiefly to the ideas of Jean-Georges Noverre, dance theory underwent a complete U-turn in terms of its ideals, fundamental principles, and goals. The situation around 1870 is eloquently lamented by G. Léopold Adice:

> Sadly, traditions lacking a methodology are soon lost, and an art such as ours that moves forward randomly, deprived of a method and theory, and abandoned to caprice, can only fall into ruin, the sad results of which are already evident.[3]

Indeed, like a *Leitmotif* recurring in every century since the sixteenth, theorists have continually asserted the lack of any pre-existing dance theory.[4]

There is a broad spectrum of definitions of the word *theory* and its cognate words. The Greek root has to do with observation or contemplation. In modern English, the most casual usage can express illogic, improbability, guesswork—"Theoretically, anything can happen"—giving the impression that theory can validate anything one wants it to. Science demands the more methodical interpretation of starting from a plausible *hypothesis*, which at least must be proved or disproved. In this book we take a position between the original Greek definition and St.-Léon's understanding of the word: theory is an open-minded way of observing something analytically in order to grasp its essential and eternal nature. Wherever a clear distinction exists between the theory and practice of an art form, theory will deal with the constituent elements and principles common to all manifestations of that art. Music theory will serve as our model for dance theory.

Music is the art most intimately related to dance—according to legend, either by a sibling or filial relationship. Aristides Quintilianus (dated vaguely between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE) is said to be the first writer to observe the theory-practice distinction in music, in his *Peri mousikes* (or *De musica*).[5] Melody, harmony, meter, and rhythm are the basic elements of music theory. They have been the subject of numerous treatises produced continually since the early Middle Ages and have remained a constant, no matter what style of composition or notation was in use in any given period. Modern academic programs in music offer degrees in three specialized areas: music theory, music history (musicology), and performance.[6] Professional music theorists teach in graduate programs, present their research before learned organizations like the Society for Music Theory, and publish analytical studies and treatises of their own on theory topics both historical and contemporary. Few such academic, scholarly, and professional institutions have existed for dance theory.

Why did writers on dance never succeed in establishing a permanent set of elements upon which a theory could be based? Several hypotheses come to mind. Historiographically speaking, dance lacks music's compelling creation stories and founding heroes—including theorists like Pythagoras with his anvil and hammers, as well as musicians like Orpheus, King David, and Saint

Cecilia—who throughout its history have imparted a sense of tradition, purpose, and continuity. As John Weaver wrote of Pythagoras in *The Spectator* in 1712, and was quoted 120 years later by E. A. Théleur:

> By these Steps, from so mean a Beginning, did this great Man reduce, what was only before Noise, to one of the most delightful Sciences, by marrying it to the Mathematicks; and by those means caused it to be one of the most abstract and demonstrative of Siences [*sic*]. Who knows therefore but Motion, whether Decorous or Representative, may not (as it seems highly probable it may) be taken into consideration by some Person capable of reducing it into a regular Science, tho' not so demonstrative as that proceeding from Sounds, yet sufficient to entitle it to a Place among the magnify'd Arts.[7]

Weaver implies that without theory, dance cannot be considered on a par with the other "magnify'd Arts." In contrast to music, dance in Weaver's time was not yet formally recognized as belonging to the liberal arts except, at best, as music's inferior offspring. Dance's ambivalent relationship to religion—its reputation of sinfulness *versus* its various biblical justifications—also mitigated against it.

The historical discontinuity of dance theory is surely due, in part, to the various walks of life from which its writers approached it. In the course of this *Reader*, we will encounter philosophers and historians, a Jesuit scholar, encyclopedists and lexicographers, dancing masters and ballet masters, choreographers and professional dancers, anthropologists and art historians, and most recently—almost as if coming full circle—dance-studies academics obsessed with the philosophical currents *du jour*. The most crucial reason, however, may be dance's inability to develop a single, generally accepted, continuously evolving notation system in which theoretical ideas are signified and applied to practice. Musical notation, with its four basic elements in full array, is such a system.[8]

The purpose of this book is to revive and reintegrate dance theory as a field of historical dance studies, and to present a coherent reading of the interaction of theory and practice during two millennia of dance history. The first hurdle in this undertaking is to establish what sources, what ideological threads, to follow. This is not just a book about books with "theory" in the title, but it is that, too. Dance sources used the term "theory" only discontinuously and inconsistently, so a history of the term by itself will exclude much pertinent material. Indeed, in the course of this book we will meet genuine theorists who never used the word "theory," as well as writers for whom the word "theory" meant precisely its opposite: practice. Some writers merely flaunt the word in

their title to hint at a degree of intellectual profundity that is absent from their content.

