

## A Graham Technique Class

We might visualize a semiotic system that depended, in the absence of the power of speech, upon the apperception by the human participants of contextually defined logical relations among themselves in space. Let us say: the relative position of each participant to another in a gathering, and to items in a fixed environment. The elements of the semiotic would be stated by their existential presence and would acquire meaning (value) through the relations, which would themselves be apperceptible as some kind of syntax. The possible range of such separate semiotics without speech is great. Careful structuring of the bio-physical environment would be required, for the actors themselves are symbols in the semiotic ... (Ardener, E.W. Introduction to *Social Anthropology and Language*, p. xlii-xliv, 1971).

### Getting Started

Pressing a buzzer on the door of the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance at 316 East 63rd Street, New York City, and leaving the noise and confusion of Second Avenue behind, one enters into a differently ordered world. Straight ahead through a short narrow hallway is the registration desk, where a young man or woman sits waiting to collect or sell class tickets and cards<sup>1</sup> and to supply information. Farther ahead, dancers line the hallway leading to Studio I, which is the largest and most coveted of the building's three studios. Space is extremely valuable here.

Male students proceed down the hallway and, just before reaching the doors of Studio I, enter a small dressing room to the right. Women turn right at the registration desk and ascend a flight of stairs to the second floor to change clothes. There, the people walking back and forth consist of school administrators, female faculty and company members, and students. All are minimally accommodated in the tiny rooms that serve as offices and changing rooms. Students consult a schedule posted on the dressing room door to see where their class will take place and who will teach and accompany it.

The atmosphere in the dressing room is business-like. An aura of seriousness permeates the air. Everyone seems to have a specific routine as street clothes are rapidly exchanged for leotards, tights and leg warmers.<sup>2</sup> Long hair is bound tightly into some shape that will lie relatively flat against the skull permitting the shape of the head to be seen. Some people put on new makeup or refresh the old. Dancers who know each other talk about their diets, injuries and recent dance concerts they may have seen or are about to see.

Downstairs the doors to Studio I open, and a half dozen sweaty company members emerge from a rehearsal. They saunter into the company lounge by way of the kitchen, which rooms are both considered to be hallowed ground in the sense that they are used only by company members and are closed to the student population. Students pick up their dance-bags, an essential element of the serious dancer's daily accoutrement, and they enter the studio. Shoes are removed at the door out of a traditionally established respect among contemporary dancers for the floor, and all bags are placed along the rear wall.

The studio is spacious, and although the presence of thirty or more dancers fills the room, mirrors covering the south wall accentuate and seem to expand the space. Dancers move quickly to their 'spots' on the floor, which are not assigned places but chosen by the dancers. However, the untutored observer is usually unaware that there is an unwritten, unspoken code among students and teachers which dictates that more experienced dancers often occupy the front row, and that once a dancer chooses a spot, he or she has certain rights to it for the duration of the class. A dancer usually finds a particular spot in the studio that is suitable for an extended period of time, say a month or two, at which point another is found. Criteria for choosing a spot may include proximity to the mirrors, a good sight-line to the teacher, a 'feeling' for the right or left side of the room, or distance from the mirrors or teacher. A person's 'place' is regarded as property, and a dancer may even ask another to save the spot while attention is paid to some last minute detail before class.

Once in their places, the dancers begin to stretch their bodies, some seated, others standing. Many become introspective at this point, executing movements they have done so many times before that they form a personalized kind of routine. They anticipate the beginning of class, and hope that it will be a good one. Criteria for what constitutes a 'good' class vary from individual to individual, however, many dancers hope that first, their muscles will become warm quickly and that they will begin to feel the 'connection' early on in the class.

This concept is difficult for non-dancers -- or even beginning dancers -- to understand, but it refers to the fine-tuning of a professional dancer's body, of which the dancer is keenly aware, and which must be re-discovered each day. It is possible for these 'connections' not to be made from time to time, on an 'off' day, and this is a bitter disappointment to the dancer.

Second, many dancers hope that the instructor will spend a little less time on the floorwork and center portions of class, and slightly longer time on the 'across the floor' portion of the class, which is more enjoyable to the dancer in certain ways. The first portions of class could be compared to a musician playing scales and the latter portion to playing a piece of music.

Third, dancers hope that the instructor will not assign combinations of moves that are particularly hated for their difficulty or for some other reason, which varies from one dancer to another. Obviously any single class does not equally satisfy all the dancers in it.

### The Teacher

The studio door opens again. This time the teacher and accompanist enter together, walking directly to their respective places at the front of the room. A grand piano is in the left-hand corner, to the teacher's right. As they enter, the class rises *en masse* to stand facing the mirrors with legs together in first position.<sup>3</sup> All talking has stopped and the dancers continue their silent gesture of respect by standing until the instructor says, "You may be seated." Everyone sits on the floor quickly and assumes the beginning position for a Graham class: soles of the feet touch one another, hands loosely hold the ankles, and the torso remains erect

as in Fig. 1. The instructor, having checked to see that all are at attention, issues the command, "Ready, and, ...."

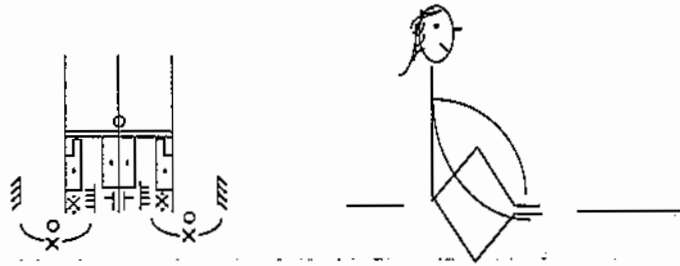


Figure 1. The Seated Position

Rounded torsos bend forward and 'bounce' in unison. Cryptic messages that the dancers have no trouble understanding convey what is to be done next.

The above example is a situation of the kinds of structuring and unspoken rules that Ardener visualizes (see epigraph, p. 191). The technical language used to teach Graham's idiom of dancing includes many 'shortcut words' and unintelligible usages of everyday English terms, for example "the breathings on 2, twice, on 4, twice, finish high release on the fifth."

