

‘Choreography for One, Two, and Three Legs’ (A Phenomenological Meditation in Movements)

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ABSTRACT: ‘Choreography for One, Two, and Three Legs’ approaches the intentional formation of bodily movement and expression from the various perspectives of individuals who are ‘differently abled.’ Exploring what it is for a non-dancer to experience various rhythms and movements and spaces with crutches, prosthetic leg, and cane, the essay interweaves phenomenological description and interpretation of suddenly defamiliarized daily activities with discourse drawn from the experiences of professional dancers who are ‘differently abled’. The aim is to foreground the opacities, transparencies, and ambiguities of a more general sense of embodied and expressive movement that subtends the abled and ‘differently abled’ and the non-dancer and dancer, and to acknowledge the lived and living body as the common ground that enables all of our thoughts, movements, and modes of expression, however differentiated their myriad forms and satisfactions.

I look where the goal is, I am drawn by it, and the whole bodily machine does what must be done for me to get there.¹(Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

‘You only need one leg to pirouette’.
(choreographer Christopher Pilafian to dancer Catherine Cole)²

In the summer of 1993, as the result of a recurrent soft-tissue cancer in my thigh, my left leg – after three operations, literally as well as metaphorically, ‘a drag’ – was amputated high above the knee. For six months or so, while my flesh was still healing and I was engaged in strenuous preliminary rehabilitation, I got about using crutches. Eventually, however, my body was ready to go through the arduous plaster casting, fiberglass molding, and microfitting of a prosthetic leg so that I could begin to learn to walk again – a fairly lengthy and complex process that involved both intensive mechanical adjustment and physical practice. If, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, before my leg became a hermeneutic problem, ‘I move[d] my body without even knowing which muscles and nerve paths should intervene or where I should look for the instruments of this action’, the situation during rehab

was quite different. Rather than the transparent capacity for action and intention the philosopher goes on to describe, my bodily motility no longer absent-mindedly ‘adjusted it[self] to the objective requirements of the task’ – that is, simply, and without a thought, enabled me to walk from here to there. Before the amputation, like most people going about their everyday lives, I just moved in the direction of my intentions without thought of the movement and ‘without access to the inhuman secret of the bodily mechanism’ that got me there. Even if I was relatively graceless, my sense of physical immanence was typically transcended as my attention focused elsewhere – on other things and other thoughts than those, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, of the ‘thousand natural miracles’ my body accomplished as it ‘obey[ed] the requirements of this little drama’.³

During the rehabilitation process of learning to walk with a prosthetic leg, my intense sense of physical immanence refocused my attention from ‘elsewhere’ to a very concrete bodily and spatial ‘here’ and to the very complex choreography I had once performed without a thought. There were all sorts of things I had to learn to do – not only consciously but also in quick sequence or, worse, simultaneously. To take merely one step, I had to kick the prosthetic leg forward and ground the heel, tighten my butt, pull my residual limb back in the fiberglass socket and weight the prosthetic leg over the toe to lock the knee so it would not collapse, take a step with my ‘own’ leg and unweight the prosthetic leg as I did so, and finally tighten my stomach and pull up tall in preparation to kick the prosthetic forward once again. Surprisingly, however, accomplishing all this and achieving some sort of ensemble of movement sufficient for me to walk with a cane took a great deal less time than I feared

it would, given my middle age, general physical clumsiness, and my almost willful lack of intimacy with my own body. Although it was much longer before I developed a smoothly cadenced gait, I was functionally walking in little over a month. Now, 10 years later, as I walk from here to there, I once again ‘look where the goal is’ and my ‘bodily machine does what must be done for me to get there’. But the transparency and ease of my actions are always partial and fragile, even in the best of times phenomenologically qualified by a certain effortfulness, by a certain vigilance, by a certain need to consciously choreograph my life just a bit (and sometimes a lot) in advance of living it.

Are you a dancer with a disability?