If our aim is to model a working definition of dance theory on music theory's core functional principles of melody-harmony-meter-rhythm, it becomes immediately apparent that many twentieth-century discussions of dance have relied on taxonomies that theorize *about* dance but are not *of* dance, being based, rather, on standards or categories such as aesthetics, modality, and genre. By aesthetics I mean subjective standards of taste and beauty, which mutate unceasingly with the times. By modality I am referring to categories like mimetic, expressive, and formalistic dance.[9] By genre I mean theatrical, social, national, folk, religious dance, and so on. These taxonomies, according to André Levinson, are contingent and extraneous to theory, or associated with theory but not essential parts of it:

> It seems as though everyone had piled upon this art mistaken attributes or supplementary burdens in his efforts to redeem—if only in a small way—the actual movements of the dance.
>
> I cannot think of anyone who has devoted himself to those characteristics which belong exclusively to dancing, or who has endeavored to formulate specifically the laws of this art on its own ground.[10]

Dance's essential constituent is human motion, and its unique manifestation or artifact is ephemeral: a living, moving, present human body. How, then, is one to abstract its principles from one's own physical experience? "Nothing is more difficult than to reduce the essential esthetic realities of the dance to verbal formulas," Levinson writes, because it is "so peculiarly inarticulate." Practical works (manuals, choreographies, *recueils*), on the other hand, are based on "empirical laws which rule the execution of their elements."[11] They are the "how-to" books: how to make steps, how to dance current dances, and so forth. As such, they have easily cast a shadow of superfluousness over the very idea of a dance theory, and as a result, practical works have played a disproportionately large role in our modern reconstruction of the performance and ethos of early dance.

If practice is the "how" of dance, theory is the no less basic "what" and "why": what is it, and why do we do it? Historically, the earliest theoretical writing predates the earliest practical sources, and until around 1800, dance writers gave theory priority. They placed statements on dance principles and ideals at the head of their treatises, and many insisted that one cannot learn to dance without first acquiring a respectful understanding of its theory. They believed that theory consists of principles governed by rational laws; that

practice begins when works embodying these principles and laws are created; and that notation is developed from dance works as a means of pedagogy, performance, and preservation. However, by the second half of the eighteenth century the edifice was beginning to fall apart, and dance theory failed to evolve toward Saint-Léon's idealistic vision. What follows is a tale of inverted priorities, redefinition of basic terms, brand-new epistemologies, and even an ending *in medias res*, as it were, and more optimistic than I could have expected.

This is a typical book of collected readings, and as such, a history of an idea from one generation to another. The book is divided into nine chapters organized chronologically by historical era and predominant intellectual and artistic currents. Each chapter begins with an introduction, of varying length, that serves as a transition through the interstices of time, ideologies, and zeitgeist. The individual source readings that follow have their own introductions. My job as a historian was to follow the wayward path of dance theory wherever the sources led. This means that certain imbalances are inevitable; for example, Antiquity and the Middle Ages (a span of ca. 1800 years) are covered in one chapter, while the eighteenth century is spread over three. The Appendix: Table of Dance Periodization should help sort out the chronological structure of the book.

A graver issue: no women theorists before the twentieth century, a situation endemic in all the arts, but even more pronounced in dance because of its unmediated physicality. The absence of women in dance theory until the twentieth century is a by-product of a sexist mind-body dualism, according to which women should be voiceless (dumb in common parlance) and beautiful, and should let men do all the thinking. As dancers, however, women have been feted, idolized, and idealized for centuries. Classical ballet is the pinnacle of this glorification of the female form and movement; it was George Balanchine, after all, who said: "Woman is still first in ballet. Man is an attendant to a queen. He is a consort, he is noble, brilliant, but, finally merely *good enough* to be her partner. Ballet is a woman."[12] Of the pre-1900 sources included here, only two refer even glancingly to a female dancing master or teacher of dance, whereas in Chapters 8 and 9 there are nearly twice as many women theorists as men.[13]

Probably the most sensitive issue of all is the way I have organized African American dance theory readings in clusters in Chapters 8 and 9. I would very much regret if this procedure were perceived as a kind of ghettoization—it would be the opposite of my intention. I decided to cluster African American Dance Theory I because even though the readings cover a seventy-year time span, they trace the establishment of basic principles in a close, coherent sequence, the impact of which would have been lost, I felt, if the five readings

had been scattered in strict chronological order. The current placement also draws attention to the synergistic relation between African American dance movement and modernist dance as exemplified by Martha Graham. African American Dance Theory II is a small essay in its own right, covering only fourteen years and showing how this field maintains its historical roots and principles while spreading globally and embracing the theory and methodology of poststructuralism.