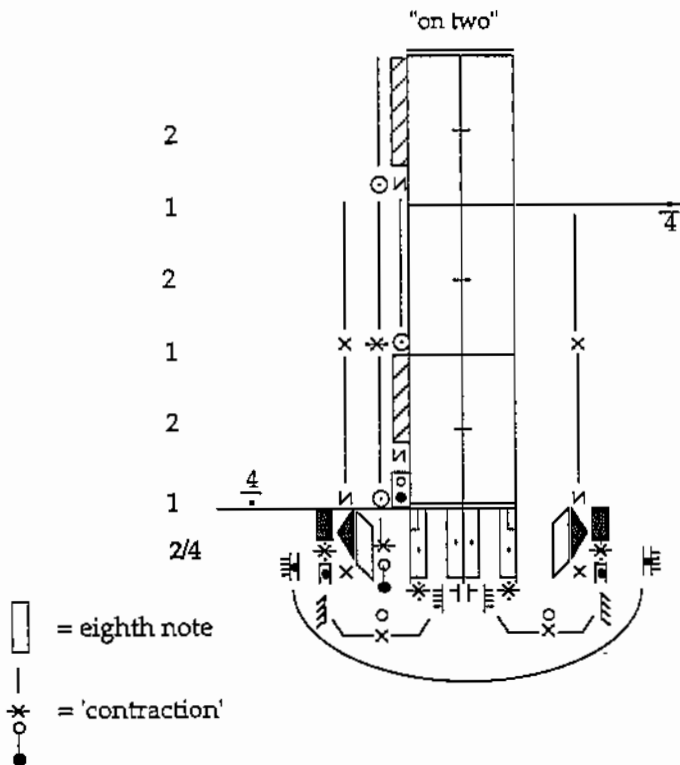


Figure 2. The 'Breathings' on '2' from a Graham Technique Class

Also, "turns around the back, on 3 left and right, the 6's, the opening with contraction back, arms wrapped, around and back -- two times, finish open on the third."

The words, 'breathings', 'high releases', 'turns around the back' and 'opening with contraction back' are all names of specific actions. The tendency to use a

noun form instead of a verb to describe these actions is discussed later. For now, the phrases 'on 2' (See Fig. 2), or 'on 3' and 'the 6's' refer to the meter in which the exercise is to be performed. Incomprehensible to the uninitiated though they may be, these usages of English are neither ungrammatical nor incomprehensible to dancers in the context of a Graham technique class. Nearly all dance forms possess a highly technical language which is learned by its practitioners as they progress through increasing levels of difficulty.

The instructor may give only the slightest indication of the movements with her own body in the intermediate and advanced classes during the first twenty-five minutes of the class, as these vocal commands are sufficient for students to understand what is expected. However, if there is a pause for corrections, or if an unusual variation of an exercise is asked for, the instructor will accompany the request with a demonstration 'full out'. Few questions are asked, although they are not overtly discouraged. Students seem generally concerned with themselves and do not pay much attention to those around them during this first part of class, although they can be seen looking at their own reflections in the mirrors.

### Basic Construction of a Class

The Graham technique class is constructed so as to develop mastery of movement in five basic categories pertaining to the up/down dimension. They are (1) on the floor -- seated or supine; (2) on the knees; (3) standing (both in place and moving through space); (4) in the air, and (5) 'the falls', which are taught at all vertical levels, the ultimate 'fall' called the 'standing back fall' making use of three levels (standing, seated, supine, and back to standing). One more category, used only occasionally now, is movement 'at the barre'.<sup>4</sup>

After thirty or forty minutes of 'floor work' is complete, the dancers rise to a standing position, although there may be a few exercises on the knees to be done first. The entire floor work section of class is seen as a progression from a seated to a standing position. In fact, up to this point, there has been a prescribed transitional phrase of movement connecting each exercise (also called 'combination') to the next. These formalized conjunctions between exercises make it possible in the most advanced classes, to perform almost the entire floor work series non-stop from "Ready, and, ..." to the knee work or "the rising."

By this time the dancers are sweating. Some are entirely soaked. This is desirable from the dancers' point of view, and class is proceeding well if they 'break sweat', as it is called, early on. Unlike models in the fashion industry to whom visible sweat represents a serious blemish on appearance, dancers pride themselves on the amount of sweat that is visible all over their bodies and the speed with which it appears. Sweat becomes symbolic. It is a sign of hard work and zealous dancing.<sup>5</sup> It indicates a certain readiness of the muscles to move in a vigorous and agile manner.

At this point in the class, the dancers perform various exercises for the legs and feet as well as for the torso, in preparation for the longer combinations to be done across the floor from one corner of the practice room to the other. They show signs of competition with one another as they begin these longer combinations. It is this last section of class that students look forward to, for it constitutes

a chance 'really to dance' -- a distinction that is made between 'dancing' and 'doing combinations' that are geared towards technical mastery and routine.

Ideally, the entire class is intended to be a dancing experience, but many dancers regard the next to last part of class as being closer to the performance experience. The first (and larger) portion of class is considered to be concerned with 'technique'. It is in a section just before the 'the falls' and the formal conclusion of the class that the dancers have a chance to demonstrate their abilities as performers.

Returning to their previous places after the 'performance portion', the class ends with a series of movements called 'falls'. Movements thus classified have two basic physical components which, taken together, constitute a 'back fall': (i) a contraction of the torso, and (ii) a transference of weight from the feet or knees to a portion of the dancer's back. Falls are done slowly at first; then, on successive falls, counts are eliminated one-by-one and the movement is telescoped until finally, the dancers fall to the floor on one count and recover to a standing position on one count. The instructor thanks the class and the accompanist while the students applaud. Class is over.

### Technique and Semantics

In the Graham technique, the 'back falls' are taken from two of several series of falls that comprise one distinct portion of the technique. For example, the Woman's back-fall in Graham's choreographic work called *Errand Into the Maze* signifies a momentary overwhelming and recovery, and the First Sister's kneeling back-falls in *Deaths and Entrances* signify inevitability and doom, but both are from one series called "the standing back-falls." The Maid's back-fall in *Seraphic Dialogue*, however, occurs because of the awe and respect she has for St. Michael's command, but this fall is from another, separate series called "hinging back-falls."

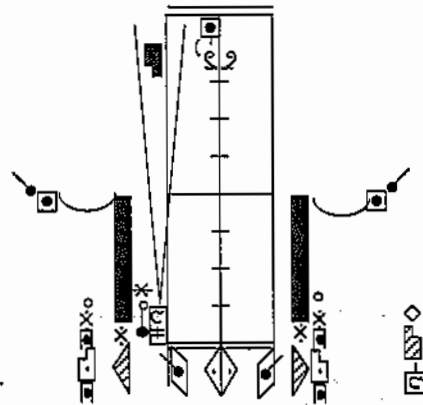


Figure 3. Joan's "hinging back fall" in response to St. Michael from *Seraphic Dialogue*. The semantic interpretation of the dancer's pelvis in contraction is here regarded as "vulnerability." [Text written by Dixie Durr].