‘Oakland, CA, AXIS Dance company is currently seeking men and women, 20–50 years. of age with physical disabilities to fill part-time company positions....[I]f you’re a dancer with a disability, with previous dance or athletic experience, and you have a passion for movement, you’re invited to send your resume and a 10–15 minute video of your dance work to AXIS Dance Company’.⁴

‘We look for stage presence and musicality; we look at how they are inside their body – how do they use their chair, how do they relate to it? ...And then there is that fiery stuff which makes us want to watch anybody’.⁵

‘AXIS’s six dancers with disabilities (half of them survivors of automobile accidents) all had physical training, either in sports or dance, before joining the company. Smith was an equestrian; Megan Shirle was a competitive swimmer and ballroom dancer; Schmitz had been involved in competitive wheelchair sports since his teens; Adame was a flamenco dancer, and Poulin-Denis and AXIS co-founder Bonnie Lewkowicz both had studied a variety of dance idioms before their accidents’.⁶

Here, it needs to be said that even before my leg was amputated I was a lousy dancer. Growing up bookish and living in a big city, it was clear to me from the beginning that, whatever small sense I had of my own bodily rhythm, that rhythm – both literally and metaphorically – was irregular and ‘off beat’. As a child, I learned the box step from my father by mechanically counting aloud and looking down at my feet which always seemed to stiff-leggedly lag behind the numbers; worse, I was forced by my mother (who had always wanted to be a ballerina) to take ballet lessons, taught at the original Metropolitan Opera House by a strict and cold teacher who always eyed my clumsiness not only with disapproval but also with disbelief. Later, at teen dances, no matter how hard I tried, my body refused to follow the lead of all

the boys I did not trust; and, later still, as an adult woman obligatorily (if resentfully) ‘shaping up’ at Jazzercise, I always seemed to be moving in the wrong direction from the roomful of women who gracefully surrounded – and foregrounded – my awkwardness. This awkwardness was not only with my body – but also with space itself, posited as something other and against me rather than of me and for me. Thus, even when I had two seemingly ‘good’ legs, I was never one to plunge into space as if it were an open and hospitable field of possible experience. And, although courageous about many things, I tended to tip-toe or edge into unknown places (however ordinary) with a certain tentativeness born of anxiety, sometimes even of fear. Thus, long before the amputation and having to learn to walk again, I suppose I had often thought ‘choreographically’ – that is, consciously pre-planning and plotting my movements in advance of executing them. Nonetheless, given choreography’s usual association with the aesthetic creation and shaping of dance, I would never have described the inhibited fore-mapping of my movement through space with, what seemed to me, so positive a term.

Homer Avila: Dancer

‘Avila lost his right leg and hip...to...a rare form of cancer’ and now has what he ‘calls his “new morphology,” a new way of looking at his bodily material and technique. Small adjustments to balance executed in tiny shifts and jumps of his left foot, along with the precise counterbalance of his exquisitely refined arms turn Avila’s “new morphology” into an incessant source of strength and beauty’.⁷

‘I do not stand in front of you with the mind-set that I am not a two-legged dancer,’ Avila pointedly tells his...audience. ‘It’s not about looking at an aspect of partial function. What you are seeing is the wholeness of this organism. And what impresses me most about this organism – this corpus – is that you may alter it in so many ways, and still it has this incredible desire to have an expression of life’.⁸

Existential phenomenology describes the lived body (that is, the body as it is experienced) not as an objective and immanent ‘thing’ but as the materialized locus of subjective intentionality, motility, and a transcendent ensemble of ‘capacities’ that allows us access to the world and the realization of our projects. As social philosopher Iris Marion Young puts it (in a discussion of movement ‘inhibited’ by gender): ‘[F]or the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate action of intentions, it cannot exist as an object. As subject, the body is referred not onto itself,

but onto the world's possibilities'.⁹ Furthermore, '[t]he transcendence of the lived body...is a transcendence that moves out from the body in its immanence as an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action. The lived body as transcendence is pure fluid action, the continuous calling-forth of capacities that are applied to the world'.¹⁰

Thus, intentionality (in life as in dance) is motility. In its motility, the lived body as a transcendent capacity and opening to the world not only 'unites itself with its surroundings' but its synthesized movement and orientation also 'organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being'.¹¹ Lived, or phenomenal space, is thus not abstract or geometric or thought; rather, it 'arises out of motility, and lived relations of space are generated by the capacities of the body's motion and the intentional relations that motion constitutes'.¹² Certainly, the lived body as a transcendence regularly meets resistances and opacities both in itself and in the world that forestall its motility and catch it up short in its immanence. However, just as certainly, the lived body more usually comprehends and 'grasps' worldly space as the field of its intentional projects and not as some distanced thing that has to be objectively 'negotiated' and 'navigated' at every turn. And this is still generally the case (albeit at first markedly less so) when one moves in space with agency and the assistance of technological prostheses – be they an automobile, crutches, a prosthetic leg and cane, or a wheelchair. Thus, immanence and transcendence are not two different orders of existence – one emerging on the side of the human body and the other on the side of the technological or artificial. Immanence and transcendence are both modulations of any lived body which is the very 'hinge' of experience – and each of us (no matter how many or what kind of legs we have) live both modalities every day in an extraordinary variety of bodily pleasures, absorptions, pains and frustrations, and flights of imagination, consciousness, and achievement.