The readings comprise a corpus that addresses a circumscribed dance repertoire conveniently referred to as "Western" dance because it originated in the area now known as Western Europe. It remained within this area until the ages of exploration and colonization, when it gradually was exported to the Western hemisphere and began to confront—or be confronted by—native dance traditions and the dance styles brought by African slaves. Even in this period, however, the theoretical treatises were written by Europeans in Europe, who were concerned only with their own dance culture. The only real exception to this state of affairs is found in encyclopedias and other reference works, or books that aim in length and breadth at encyclopedic inclusiveness. Charles Compan, for example, has articles on "CHINOIS (Danses des)" and "KALUMET, ou CALUMET. Danse des Othagras & des Sakis, Sauvages du Canada" in his *Dictionnaire* (1787); Gottfried Taubert's *Rechtschaffener Tantzmeister* (1717), nearly 1,300 pages long, takes all the space needed to expound at leisure on the entire universe of dance knowledge.

Only in the twentieth century did "Western" dance theory begin to open up to non-Western influences. In the United States this broadening of scope was encouraged by immigration, which increased demographic diversity; by advanced study programs in anthropology, ethnology, and especially ethnomusicology; by the civil rights movement, the growth of African and African American studies programs, and, in particular, the vitality and popularity of African American dance itself; and by the interdisciplinarity, intertextuality, and global reach of twenty-first century poststructuralist dance studies. However, to understand what the dance theorists in this collection are saying, the reader requires no background in the basics of, say, Brazilian, Japanese, Ghanaian, or Hopi dance. I hope that the principles and criteria—the working definition—of dance theory adumbrated earlier and, ideally, as "immutable" as Saint-Léon wished it to be, will suffice as a standard, uniformly applicable to every reading.

Above all, my aim is to keep the story focused and connected. A weighty and costly encyclopedic tome (that will never be global enough to satisfy all tastes) is the last thing needed in a dynamic learning environment in which supplemental material is readily available for further reading, research, and discussion.

This book makes no claim to cite every source; nor does it assume an all-knowing or *ex cathedra* authority. The corpus is not a canon. Indeed, readers should not hesitate to interrogate my choices, criteria, and opinions—to say nothing of my presumptuousness as an interloper in the dance world. The book will succeed to the extent that it provides readers with a solid intellectual basis for independent critical thinking about dance theory and how it relates to experiencing dance performance.

In traversing the different eras, nationalities, mentalities, and priorities of the different authors, readers are encouraged to detect and follow a skein of connective threads that trace a coherent and, one hopes, fair narrative of the evolution of dance theory as a concept in Western culture. The way is signposted by numerous cross-references from one reading to another, going both backward and forward in time, and increasing as the book progresses. These threads include definitions of dance theory and the names and significance of its essential elements; theory's relation to practice; its relation to ethics; to humanism; to linguistic issues; to choreography, gymnastics, and pedagogy; to sciences (especially anatomy, physics, and the social sciences); to other arts (especially music and painting); and to the liberal arts.

Note: Some of the readings originally contain annotations of various sorts (footnotes, endnotes, etc.). To include these annotations in the readings would confusingly encumber the book with dual footnote systems, without adding any essential information. Therefore, all readings are transcribed without their footnotes/endnotes, etc., if present, unless otherwise indicated.

All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated. All transcriptions follow the orthography, punctuation, and accentuation of the source text.

NOTES

1. Arthur Saint-Léon, *La Sténochorégraphie* (Paris: author and Brandus & Cie., 1852), 13.
2. *International Encyclopedia of Dance,* ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen, 6 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
3. G. Léopold Adice, "Grammaire/et/Théorie chorégraphique/Composition de la gymnastique/de la danse théâtrale" (ms.: Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, cote B61(1), [1868–1871]), Gallica 311742, "Des Bras," 599: "Malheureusement les traditions sans la methode se perdent bientôt, et un art qui marche à l'aventure comme la [*sic*] notre privé de methode et de théorie et abandonnée [*sic*] au caprice, ne peut que tomber bientôt en ruine, nous en voyons déjà les tristes effets."