All the moves in a Graham technique class are organized along ascending levels on an up/down axis, the 'falls' epitomizing the mastery of movement at all of these levels. There is a generalized meaning for these falls as they are learned in the classroom

that is directly related to the up/down axis. The semantic generalizations externalize in movement what happens to one's insides in reaction to some unexpected and shocking event in the form of visual metaphors.<sup>6</sup> A 'fall' is conceived to be a moment of realization or an 'impact' of some kind. Exactly what kind of realization or impact is represented can only be determined when the action-sign is performed in the context of a specific choreographed work.

By way of illustration, Graham often recounted the following anecdote to students, company members and audiences:

A woman came to me and asked me, with regard to *Deaths and Entrances*, why I fell down in an evening gown. I asked her, in return, "What would you do if, suddenly, at a ball, you saw someone whom at one time you had loved very much? You would fall inside!" And that is why she falls ... (paraphrased from Graham's communications in classes and lectures).

It is this kind of externalization of inner emotion that is referred to in the word glosses above, i.e. "momentary overwhelming and recovery;" inevitability and doom" and "awe and respect." One understands, of course, that the 'falling inside' to which Graham refers in her statement is a metaphorical understanding of what such momentary emotional shocks might feel like.

#### After the Class

Students collect their belongings and head for the dressing rooms, stopping to buy a can of juice from a machine in the hall upstairs. A few remain behind to clarify a point with the instructor, or to scrutinize themselves in the mirror as they practice a stretch of movement one more time. While changing in the dressing rooms, discussion of the class, the teacher, the weather and 'what's new' takes place. Drenched tights and leotards are peeled off, bodies wiped dry and/or showered, and street clothes are put on.

As the students leave the building for the outside world, they carry their dancer's *persona* on the inside. Even disguised in civilian clothes, however, a seasoned New Yorker may easily recognize a dancer by certain telltale signs. If the hair style (which often remains the same for the street as it was in class) or the presence of the 'dance bag' do not reveal identity, then the dancer's distinctive gait may do so, for legs continue to be rotated outwards as in class, for example. This results in a kind of 'waddle' (possibly more accentuated among ballet dancers), but most of all the body is held taut and erect. The dancer's body is alert; poised as if to spring into action at any moment. Some class-members will be headed toward another dance class in another studio; others will go home, or engage in some other activity. Their 'return' however, is always to the dance class. Anything else that may take place is classified as "what happens until the next class" which for many professional dancers is more 'home' than home.

#### Commitment

The school provides the locus for learning the Graham Technique; for acquiring mastery of the idiom, which is one of the internal 'good things' that may be

obtained through the kinds of commitment that professional dancers make. Other benefits associated with the practice of dancing include spiritual development, increased good health, self-discipline and various opportunities for life-experience, such as those which accompany paid travel to foreign countries.

By committing him or herself to the practice of dancing, the dancer also becomes associated with at least one institution of dancing. The kinds of training available in most university dance departments (in contrast to studios or conservatories) in America usually prepares a student to continue as a dance educator, therapist, historian or critic, and not as a professional dancer.<sup>7</sup> More often, it is in the privately owned and operated studio or conservatory that professionally recognized standards of preparation are maintained. The ultimate goal, or external 'good', towards which the professional concert dancer strives is association with a company, where he or she enjoys a certain amount of prestige, status, power and money.

However, it should be remembered that most American dance companies do not have paid work for fifty-two or even forty-eight weeks out of any given year. When I was a member of Graham's company, a *good* year included slightly more than six months of paid rehearsals and performances. Even though wages are based on a union scale, the weeks and months spent on unemployment lines offset this otherwise decent salary. Dancers often supplement their incomes by teaching, free-lancing or taking part-time jobs in restaurants or bars. The point here is that although money can be seen to be an 'external good' for the professional dancer, it is hardly the main drawing card. Commitment in the concert dance world doesn't include a high priority ambition for a steady high salary.

### Companies and Schools

Not all American modern dance companies are connected with schools that specifically transmit the technique or idiom of dancing which dominates a company's repertoire. Those which are so connected consist mainly of the larger, well-established companies. They are usually headed by a dominant artist who choreographs many, if not all, of the works that are performed and by whose name the company is identified. The establishment of such schools requires considerable financial means, and of the several hundred companies in New York city alone, only a small fraction have managed to open and maintain schools.

The school is valuable to the life of a company, for it provides a physical 'home' -- a space in which rehearsals may take place. These must be scheduled around class hours. The school also provides a means of supplying the company with potential company members who are trained in the idiom of body language that is practiced by the company. Although dancers are often recruited from outside the company's school (if it has one), it is preferable to hire dancers who are 'native speakers' of the particular idiom of body language the company uses.

At the Graham school, classes are attended by a wide variety of people who have many different reasons for doing so. Professionals and professionally minded students refer to the event as "taking class."<sup>8</sup> The phrase has a slightly prescriptive tone to it -- as in "taking medicine." For this category of person, taking class is a daily event, with the possible exception of one day per week, since



it is generally believed to be healthy for body and spirit to include an occasional regular day of rest. Non-professionally-minded students may attend the classes more sporadically out of a desire for physical fitness or because dancing is regarded primarily as a hobby or avocation. Since the concern here is with Graham Technique as an idiom of body language, we shall concentrate upon the 'native speaker'. That is, the professional dancer for whom it appears to be 'second nature' to perform the technique -- to 'speak' or 'utter' the body language.

### The Discipline

Professional modern concert dancers can be seen to form a community of individuals who choose to live according to particular sets of rules, much in the same way that a religious order chooses to live according to a 'rule'. They must pass through various stages of apprenticeship, whether as a long-term student at the Graham School, or as an understudy for company members. They must also maintain a sense of commitment that will sustain them through years of hard work, self-doubt and possible disillusion.