AXIS dance company

'As I watched the AXIS performance, I wondered [who had] ever imagined this: A physically integrated dance ensemble including three dancers needing no assistance, two using wheelchairs, one using a leg brace, one using a cane, and a dancer using his only leg to dance a pas de deux, and all of it moving through an evening with no apparent hitches, except when

some of the dancers, with or without disabilities, hitched themselves to wheelchairs as part of the well-turned choreography that characterized the performance. That choreography included works by...artists who clearly see a new set of possibilities in the setting of wheels to music, and the use of such props as a rhinestone-studded cane lowered from the ceiling to the dancer onstage who would perform with it, and how dance movement changes (or doesn't) when it is set on a dancer with one leg or one foot'.¹³

Except when I am in a hurry and completely directed outward from my body to the world and a specific task, to some degree I am always aware of the different choreographies, bodily rhythms, and spaces that attach to and attend my use (or non-use) of my crutches or my prosthetic leg and my cane (not rhinestone-studded). In the best of circumstances, when I feel safe and my world is familiar, this awareness exists vaguely, in the background of my consciousness, as what phenomenologist Don Ihde has called an echo focus. Using Merleau-Ponty's example of a blind man seeing the world at the end of his cane and his own of someone writing on a blackboard with a piece of chalk, Ihde points to the way in which these instruments are literally – if incompletely – incorporated as part of the ensemble that is the lived body accomplishing and absorbed in its intentional projects of walking to get somewhere or writing to communicate something. As Ihde describes this incorporation: 'The chalk [or crutches, prosthetic leg, cane] is only secondarily an "object", while more primarily it is absorbed into my experiencing as an extension of myself. It is true, that the chalk [or crutches, prosthetic leg, cane] is not totally absorbed in that I have what might be called an "echo focus" in which I feel simultaneously a certain pressure at the juncture fingers/chalk [or hands/crutches, residual limb/prosthesis, hand/cane] with what I feel at the end of the chalk [or crutches, prosthetic leg, cane]'.¹⁴ Thus, as we go about our various projects in the world, insofar as we have learned to use them, we incorporate our prostheses and tools and – unless there's a functional problem or they become of interest 'in themselves' – they are experienced as subordinate to our focus on our goals and projects; that is, they are generally the ground of our intentional movement and acts, not the figure.

Nonetheless, the faint 'echo focus' that attends our incorporation of various kinds of prostheses (be they contact lenses, automobiles, or artificial limbs)

can, of course, become primary – both in positive and negative modalities. In the positive mode, the vague ‘echo focus’ of my crutches, prosthetic leg, and cane becomes primary when I am especially aware of their enabling my capacity for transcendence or my virtuosity in their use. In these pleasurable instances, my sense of space also becomes heightened; space is transformed from the invisible ground of my actions into a hospitable and expansive field in which I am aware not only of my own ease of mobility but also of the world’s possibilities for play. However, this ‘echo focus’ also becomes primary when I feel imperiled in strange places rife with resistances and obstacles, when I am extremely tired and feel the weight of my prosthetic leg as an extra burden, and when there is a problem at the ‘juncture’ of my body and instrument (such as chafing) or at the ‘terminus’ of my crutches, prosthetic, or cane (such as the unstable sponginess of grass underfoot). In these negative instances, the relation of my body to its artifacts becomes foregrounded as also does the objective and distanced nature of the space that I had previously grasped and inhabited as a subjective field for my movement. All now become hermeneutic problems – all lose their general transparency, all take on a recalcitrant immanence, all become objects with which I must deal. In this negative mode, both my consciousness and the space around me contract toward my body and I am suddenly rooted to the spot and forced to think my motility rather than live it. And, sometimes (if only rarely), simultaneous with this unbalancing of the usual transparent synchrony and synthesis of my lived body and the world, I am completely ungrounded and I fall.