4. Sixteenth century: Arbeau; seventeenth century: De Lauze, Menestrier; eighteenth century: Behr, Cahusac, Noverre, Compan; nineteenth century: Blasis, Adice, Zorn; twentieth century: Laban, Levinson; twenty-first century: Foster. All these authors (except André Levinson) are represented in the readings that follow.
5. See Thomas J. Mathiesen, "Aristides Quintilianus," *Grove Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/01244?q=Aristides+Quintilianus&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#F010731, who dates the treatise most likely in the second or third century CE; also Egon Wellesz, "Musicology," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 3rd ed., ed. H. C. Colles, *Supplementary Volume* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 456.
6. Many departments have broadened their offerings in recent decades to include ethnomusicology and other areas of specialization.
7. John Weaver, *The Spectator* 334 (March 24, 1712), 60; quoted by E. A. Théleur, *Letters on Dancing* (London: Sherwood & Co., 1831; facs. ed. *Studies in Dance History* II/1 [Society of Dance History Scholars, 1990]), vii. Théleur (v) incorrectly attributes the passage to Richard Steele.
8. This explanation has been previously advanced by Fernau Hall, "Dance Notation and Choreology," *What Is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 394–395.
9. See Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds., *What Is Dance?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1–9; Noël Carroll, "Dance," *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics,* ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 583–593, misleadingly (in my view) describes as aesthetics what I call modality.
10. Levinson, "The Spirit of the Classic Dance," *Reading Dance,* ed. Robert Gottlieb (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 413. The essay originally appeared in *Theatre Arts Monthly* (March 1925).
11. Ibid., 412–413.
12. Undated quotation, from Robert Gottlieb, "Balanchine's Dream," *Vanity Fair* (December 1998), https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1998/12/george-balanchine-new-york-city-ballet-history.
13. Gottfried Taubert (Reading 4.3) states that there were *Tantzmeisterinnen* in Antiquity (34, not quoted in this reading); Eugène Giraudet (Reading 7.6a) says a woman can be an effective dance teacher.

| 1 |

Dance Theory to ca. 1300

Around 1,660 years passed between Plato, the first reading in this chapter, and Johannes de Grocheio, the last. During this millennium-and-a-half, "dance theory" did not exist. Its founding documents are not dance treatises, but parts of larger works on subjects in which dance is implicated, by authors whose knowledge of dance was based more on observation than participation. While the attitude of the classical authors (Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Lucian) was positive, based primarily on popular theatrical pantomime and choric dance, the prevailing attitude during the Middle Ages (ca. 450–1450) was negative because of ecclesiastic objections to dance's sensuality and reputation of immorality.

Three distinct approaches to dance theory emerge from our readings of the four classical theorists:

1. the ethics of dance: dance's ethical and civic function (Plato);
2. the raw materials of dance: the physical components of organized human movement, thus the theoretical basis of dance practice (Aristotle and Plutarch); and
3. the culture of dance: how dance fits into the life of a civilized society; its history, its utilitarian, aesthetic, and moral benefits, and its relation to other arts and disciplines (Lucian).

None of the theorists who follow will fail to emphasize one or more of these themes.

1.1. PLATO (428/427 OR 424/423–348/347 BCE)

Laws (written 360 BCE), trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 187 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), Book II.

The earliest purely theoretical writing on dance—sparse though it may be—predates the first practical dance treatises by almost two millennia.

Book II of Plato's *Laws* deals with music and dance together. Plato says that all living creatures have an inborn impulse to move, but only humans can do so in an organized way because only they can perceive rhythm and harmony. Harmony is the order of song, and rhythm is the order of dance; both together form the basis of choric dance. Plato defines "choric performances" as "representations of character, exhibited in actions and circumstances of every kind." Education is given through Apollo and the nine Muses (not exclusively through Terpsichore, the muse of dance). To be well educated is to dance and sing well, and that which is sung or danced must also be good. "Education is the process of drawing and guiding children towards that principle which is pronounced right by the law and confirmed as truly right by the experience of the oldest and the most just." Therefore, laws should compel poets (i.e., creative artists) to compose works that teach virtue. Plato establishes themes that will reappear continually in dance theoretical writing: dance as a divine gift that can be received and enjoyed only through the medium of human rationality; dance's power to instill virtue; its educative mission to foster ethical behavior in a civilized society; and its mimetic nature.