For the small community of individuals who have chosen to devote their lives to professional modern dancing, each 'taking of class' is an act of re-commitment and an affirmation of self-identity. It is in and through the class that the student will eventually assume his or her dancer's *persona*. As do members of many other professions in Euro-centered societies, "... existing in almost airtight communities of specialization ..." (Ross, 1970: 10), dancers identify very strongly with their professional *personas*. At a cocktail party one is far more likely to hear the phrase, "I am a dancer" than the simpler, by vastly different assertion, "I dance," in response to the question "What do you do?" This tendency to identify with some 'thing', expressed vocally as nouns ('a dancer') rather than with verbs (the act), is also carried out in interesting ways by the sets of names that are given to the Graham vocabulary of movements. That subject, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

### The Importance of Classes

Regular attendance in technique classes is imperative for the following three reasons:

1. It is in class that students actually learn the idiom of body language, its rule-structures and basic vocabulary of actions. The process is as difficult and time-consuming as learning a spoken or signed language. Anything less than daily attendance greatly impairs the speed with which learning is accomplished.
2. In the early stages of learning Graham technique, it is often easier to understand the idiom, its rules and how one is meant to produce it than it is to perform it properly. Daily practice is therefore necessary to instill, then to improve and reinforce 'muscular memory'. In their own specialized discourse, dancers often claim that *the body remembers* what to do. In a certain sense one can say that it does. Neuromuscular patterns are established through the repeated practice of specific actions, remembering that dancers can and do exercise control over what patterns become established, and, they can change those patterns if necessary.
3. After a sufficiently high level of performance competence is reached, if daily practice is interrupted for longer than three or four days, the body begins to lose significantly in



terms of tone and fine-tuning. Muscles constrict and begin to feel 'rusty'. If more than a week elapses during which the dancer doesn't attend classes, it can take as much as twice the length of time to regain the former level of flexibility and ease of movement.

The serious student makes commitments on several levels which are renewed each day.

All of the concepts, information, etc. which is learned in technique classes is gradually stored in the individual's subsidiary awareness so that what remains at the center of his or her focal attention is only that which is necessary to the act of performing. For example, by the time an aspiring dancer can finally execute a standing back fall,<sup>9</sup> so many rules and movement principles have been absorbed into subsidiary awareness that an explanation of *how to execute* the act is a far more arduous task than simply performing it.

#### Learning the Rules

At the beginning of a Graham dancer's training, the internalization of rules takes place through the repetition of movement utterances that are prescribed not only by the instructor but by the idiom itself.<sup>10</sup> Beginning dancers do not make up their own sequences of actions in the classroom, however, as the dancer passes from the state of 'novice' to that of professional, greater freedom is allowed in that a dancer may begin to interpret a phrase differently from the instructor's or other dancers' interpretations.

*The ground-rules for the idiom (the technique) do not change.* Interpretations are achieved through what Chomsky calls "a process of active construction" (1980: 203). Professional Graham dancers may also contribute their own extended creative ideas, producing new utterances in the idiom within the context of an improvisation for Graham in a rehearsal for a new dance (see Puri and Hart-Johnson 1995, for further comment on improvising and composing dances).

Both in the case of first language acquisition and in the case of learning Graham technique, several features of the learning process are distinctively human -- in contrast to non-human modes of learning. The feature that distinguishes the human learning process is the "reflective application of a criterion" (Winch, citing Oakeshott, 1958: 58 and 60). The habits that animals may have, such as the various 'dances' of bees, altered by stimuli introduced by human agents, are not the same. Learning an idiom of dancing requires knowledge of a right and wrong way of doing something.

There is a sense in which to acquire a habit is to acquire a propensity to go on doing the same kind of thing; there is another sense in which this is true of learning a rule. These senses are different and a great deal hangs on the difference (Winch 1958: 59-60).

Suffice to say here that some of the first rules one learns in a Graham class are concerned with specific structured usages of time and space. These may be perceived through recognizing that complete order exists in a technique classroom from beginning to end. Many of the rules for maintaining this order are unspoken. Such rules are acquired quickly during the first classes that are taken. They are transmitted by the teacher and other students who are already

familiar with them. By the time a dancer can claim the title, 'professional', such rules are completely taken for granted.

Earlier on (see p. 192), the notion that dancers come to 'possess' a particular small area of the classroom before the class begins was noted. Chosen areas are claimed on a "first come, first serve" basis, so that to those dancers to whom placement in the room matters a great deal arrive earlier than others in order to stake their claim. A claim may be made by the dancer continuing to occupy his or her chosen spot after a previous class, remaining until the next class begins, or the dancer may leave an outer article of clothing (leg-warmers, sweatshirt) in lieu of his or her physical presence if it becomes necessary to leave the room for a moment. The article of clothing signifies that the spot is taken.<sup>11</sup> Another alternative is to ask someone else to make sure that nobody comes to sit in that particular place if its 'owner' has to leave.<sup>11</sup>

Once class begins, each dancer maintains a separate relationship to the space, which depends upon his or her placement in the room. The classroom itself is regarded as though it were a stage, the mirrored wall representing the audience or 'front'. Many exercises at the beginning of class are performed such that the frontal plane of the body is directly parallel to the front plane (or 'wall') of the stage. Many people don't know that there are positive values attached to exposing the anterior (rather than posterior) planes of the body to the audience or to other people generally. American modern dance idioms in general identify the frontal plane of the dancer's body as the most important. Humphrey speaks for many American dance artists when she says,

The lines of the body can be all but obliterated by improper choices of direction, and a great deal of effort can be wasted when the movement does not clearly address itself to the one open side of the [proscenium] stage. For instance, a dancer, facing off-stage and standing in second position, with his arms to the side, is throwing away about half his body. Just as it is absolutely elementary for the actor to be *heard*, so the dancer *seen* (1959: 85-86 - italics added).

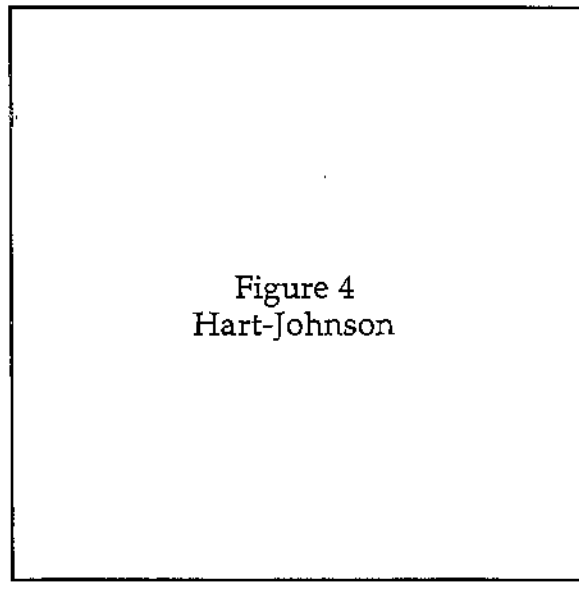


Figure 4. Frontal View of Dancer's Body in 2nd Position and a Dancer Facing Off-Stage (from Humphrey 1959: 86).