Homer Avila: Dancer

(‘Not/without words’ choreographed by Homer Avila)

[T]he solo work...places Avila first invisibly inside a box. Tossing out shoes, then a sock, ...Avila reveals himself with the words, ‘I lost my shoe’. A comical first jab at his obvious loss of more than his shoe, the piece continues with a both funny and increasingly poignant litany of loss. ‘I lost my innocence’, he offers as he tosses a teddy bear from the box. Falling out of the box, Avila begins a dance that is both daring – with several jumps and turns – and vulnerable as embodied in his falls to the floor. It is, in the end, when he stands staunch still on his left leg atop a small, school child’s desk, that Avila intones, ‘I lost my leg. I lost my fear.’¹⁵

(‘Solo’ choreographed by Victoria Marks)

Avila stands on his one leg alone in the middle of a darkened campus dance studio as a soft spot spills light around him. Against the amplified sound of a single sustained note, his sinewy muscles tense, his face is a frozen mask without expression. Suddenly, the music breaks free and begins to race. He boldly throws his body across the space, catapulting in arcs that seem to defy gravity. Tumbling, flying, jumping, he is a blur of frenetic movement until he falls to his side, his profile starkly silhouetted against the floor. With limbs pumping wildly, Avila desperately runs in place, a sprinter anchored to one spot on the floor.¹⁶

Through the course of a single day, my mode and experience of movement shifts and changes. As is the case with anyone else, this is, in part, because, through the course of a day, I inhabit different kinds of space (both safe and perilous) and engage in myriad different tasks and projects (both familiar and strange). However, more singularly, these shifts in my modes of bodily movement tend to be more varied, occur more frequently, and occupy my self-consciousness more often than is the case with most people. This is because, over a relatively short period of time, I am variously one-legged, two-legged, and three-legged (as well as, in my car, four-wheeled). Each of these incarnations involves its own bodily rhythm, speed, and ‘protocol’ – and because I shift my mode of movement several times a day, there are regular and marked ruptures in my lived body’s transcendence as ‘pure fluid action’. That is, every time I change my crutches for my prosthetic leg, every time I take off the leg and switch to crutches, and every time I find myself dependent upon only one leg or am occasionally compelled to use a wheelchair to get through the impossibly vast stretches of an airport, I am self-consciously referred back to myself and my bodily immanence, to the different sets of conditions and protocols attached to my motility, and to consideration of the objective spaces that need to be negotiated as they are taken up as my subjective world. In a certain sense, then, I am not so far removed from the self-consciousness and bodily calculation that occupy athletes and dancers – if perhaps not in performance, then surely in preparation.

Unless I am sleeping, in the shower, sitting at my desk at home for long periods of time, or out of town for a conference or lecture without my crutches (although with my cane) in a strange hotel room, I am rarely one-legged. Sitting and sleeping do not require

a conscious choreography, but negotiating a hotel room on one leg late at night or early in the morning before I put on my prosthesis most certainly does. When I arrive (and before I take off my leg to get ready for bed), I have learned to ‘case the joint’: if the room is small and the bed not far from the bathroom, I calculate the distance in hops – but have to factor in the placement of furniture, doors, walls and moldings I might hold onto for stability and safety; if the room is large, I also have learned to move the available chairs around in advance of my one-leggedness. Indeed, I am most proud of a recent instance at a truly dismal Budapest hotel suite in which the bed was in a completely different room and quite distant from the bath. It was quite clear that hopping would not do – and crawling on the suspect carpet was not, even to my tired view, an option. My initial despair turned to triumph, however – for I was able to form a spaced-out and sinuous curve of chairs that allowed me to hop, sit, turn toward the next, get up, hop, sit, and turn toward the next safely to arrive at what, at first, had seemed an impossible goal. Although it sometimes emerges from desperation, improvisation is a very liberating intentional activity.

Victoria Marks: Choreographer

During 20 years of dance making, Marks has developed an exceptionally catholic approach to the questions ‘What is a dancer?’ and ‘What is a dance?’ She has choreographed for mixed-ability dancers, for nondancers such as mother–daughter and father–daughter teams, for a group of middle-aged men from a small town in Canada, and for clergy and their families in metropolitan Houston. But just as often she has choreographed for highly skilled professionals, including herself...Though Marks wouldn’t deny a virtuoso dancer is capable of different things than an elderly man, she also believes every person embodies a human drama that can be observed. ‘I am really interested in the body in action and what different bodies say when they move.’¹⁷

The raw materials for Marks’ dances are real relationships and human problems, not necessarily virtuosity. ‘I’m as interested in a tic in somebody’s face as I am in big spirals of movement’, [she says].¹⁸