READING 1.1
Plato (trans. Bury)

PP. 88–113

Athenian Stranger. In the next place, we probably ought to enquire, regarding this subject, whether the discerning of men's natural dispositions is the only gain to be derived from the right use of wine-parties, or whether it entails benefits so great as to be worthy of serious consideration. What do we say about this? Our argument evidently tends to indicate that it does entail such benefits; so how and wherein it does so let us now hear, and that with minds attentive, lest haply we be led astray by it.

Clinias of Crete. Say on.

Ath. I want us to call to mind again our definition of right education. For the safe-keeping of this depends, as I now conjecture, upon the correct establishment of the institution mentioned.

Clin. That is a strong statement!

Ath. What I state is this,—that in children the first childish sensations are pleasure and pain, and that it is in these first that goodness and badness come to the soul; but as to wisdom and settled true opinions, a man is lucky if they come to him even in old age; and he that is possessed of these blessings, and all that they comprise, is indeed a perfect man.

I term, then, the goodness that first comes to children "education." When pleasure and love, and pain and hatred, spring up rightly in the souls of those who are unable as yet to grasp a rational account; and when, after grasping the rational account, they consent thereunto through having been rightly trained in fitting practices:—this consent, viewed as a whole, is goodness, while the part of it that is rightly trained in respect of pleasures arid pains, so as to hate what ought to be hated, right from the beginning up to the very end, and to love what ought to be loved,—if you were to mark this part off in your definition and call it "education," you would be giving it, in my opinion, its right name.

Clin. You are quite right, Stranger, as it seems to us, both in what you said before and in what you say now about education.

Ath. Very good. Now these forms of child-training, which consist in right discipline in pleasures and pains, grow slack and weakened to a great extent in the course of men's lives; so the gods, in pity for the human race thus born to misery, have ordained the feasts of thanksgiving as periods of respite from their troubles; and they have granted them as companions in their feasts the Muses and Apollo the master of music, and Dionysus, that they may at least set right again their modes of discipline by associating in their feasts with gods. We must consider, then, whether the account that is harped on nowadays is true to nature? What it says is that, almost without exception, every young creature is incapable of keeping either its body or its tongue quiet, and is always striving to move and to cry, leaping and skipping and delighting in dances and games, and uttering, also, noises of every description. Now, whereas all other creatures are devoid of any perception of the various kinds of order and disorder in movement (which we term rhythm and harmony), to us men the very gods, who were given, as we said, to be our fellows in the dance, have granted the pleasurable perception of rhythm and harmony, whereby they cause us to move and lead our choirs, linking us one with another by means of songs and dances; and to the choir they have given its name from the "cheer" implanted therein. Shall we accept this account to begin with, and postulate that education owes its origin to Apollo and the Muses?

Clin. Yes.

Ath. Shall we assume that the uneducated man is without choir-training, and the educated man fully choir-trained?

Clin. Certainly.

Ath. Choir-training, as a whole, embraces of course both dancing and song.

Clin. Undoubtedly.

Ath. So the well-educated man will be able both to sing and dance well.

Clin. Evidently.

Ath. Let us now consider what this last statement of ours implies.

Clin. Which statement?

Ath. Our words are,—"he sings well and dances well": ought we, or ought we not, to add,—"provided that he sings good songs and dances good dances"?

Clin. We ought to add this.

Ath. How then, if a man takes the good for good and the bad for bad and treats them accordingly? Shall we regard such a man as better trained in choristry and music when he is always able both with gesture and voice to represent adequately that which he conceives to be good, though he feels neither delight in the good nor hatred of the bad,—or when, though not wholly able to represent his conception rightly by voice and gesture, he yet keeps right in his feelings of pain and pleasure, welcoming everything good and abhorring everything not good?

Clin. There is a vast difference between the two cases, Stranger, in point of education.

Ath. If, then, we three[1] understand what constitutes goodness in respect of dance and song, we also know who is and who is not rightly educated; but without this knowledge we shall never be able to discern whether there exists any safeguard for education or where it is to be found. Is not that so?

Clin. It is.

Ath. What we have next to track down, like hounds on the trail, is goodness of posture and tunes in relation to song and dance; if this eludes our pursuit, it will be in vain for us to discourse further concerning right education, whether of Greeks or of barbarians.

Clin. Yes.

Ath. Well then, however shall we define goodness of posture or of tune? Come, consider: when a manly soul is beset by troubles, and a cowardly soul by troubles identical and equal, are the postures and utterances that result in the two cases similar?