What Humphrey means is illustrated in Fig. 4 above. In the Graham Technique it is seen to be too limiting to perform all exercises with a frontal orientation. Performances maintaining this 'front' would produce a flat, two-dimensional or 'paper-doll image' of the body and Graham didn't want that.

The most significant body part in Graham technique is the torso, and two movement principles for the torso dominate the technique: (1) contraction/release<sup>12</sup> and (2) spiraling.

The Graham dancer is taught almost immediately the use of an imaginary diagonal line that divides the stage/classroom space called *Via Triumphalis* (see Fig. 5). Although this imaginary line bisects the stage space, dancers rarely think of it this way because to them, the line lies *internal* to the body and is manifest through a move called 'spiraling' where the torso turns around its own axis up to 45 degrees.

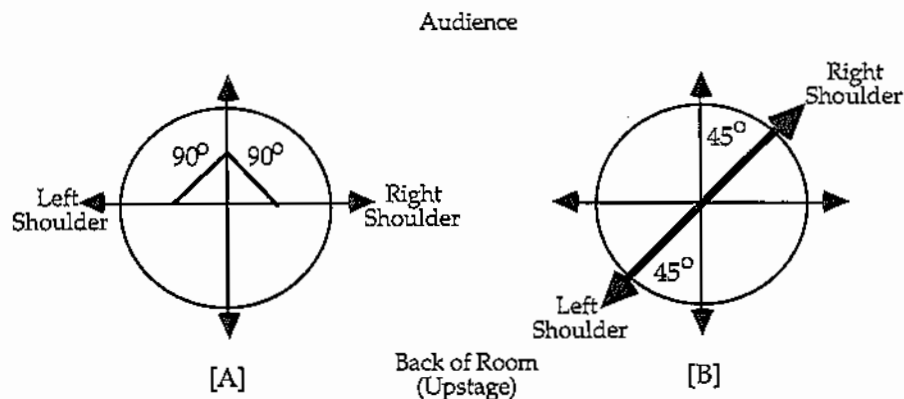


Figure 5. A 'Straight' [A] in Contrast to a 'Diagonal' [B] Orientation.

The precise degree of turn in 'spiraling' is not constant because it is governed by the dancer's position in the room, thus may not be 45 degrees all the time. The concept of 'spiral' is the turn of the body around its vertical axis from a fixed base (see Extract 1 in Appendix, p. 212).

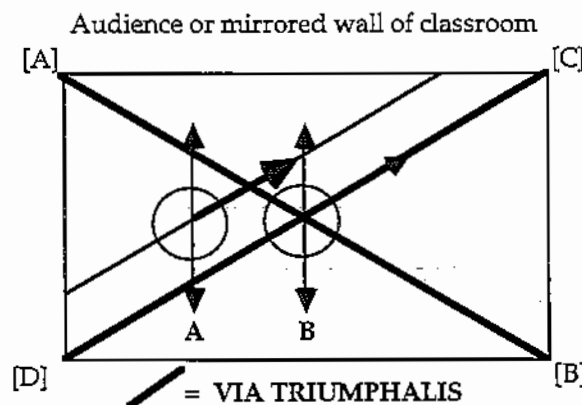


Figure 6. The Stage Space Bisected by 'Via Triumphalis' and Two Dancers' Personal Spaces, where [A] to [B] and [C] to [D] are diagonals of the whole stage or classroom.

As Helpern (1981) noted, the 'spiral' was not present in the technique during the earliest years, but appeared later. The spiral followed as a logical development of Graham's general principle of constant oppositions in movement. In this case it involved the addition of a pull along the right/left axis to a front/back opposition. Both of these tensions operate against the constant and dynamic relationship between up and down. The three dimensions are consciously played off against one another in Graham technique.

While one cannot say that Graham invented the movement of spiraling, she certainly invented the semantic concept of spiraling and its use in her choreography (for one example, see Appendix: Extract 1, p. 212). In fact, to a dancer or choreographer, much of that which critics and aestheticians refer to as 'style' is a result of spatial rules and relationships, one example of which has been described in more detail.

Much of the time, a smaller degree of torso-turn is appropriate. Depending upon where the dancer is situated, his or her internal diagonal may or may not correspond to the diagonals of the stage/room. The Graham dancer is not expected to *aim* his or her shoulders (or gaze) towards the corners of the room, like ballet dancers. Graham dancers are expected to produce a sense of matching the tensions of those imagined lines producing a similar tension in his or her own personal space. For example, while doing the same exercise, dancer A (Fig. 6 above) would not attempt to focus on the same spot as dancer B, unless the choreographic requirements were for the two dancers both to focus on some common object or location in the space. These and other rules of orienting self in the danced space are built into the technique class and are learned along with movement principles during the course of training.

When finally the dancer is ready to appear on the stage, the only adjustment that is necessary is to take into account any difference between the dimensions of the class or rehearsal space and those of the stage, since essentially the classroom is a homomorphic model of the stage. In rehearsals, the classroom is treated as though it were a stage. Dancers idealize the classroom, imagining the presence of entrance and exist areas, called 'wings', various set pieces if they are not available, the downstage and upstage edges of the stage and such.

When Graham was forging her first movement materials for the technique, there was less concern with geometrical spatial relations of this kind than there was in the 1980s. In the earlier days, before ballet dancers and the influence of ballet technique were incorporated into her work, Graham placed less emphasis upon a sense of 'line' than upon the motivations for moving. Helpern says that "Unison work by Graham's group was achieved by sharing a common attack (dynamic phrasing), and not by reproducing the way other dancers looked" (1981: 90). It is a significant diachronic development in the growth and enrichment of Graham's idiom of body language that in rehearsals during the period 1973-1978, corrections given to chorus members often referred to whether or not the linear 'spacing' of dancers in a group was accurate enough -- or whether everyone's arms were at exactly the same angle. No doubt these aspects of performance were important in earlier times as well, but many have pointed out that the approach to achieving this result was quite different.