Whereas once it was my normative human condition, I am now only rarely – and momentarily – two-legged. This is usually in my kitchen which is long and narrow with counters on both sides. Here I can stand on my prosthesis and take a step or two without having to use my cane (which is always nearby). The

cane is generally a necessity because, without something to help stabilize my movement, my residual limb has so little femur and so much flesh that the latter would torque in the leg’s socket and make me wobble as I walked. Nonetheless, in my kitchen, I achieve a certain level of grace – stepping a step or two, using the counter as a brace when I need it. In other circumstances, my two-leggedness is really a cheat. In the supermarket, I seemingly walk on two legs only, my cane hung on the handle of the grocery cart I push through the aisles. But the accurate accountancy here is not two but six – given the wheels of the cart that far too often take me (and others) in directions we do not wish to go.

Most of the time, however, I am three-legged – but this in two quite different modalities: each dependent on whether I am using my crutches or my prosthesis and cane. If one learns how to use crutches properly, they are extraordinarily liberating. Indeed, one can move more quickly and with greater exuberance on crutches than on one’s own two legs (whether prosthetic or not). The span of one’s gait increases and there is a cadenced and graceful ‘swing through’ effect that not only covers ground but also propels the lived body forward in pleasingly groundless ways not allowed by mere walking. There is, both phenomenologically and empirically, a ‘lift’ to one’s step. Early on after the amputation, before I could be cast for a prosthetic, I became quite adept with crutches. I could climb long flights of stairs and – what was even more of an accomplishment – come down them (something I can no longer do because I am out of practice and it seems terrifying). Now I use the crutches when I’m not going to leave my home for a lengthy period of time and always in the early morning and late at night – and they are, for me, the most effortless means of getting about. Crutches do make it difficult to carry things, however, and sometimes – because it’s easy not to think about using them – they can be very dangerous, catching on the corner of a rug or slipping on a wet spot or even a tiny piece of paper on the floor. Nonetheless, at home, the crutches generally allow me to lope through my domestic life. Indeed, I can understand why one woman amputee I met who had been a (non-professional) dancer much preferred crutches to the prosthetic that she felt weighed her down and grounded her – she wore the latter only for housework because it let her more easily push around the vacuum cleaner.

Catherine Cole: Dancer

(‘Pirouette’: choreographed by Christopher Pilafian)

‘The piece is built around vignettes of people in ordinary, everyday situations: making toast, driving in traffic, doing laundry....Though it seems paradoxical that a woman of 38 would lose her leg and decide to start dancing, it is, for me, a logical progression. In order to get around in my everyday life now, I have to be quite dancerly. Both on crutches and on my prosthesis, I have to have fabulous balance, strength, flexibility, agility and stamina. So dance is an extension of physical abilities I have had to acquire in recent months’.¹⁹

Catherine Cole walks on to the stage on two legs and crutches. After she takes off her dress and puts aside her crutches, the audience can see a prosthetic leg that reaches to her hip. She calmly removes the prosthetic, tells the audience that she has never danced before, and observes that a pirouette requires only one leg. She begins to dance – both by herself and, at times, joined by two other dancers (hence the pun in the program’s name). At first, the choreography seems to be about overcoming the limitations of having only one leg (and crutches) with which to accomplish the simplest and most ordinary tasks: doing the laundry or sweeping the floor. But actions initially signaled as effortful become highly – and gracefully – accomplished, performed by a virtuoso not ‘overcoming’ but ‘becoming’. After finishing her danced housework, Cole, on crutches, carries on stage a glass of champagne gripped in her teeth, sits down in an armchair, and slowly, with great satisfaction, drinks it.

Particularly when I’m at home and using my crutches, I take great satisfaction and pleasure in carving out with the trajectory and cadence of my movement a certain orderliness and sequence to my actions. There is a phenomenological sense of function and economy that informs and aestheticizes the most mundane of my domestic chores when I am using my crutches. I may drape my arms with some clothing that needs hanging up, stuff a few small items into my pockets, put various and sundry into a small tote bag I can carry along with the crutches – depositing and gathering up the stuff of my life from room to room as I go. Moving as I do through my home, selecting and picking things up as I go, carrying them from one place to another, and sequencing my actions so as to conserve physical energy has become not merely a practical activity but also a practiced one. Although there is no audience but myself, I applaud my virtuosity – my clean calculation of sequencing my tasks and movements through the rooms, the smoothness of my gait and the firmness of my grasp on both my crutches and the objects in my life. Indeed, this economy of movement (and the strategic plotting that enables it) is extraordinarily

pleasing – something, I think, that must be akin to the aesthetic of ‘parsimony’ that is one of the criteria for elegant theory: the most being accomplished in the fewest of moves. Here function is transformed into an immanent practical aesthetic, its practice into a fluid and transcendently expressive art. Thus, safe at home in familiar space, my swinging, horizontal body movement on crutches gives me pleasure: not only does it express my functional fluency, but it also allows me to apprehend and appreciate bodily a certain expressive transcendence of gravity, an aspect of dance I was never able to feel when I was actually – and clumsily – dancing.