Clin. How could they be, when even their complexions differ in colour?

Ath. Well said, my friend. But in fact, while postures and tunes do exist in music, which deals with rhythm and harmony, so that one can rightly speak of a tune or posture being "rhythmical" or "harmonious," one cannot rightly apply the choirmasters' metaphor "well-coloured" to tune and posture; but one can use this language about the posture and tune of the brave man and the coward, and one is right in calling those of the brave man good, and those of the coward bad. To avoid a tediously long

disquisition, let us sum up the whole matter by saying that the postures and tunes which attach to goodness of soul or body, or to some image thereof, are universally good, while those which attach to badness are exactly the reverse.

Clin. Your pronouncement is correct, and we now formally endorse it.

Ath. Another point:—do we all delight equally in choral dancing, or far from equally?

Clin. Very far indeed.

Ath. Then what are we to suppose it is that misleads us? Is it the fact that we do not all regard as good the same things, or is it that, although they are the same, they are thought not to be the same? For surely no one will maintain that the choric performances of vice are better than those of virtue, or that he himself enjoys the postures of turpitude, while all others delight in music of the opposite kind. Most people, however, assert that the value of music consists in its power of affording pleasure to the soul. But such an assertion is quite intolerable, and it is blasphemy even to utter it. The fact which misleads us is more probably the following—

Clin. What?

Ath. Inasmuch as choric performances are representations of character, exhibited in actions and circumstances of every kind, in which the several performers enact their parts by habit and imitative art, whenever the choric performances are congenial to them in point of diction, tune or other features (whether from natural bent or from habit, or from both these causes combined), then these performers invariably delight in such performances and extol them as excellent; whereas those who find them repugnant to their nature, disposition or habits cannot possibly delight in them or praise them, but call them bad. And when men are right in their natural tastes but wrong in those acquired by habituation, or right in the latter but wrong in the former, then by their expressions of praise they convey the opposite of their real sentiments; for whereas they say of a performance that it is pleasant but bad, and feel ashamed to indulge in such bodily motions before men whose wisdom they respect, or to sing such songs (as though they seriously approved of them), they really take a delight in them in private.

Clin. Very true.

Ath. Does the man who delights in bad postures and tunes suffer any damage thereby, or do those who take pleasure in the opposite gain therefrom any benefit?

Clin. Probably.

Ath. Is it not probable or rather inevitable that the result here will be exactly the same as what takes place when a man who is living amongst the bad habits of wicked men, though he does not really abhor but rather accepts and delights in those habits, yet censures them casually, as though dimly aware of his own turpitude? In such a case it is, to be sure, inevitable that the man thus delighted becomes assimilated to those habits, good or bad, in which he delights, even though he is ashamed to praise them. Yet what blessing could we name, or what curse, greater than that of assimilation which befalls us so inevitably?

Clin. There is none, I believe.

Ath. Now where laws are, or will be in the future, rightly laid down regarding musical education and recreation, do we imagine that poets will be granted such licence that they may teach whatever form of rhythm or tune or words they best like themselves to the children of law-abiding citizens and the young men in the choirs, no matter what the result may be in the way of virtue or depravity?

Clin. That would be unreasonable, most certainly.

Ath. But at present this licence is allowed in practically every State, with the exception of Egypt.

Clin. How, then, does the law stand in Egypt?

Ath. It is marvellous, even in the telling. It appears that long ago they determined on the rule of which we are now speaking, that the youth of a State should practise in their rehearsals postures and tunes that are good: these they prescribed in detail and posted up in the temples, and outside this official list it was, and still is, forbidden to painters and all other producers of postures and representations to introduce any innovation or invention, whether in such productions or in any other branch of music, over and above the traditional forms. And if you look there, you will find that the things depicted or graven there 10,000 years ago (I mean what I say, not loosely but literally 10,000) are no whit better or worse than the productions of to-day, but wrought with the same art.

Clin. A marvellous state of affairs!

Ath. Say rather, worthy in the highest degree of a statesman and a legislator. Still, you would find in Egypt other things that are bad. This, however, is a true and noteworthy fact, that as regards music it has proved possible for the tunes which possess a natural correctness to be enacted by law and permanently consecrated. To effect this would be the task of a god or a godlike man,—even as in Egypt they say that the tunes preserved throughout all this lapse of time are the compositions of Isis. Hence, as I said, if one could by any means succeed in grasping the principle