### Using Spatial Diagonals in Class Work

Dancers travel in pairs across the floor, practising first on “the right side,” then on “the left side.” These are dancers’ phrases for diagonal tracks from upstage left to downstage right and from upstage right to downstage left respectively. All movement combinations during a technique class are practiced “on both sides” to achieve a symmetry of strength and dexterity. This is in contrast to the asymmetrical nature of the company’s repertoire, where one movement is followed by another without necessarily repeating each combination on the other side. Many choreographers, including Graham, tend to favor certain movements to one side over the other. Dancers are usually said to be “right turners” or “left turners”, meaning that it is easier for them to perform single or multiple turns standing on one leg on one side. For this reason, it is common to find that turns and other steps involving ‘handedness’ are choreographed to the right, as the majority of dancers are right-handed in an extended sense of that term. Such is the case with Graham’s repertoire, where ‘Cave turns’ and other actions are usually choreographed to the right. It is important to note that the words, ‘Cave Turn’ were created to identify a particular action-sign which first appeared in Graham’s choreography, *Cave of the Heart* (1946). These turns later became a standard part of her vocabulary of actions in classes and other works.

In the classroom, one attempts to perform equally well on both sides of the body. The unspoken rules of proper etiquette require that partners change places with each other when doing a combination to the second side, thus giving each person a chance to be closer to the mirror and the teacher’s watchful eye when traveling across the floor.

### Time (Tempo and Meter)

Time in a Graham Technique class is reckoned simultaneously in a number of ways. First there is ‘real’ time, i.e. the duration of the class and of each sequence performed in a class. Within the hour and a half class period are divisions of three more or less equal sections of a half hour each. The first is for floorwork, the second for standing movement that stays in one place, and the third includes movement combinations as well as weight-supported movements. These sections are rarely kept exactly to their allotted amounts of time, varying with the specific needs of the class population, or with the teacher’s plans for the class.

Each exercise in the class has a particular metric rhythm (and tempo) that unifies the performance of the class. This presents an apparent paradox when one considers that the movement vocabulary is used throughout the enormous variety of contexts of the repertoire, which is performed in many rhythms and at different speeds. The sequences that are performed in class each day are really vehicles for practicing movement principles and these have no intrinsic rhythm or tempo of their own. Speculation has it that it is the influence of classical ballet phrasing that has had an effect upon the codification of musical phrasing for Graham’s classroom technique. It is an interesting subject that cannot be pursued

in depth here. Suffice to say that the meters of movement utterances in the classroom are different from the meters for the same moves in the repertoire.

#### Discourse

If it were not for the teacher and the accompanist, a Graham class would be practically silent. During the class, dancers generally do not talk unless it is to ask a question for the purpose of clarifying a point about an exercise or combination. The teacher issues commands, suggests images and gives corrections using spoken language in ways that might seem strange to an outside observer with no prior knowledge of such situations or of the kind of technical spoken language required for a modern dancer's body language *gāmē*. To an untutored ear, it may seem at times that the English language was being badly mangled -- at others, that the dancers are not very bright or that the teacher is slightly mad.

It would not be unusual, for example, to hear teachers make the following running commentary while students perform what are called 'deep stretches': "In two, and over more, and str-r-e--t---c---h and rise keep going now in two ...."

This is a kind of moment-by-moment coaching which would usually be heard in an intermediate or lower level class, but would not be out of place in an advanced class. In any case, it makes perfect sense to the dancers who understand the words, as well as their apparently ungrammatical order.

#### Embodiment and Semantics

However, briefly, it is necessary to discuss some of the meanings that lie at the core of Graham's dance technique -- the basis of her idiom of expressive actions and the foundation of the Graham dancer's body language. The vocabulary of action signs learned in the classroom is generated according to principles for movement that constitutes the action-sign content of specific works choreographed for the repertoire.

The sequences learned in class may be altered for use on stage: their rhythms, dynamics, levels, tempos and syntactic placements are determined in a danced work by the demands of the choreography itself. However, all of these actions are first learned in the classroom in their uninflected forms.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the relationship between Graham's technique and the choreographed repertoire was such that movement utterances choreographed for use in particular dances were rehearsed and developed in classes. The contents of early classes concentrated upon the few phrases with which Graham happened to be working at the time, thus there was always the goal of performance in mind.

Gradually, many of these actions became a regular part of the technique class, creating a 'core set' of movement utterances that were distinctively Graham's. Along with the development of a consistent set of action signs and phrases came an emphasis upon the construction of a more balanced class structure. Graham's goal shifted from using technique classes as rehearsals for a performance to using the movements as a vehicle for the well-rounded training of dancers' bodies. In this way, she developed both her choreographic ideas and, eventually,

her system of principles for action and for training a dancer's body to move in a specific way.

Graham dancers learn the technique and at the same time, they learn that a Graham dancer's body is classified in particular ways that emphasize certain concepts that are fundamental to her idiom of movement. Taxonomies of the body have long been of interest to anthropologists, many of whom emphasize the body's symbolic potential as being "... "an important means of metaphorical expression and symbolic communication" (Ellen 1977: 356 -- also see Farnell 1996: 311-336). As an example of the kind of metaphorical spoken language used with reference to the body, a Graham dancer is often told that the spine is a cobra, coiled up and waiting ready to strike. The relationship between the spine and a cobra is defined by the kind of move each makes at certain times. The image is applied in a classroom in order to elicit the kind of movement a cobra makes when it attacks its prey. The move is sudden, quick, precise and preceded by a stillness that is vibrant with readiness.

The likening of spine to cobra is just one example of the kind of effective metaphorical usage in establishing the identity of one danced idiom from another and from an ordinary way of moving in everyday life. Graham's technique is not the only one that uses the image of a snake. The Afro-Caribbean *Yonvalou* dancer's spine is also likened to a snake -- not necessarily a cobra -- but here, emphasis is placed on the rippling motion of the creature as it travels, not upon the 'attack' movement that is the desired outcome in Graham technique.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Graham often made references to *Kundalini* Yoga when describing the kind of movement quality she hoped to elicit from her dancers. The frequent use of the phrase, "The spine is a cobra" does not imply that Graham or her dancers believe that a cobra sits implanted within their torsos in any 'real' sense. On the other hand, the movement quality to which these dancers aspire is very real.