Conversely, walking in my three-legged mode using my prosthetic leg and cane seems – above all else – ‘merely’ functional. That is, the prosthetic and cane literally ground me in gravity (and *gravitas*) in ways that the crutches do not and I do not ‘enjoy’ my use of them in any conscious way as an aesthetic or expressive activity. Indeed, at its best, this mode of three-legged motility is transparent – that is, its enablement of my realization of my intentions is grounding rather than figured as a movement I might think of applauding in self-congratulation as expressive or virtuosic. The great irony here, of course, is that even in its most mundane and functional instances, this transparency of unsung motion is achieved only through my body’s greatest virtuosity (now ‘downgraded’ to unremarkable habit) and (now unnoted) expressivity – both of which inform every other virtuosic and expressive thing I do. In sum, I have so embodied the prosthetic and cane and the movements and rhythms we daily perform together, that I quite literally pay them no mind and give them no credit.

For me, as its spectator, dance has always constituted the lived body as something much more than merely immanent and functional – and, made for me to watch (and perhaps to vicariously feel), its movements never seem transparent. Dance to me seems born – and borne – as always transcendently expressive in both of its two primary modalities. In one mode, the body’s functionality is extended to an extreme degree and becomes virtuosic in its immanent achievement of a ‘feat’. Effortfulness is allegorized and appreciated as an aesthetic of determination that becomes beautiful and wondrous because it technically accomplishes what the transcendent will desires; we look at the body in its immanence as it transcends

or overcomes its own and the world's resistances. In the other mode, the body's functionality is transcended not by will and determination but by expressivity. Here the body seems fluid, its movements effortless. As if in a state of benediction, it doesn't seem to defy gravity so much as achieve a weightless form of grace that suggests the potential realization of infinite capacities. Here, the body operates, even as we see its immanence, as a transcendence – its actions allegorized and appreciated as an aesthetic of transparency, as open and undetermined. Indeed, in this mode, the body in its transparency and transcendence of immanence overcomes nothing; rather it becomes the very condition of possibility itself.

I have articulated these modes of dance in binary terms but they are, in fact, imbricated each in the other – indeed, allegorizing by enacting the reversible and cooperative sides of bodily existence. Highlighted in dance, but experienced by all of us, our bodily immanence and transcendence, willful determination and thoughtless expressivity constitute the stuff not only of a dialectic but also of the on-going dialogue we have with ourselves, the world, and others. Thus, it is worth emphasizing, what is perceived as bodily immanence by one person may be experienced as transcendence by another – and it is not determined which perception or experience will belong to the dancer and which to the on-looker. Illuminating in this regard is that any inkling I had of my body's potential grace and power came from its supposed 'disablement'. After the amputation, I had to become familiar with my body and its rhythms and gravity to walk again. The process was, for me, empowering. Certainly, looked at objectively, my body appears less functional than it once was, somehow more pronounced in its immanence and effort. Nonetheless, I am more subjectively intimate with its possibilities for transcendence than I was before the amputation. I can feel my own effort and strength and they are, for me, transcendentally extensional. I know where my muscles are and where my center of gravity is located. This almost professional awareness and control over my body, this intimacy with it as a set of extraordinary capacities I previously never knew I had, give me – dare I say – some inkling of the pleasures I presume are experienced by an athlete or dancer. Thus, although I certainly had to 'overcome' the reductive disadvantages and limitations of my disability, I also

found my bodily experience newly expanded and amplified in a transcendent and empowered mode of 'becoming'.