Some of the imagery used in Graham's technique involves the whole body or isolated parts of it taking on the attributes and powers of an entire human being. One such phrase is "the *ear listens* to the spine" which refers to the fact that the dancer is expected to be in control of all the body's actions and simultaneously remain outside of the body as an observer. A little understood feature of professional dancing is the complex metaphysics of Self that is inherent in a dancer's life which is discernible in the technical language they habitually use.

Like many early American modern dance pioneers, Graham sought to express what she believed to lie innermost in the realm of human feelings and emotions. All of the imagery used in class or in rehearsals is designed to elicit certain valued movement qualities which in turn represents a structure of values held by the culture to which Graham belonged. Such phrases as "bring the floor to you", "navel on your spine" and "expose the inside" are all connected with the inside/outside opposition. The idea of becoming vulnerable has positive values in Graham technique, whether it meant exposing the inner surfaces of the arms and legs, or the inner emotions.

In a 'contraction', the Graham dancer strives for more depth of movement by thinking of the navel on the spine -- but not just 'thinking' about it! These dancers are asked to draw power from the floor into their bodies by bringing the



floor to their selves. These kinds of movement image emerged out of a search for self-knowledge and self-understanding. The spoken language used is rich and suffused with meaning.

While many original contributions to the modern dance world were made in Graham's time, none made use of the contraction/release principle in any way approaching Graham's elevation of it to the status of primary motivating factor for an entire body language. The opposition inside/outside is perhaps best seen in this movement principle, as the torso folds in upon itself and opens outward. The pelvis in its contracting and releasing means 'appetite', 'power', 'vulnerability' (see Fig. 3, p. 197), 'control' (see Extract 2, p. 213), 'motivation' (see Extract 3, p. 214), 'striking out', 'life-source' and ultimate expressive power.

The point here is not to examine the whole technical lexicon of terms that Graham dancers use, but to indicate how the use of spoken language metaphors and metonyms serves to stand for *the desired movement result* in the technique. Every seated exercise in the technique class is named. The name describes the movement principle stressed throughout the exercise, for example, 'bounces', 'breathings', 'spirals', 'pretzel', 'deep stretches', etc. Here, "the name of an action will stand for its result" (Ullman 1972: 220).

Many people are familiar with pretzels and having eaten them, know how they taste, but they may wonder what this snack food has to do with dancing. In Graham technique, 'pretzel' signifies the loose physical resemblance between the twisted form of an edible pretzel with the position of the dancer's legs as he or she begins an exercise designated by the name. Most people know what mild stretching movements in ordinary life feel like. They have stretched and yawned upon getting up in the morning or they may have been asked to 'reach for the ceiling' or 'touch their toes' in warm-ups before a gym class, but 'deep stretches' in Graham technique go far beyond these practices into an entirely different category of experience. Where the word 'bounce' might trigger associations in many people's minds with bouncing balls and tennis games, or bouncing up and down on a pony's back, and 'spiral' might conjure images of notebooks or staircases, such associations and images are of no assistance whatsoever if the aim is to comprehend the Graham dancer's world, nor can the dancer's world be reduced to the more common usages of these words. It is also well to remember that professional dancers spend many more hours in rehearsals and in classrooms than they do actually performing on stages.

In conclusion, we may say that Graham's idiom of dancing -- or for that matter, any structured system of human meaning -- does not convey 'one sign-for-one word' meanings, but a danced idiom *does* convey specific concepts. Graham dances cannot be read like books (unless they are notated in a movement script, in which case they can be read like books), however, they can be understood in ways that are appropriate to the idiom's mode of communication. In order for this to happen, laypeople must familiarize themselves with its 'code' -- with its rules and meta-rules and the daily practices that constitute the kind of body language that it is.

Until these are known, the meanings that can be transmitted through a single technique or idiom of movement -- or for that matter through any system of body language -- remains inaccessible.

Diana Hart-Johnson

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dancers may purchase a single class ticket, however those who attend regularly and frequently find it more economical to buy a card that may be used for entrance into ten classes. These cards are sold at a considerable discount off the single class price, and serve to encourage greater attendance. Class prices also vary according to the student's level: at the Fundamentals I and II levels the price is higher. As dancers graduate to Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced levels, the price becomes lower. Company members who take classes at the Graham School pay nothing.

<sup>2</sup> These are the traditional practice clothes of dancers. Leotards are stretchy garments that are basically shaped like a one-piece swim-suit. They may vary in color, size and cut (i.e. long or short sleeves, v-neck or round neck, zippered or zipperless). Usually men wear a white T-shirt instead of a leotard, although in recent years leotards are worn by both men and women [Interestingly, the leotard came from a male costume for the French circus, named after the first man who wore it: Jules Leotard - The Editors]. Tights are like thick nylon panty-hose, worn underneath the leotard and used by both men and women to protect the legs from abrasions. Leg warmers are thick, knitted leg coverings made of wool or acrylic fibers. The term is misleading, for they may be very short, covering only ankles. They may extend as far as the knees, or they may cover the thighs. Some cover the entire body, somewhat like a snowsuit. They are worn over tights and leotard and are usually shed once the dancer's muscles have become sufficiently warmed up.

<sup>3</sup> The term, 'first position' is borrowed from ballet terminology, as indeed are several others. It refers loosely to one of the five basic positions for the feet in ballet; one where the dancer's heels touch one another and the toes point laterally away from the vertical midline of the dancer's body. However, other than a superficial resemblance, a balletic first position and a Graham dancer's usage of the position have little or nothing to do with one another.

<sup>4</sup> The 'barre' in both Graham and ballet classes is a long wooden (sometimes metal) pole attached horizontally to the wall of the classroom, about three and a half feet from the floor and about one foot away from the wall. There may be 'barres' attached to one or all of the walls of a studio. During the section of class referred to here, the dancer holds the barre with one hand while executing various movement combinations which are then repeated while holding onto the barre with the other hand. Some exercises are performed facing the barre and holding it with both hands. Needless to say, perhaps, there are no connections with the dancer's 'barre' and a drinks bar, a lawyer's bar, or a candy bar.

<sup>5</sup> At various times, Martha Graham expressed the view that the kind of excessive sweating she had seen on her stage is not necessary, observing that she herself never sweated like that. Several dancers who performed with her on stage have said they never saw her sweat. Whether she did or not, what is interesting is Graham's denial of what -- for many dancers -- is an inevitable fact of life: when dancers perform, they sweat, and more often than not, they sweat profusely.