'I've never done this sort of work before'

Catherine Cole: Dancer

'There's no question: Daily life is much, much harder now as a monopod. Fixing meals, doing the laundry, getting around school, etc. – it's all quite difficult. But when I go into the studio, I don't feel the loss or limitation, because I've never done this sort of work before. Once something so radical happens to your body, you have to remake yourself.'²⁰

John Beauregard: Dancer

As an ardent 'ski bum' for 30 years, Beauregard also loved taking physical risks. A carpenter, he broke his neck in a fall ...and found himself using a wheelchair, with limited use of even his upper body...In dance he has found a replacement for the physical highs he got as a skier....For a while he skied in a chair, but he kept comparing it to his former thrills. 'With the dance thing I never had experience like this before, so it's priceless. I couldn't have done this better before than I do now.'²¹

Choreographer Victoria Marks has said 'Verticality for gravity, the horizontal for desire'.²² Whereas I sense myself propelled horizontally forward as I swing through my crutches, I have the sense of being intensely vertical using my prosthetic leg and my cane. For one thing, so that my prosthetic can bear my weight and keep from collapsing at the knee (it has no preventative 'brake' on it for that would make the leg less responsive to my bodily rhythm), I have to feel my gravity and plant my being through the prosthetic to the ground. As well, to unweight the prosthetic to take the next step, I have to stretch my abdominal muscles and pull myself up tall. Indeed, although I had always had reasonably good posture, it was even better after I started wearing the prosthetic. Thus, in this three-legged state, my sense of gravity rules my sense of desire – the latter always, shall we say, a 'step ahead' of my presently securing the ground on which I stand. Although this syncopation and near doubling of my spatial and temporal consciousness has become almost autonomic, there are times when it can be exhausting – no more so than when I have to get to a meeting by traversing the rain-slicked marble or tile floors that seem to be the very empirical grounding of university bureaucracy. Here, my desire is 'horizontalized' but cramped – truly only a step ahead – as I search the floor for dry spots where my cane would not suddenly slip and unbalance me.

At the very same time, all my gravity (and gravitas) solidifies to secure me in the place of my stance and in my present verticality. Simultaneously, I am rooted to the spot and yearning for forward movement. My embodied intentionality is at odds with itself – and, as its argument continues, my concentration on my movements and the space must intensify its focus in response and I grow quickly tired.

Nonetheless, the prosthetic and cane now afford my normative mode of motility and, when the sun is shining and I am not in the wilds, I generally take it so for granted that it is hard to track a particular choreography. Like everyone else walking about the world, I only notice my movement when it is challenged. Stairs and inclines provide the stage for the most blatant challenges (aside from rain-slicked floors). I go up and down stairs bringing one foot up or down to meet the other before moving on to the next step. There is, in fact, a definite protocol which, in fact, is the opposite of the one for crutches in a similar situation: prosthetic leg down first, good leg up first. Inclines (made for wheelchairs) force me to ‘side-step’ upward if they are steep and I have to take very, very short steps downward so I can get my weight over the ball of my prosthetic foot. Certainly, the cadence and rhythm of my everyday walk is also distinctive. I come down harder on my left prosthetic heel than on my right, the cane in my right hand thrust a bit ahead of me and touching the ground at the same time as the prosthetic heel.

What I notice most in this normative mode, however, is not my own choreography but the constantly shifting morphology of the space that surrounds me and, while allowing me a horizontal and horizontal field of possibilities and desire, also potentially threatens my stability and vertical grounding. In sum, to a lesser or greater degree depending upon obstacles and resistances, as I move about the world on my prosthetic leg and with a cane, I do so in a ‘doubled’ mode of spatial embodiment that Young has described as exhibiting ‘an ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings’.²³ Focusing on the social effects of gender construction that affect the female body and its spatial ‘situation’, what Young has to say about the constraints and bodily inhibitions that many women experience in their living of worldly space to a great degree also applies to those of us (whatever our gender) who are ‘disabled’ or ‘differently abled’ (or

whatever), and who realize – whether suddenly or routinely – that the world is not their dance floor.

CandoCo Dance Company

Have you ever seen a man with no legs gracefully perform a delicate ballet of complicated maneuvers using only his arms and torso? Or seen a couple of paraplegics spiraling in their wheelchairs in an exhilarating swirl as agile dancers leap over them in gravity-defying choreography? If not, then you obviously haven’t witnessed the contemporary dance phenomenon, CandoCo.²⁴

[Celeste] Dandeker [who, with Adam Benjamin, co-founded the integrated company in 1991] insists that ‘everybody’s body is different, but that does not inhibit the instinct to dance’....There is no ideal form for dance – no pretty picture....[The choreographers] use a lot of contact improvisational work which allows the dancers to move, propel themselves and shift gravity using each other’s bodies, as if connected. Wheelchairs becomes seamless extensions of the users’ bodies as they glide and slide across the floor in movement patterns so fluid they create new idioms....Nor do they shy away from difficult emotions or issues. Their works have highlighted sexuality, relationships between the ‘normal’ and the disabled, social disenfranchisement, abuse, paranoia, abandonment.²⁵