<sup>6</sup> See Farnell (1996) for an extended discussion of the metaphors we move by.

<sup>7</sup> The subject of what place a dance department has (or should have) within an academic institution has been much debated since dance classes first made their way into the American university system by way of physical education departments. There are many who would argue

that American dance departments can train dancers adequately to continue in a professional dance career, but I would strongly suggest that this is the exception – *not* the rule.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase 'taking class' in Britain refers to an instructor who actually teaches the class, whereas in the United States, we tend to say, "teaching class." British students who are 'taking' a class in university refer to it as 'sitting class'. Such phrases provide important linguistic clues regarding the attitudes and thought patterns of people in different cultures. With this example, it is easy to see how phrases in the same language, but from different socio-cultural backgrounds, must be examined beyond their surface appearances.

<sup>9</sup> As previously mentioned, there are several categories of 'falls' in Graham's technique, but the one that is reserved for the end of the class is distinguished by the fact that it is performed only on one side. Performance of this back fall also serves as a kind of ritual ending for the class because part of its significance lies in the fact that dancers cannot perform this fall in its advanced form until they have mastered the ability to move easily between all levels on an up/down axis (see subheading 'Basic Construction of a Class', pp. 196-7).

<sup>10</sup> This is something that seems difficult for non-dancers to grasp -- that learning an idiom of dancing is very much like learning a dialect of speech -- or even a new language.

<sup>11</sup> The point that the author is making pertains to the close and constant structuring of spatial relationships which, to an untutored eye, may seem to be 'spontaneous', are in fact not so.

<sup>12</sup> Contraction/release is connected with exhalation and inhalation in breathing, but Graham has stated that these two biologically based movements of the body become conceptually-based actions "... when performed muscularly only ..." (1941: 185). These concepts are used in "... the first principle taught [which is body center]" (1941: *Ibid.*).

<sup>13</sup> Klima and Bellugi discuss the word 'inflection' as "... a cover term for two different phenomena. A vocal inflection is an alteration in the manner in which a word is pronounced ... a grammatical inflection... is an entirely different kind of change: an alteration not in the manner in which a word is produced, but in the form of the word itself..." (1979: 245). These authors found that these categories also apply to American Sign Language [ASL] and I suggest that they apply equally to the action signs of Graham Technique, where the *uninflected* form of an action sign is the form in which it is taught in classrooms.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin (1996: 242-43) for *Yonvalou*.

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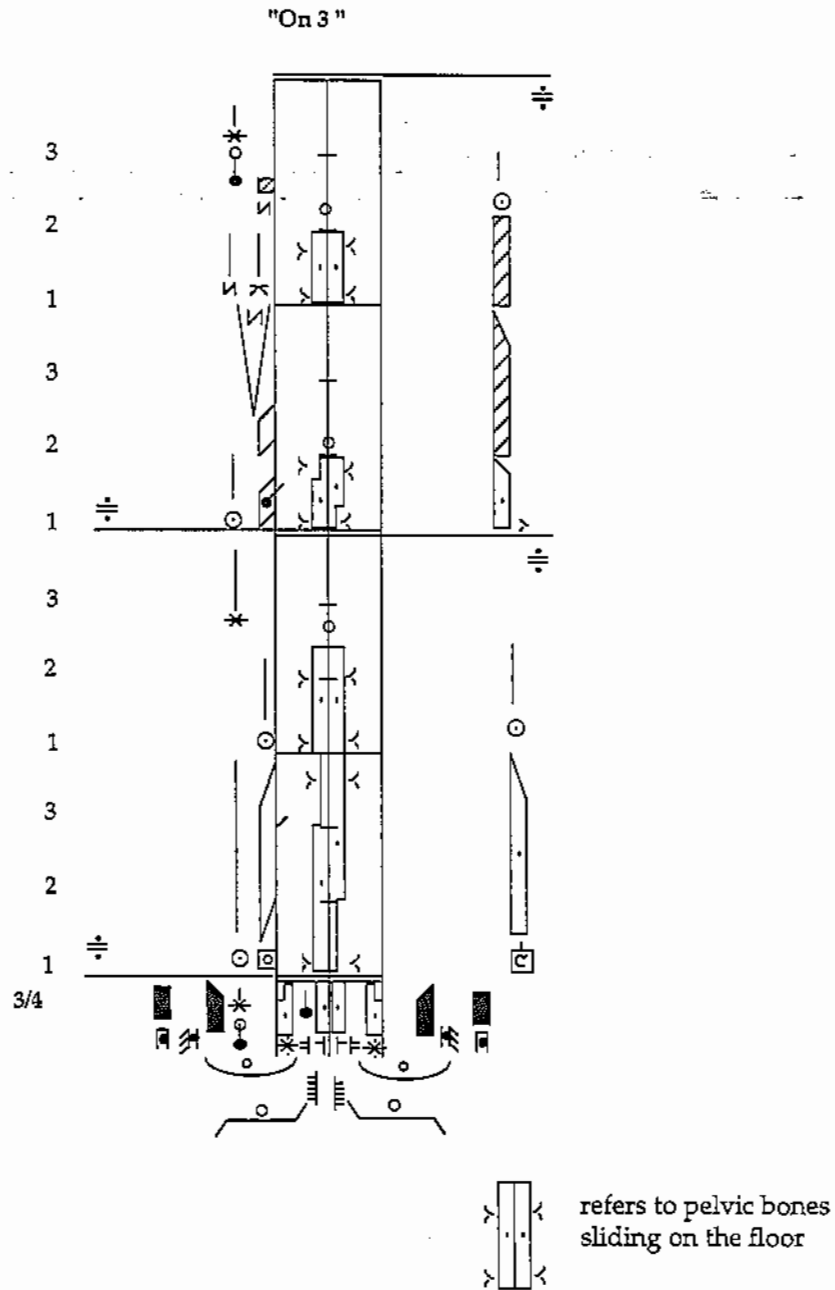
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Appendix One (Hart-Johnson 1984: 50-73)  
 [Extracts from the movement texts for Hart-Johnson's M.A. thesis]

Extract 1

[Seated Spirals on '3' and on '6'; from a technique class exercise. Text written by Hart-Johnson]





**Extract 3**

[‘Motivation’: Joan’s “darts” in *Seraphic Dialogue*. Text written by Dixie Durr]