The term is ‘freak show’....CandoCo is not about art....This sorry excuse of a show is about the random cruelties of the human body and our species’ ghoulish interest in car crashes, train wrecks, and other horrors....as a dance critic I want to avert my eyes.²⁶

What might Young mean by ‘ambiguous transcendence’, ‘inhibited intentionality’, and a ‘discontinuous unity’ with one’s surroundings? To paraphrase her response in terms particularly relevant here to my prosthetic experience: the ‘source of these contradictory modalities is the bodily self-reference of [prosthetic] comportment, which derives from the [user’s] experience of her body as a thing at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity’.²⁷ Take, for example, my crossing the street at a traffic light. My transcendence is ambiguous because, although I am mobile and directed across the street toward the transcendent achievement of whatever my real goal is, I am, for what seems the most elongated moment, also redirected to my bodily immanence to worry about, whether or not I can traverse the street in the normative time the traffic light allots – and experience tells me that it doesn’t allot sufficient time for the disabled or, indeed, the elderly to cross without anxiety. Thus my intentionality – the streaming forth and outer-directedness away from awareness of my body

and toward my worldly projects – is suddenly forestalled, in Young's terms, 'inhibited'. And, most prominent in my awareness, I feel, to use Young's phrase, in 'discontinuous unity' with my surroundings. Our bodies and the world are always dialectically engaged – each in relation to and transforming the shape of the other. Thus, for me, as I cross with my cane and prosthetic leg, the street no longer has an objective size or stable shape. The 'here' where my body is located is suddenly incredibly distanced from the 'yonder' which is where it wants to go, the street's width expanding ever more as the graphic hand on the traffic signal flashes the warning that the light is about to change and I am only halfway across.

This experience and its attendant anxiety is common. But it is less horrifying than the fact that when I am four-wheeled in my car, for all my prosthetic experience, I still find myself residually resenting elderly people – with canes – crossing the street so slowly that I know I will have to wait to go even after the light has changed. In my car, my spatial embodiment and motility are stable and transcendent, my intentionality is only inhibited by the ebb and flow of cars and traffic lights, and my unity with my surroundings is continuous. Made impatient in my car by the breakup of my 'flow', the rupture in the transcendence of my 'pure fluid actions', the slowed and inhibited motility, temporality, and spatiality of those beings crossing the street is alien to me. And yet, of course, it is familiar – and not just to me but to all of us. No one is exempt here. While these alien and effortful crossings remind me of my present inhibitions and constraints (and cause me shame), they remind others of 'the random cruelties of the human body' and their own impending and inhibited physical forestallment (and cause them hostility and anger at the 'freak show').

Writing this, I have been extremely aware of how difficult it has been for me to foreground my movement with my prosthesis and cane as anything but inhibited. My other modes of movement seem either more potentially joyful (as with the bravura lent me by my crutches) or exceptional (as hopping about a hotel room on one leg). Indeed, most of what I have described in particular about my usual prosthetic movement – walking with my prosthetic leg and cane – has been characterized as a hermeneutic (and negative) experience. In a way, I cannot help this. In its positive mode, my successful movement is invisible to

me, overwhelmed and occluded by my focus on my tasks. The fact that I have a prosthetic leg in these instances is irrelevant. It would be as if I had asked you to write about your own daily choreography. We get up and go to work and walk about in parking lots and office spaces. We go to the gym and work out. We go to the store, the movies, museums, the gas station and the doctor. Indeed, the quotidian and usual motion that allows us to simply (or complexly) get about our business and pleasure in the world is the norm for each of us (however singular in gait it may be) – and thus it is generally transparent, invisible, hard to fix precisely because it isn't fixed but fluid and improvisational, unthought as an object of consciousness.

Thus, it is primarily the rupture of that bodily transparency and fluidity that we mark as a figure against the invisible ground of our acts of active being. Hence my focus on – and my precision – about the negative experiences that forestall my movement, that bring it to the forefront of my consciousness and force its observation. In the flow that is the quotidian living of my life, the moving of my movement, I do not foreground the beating of my heart, the pulsing of my blood, the motions of my body. I generally live and move undisclosed to myself in my particulars. It is usually the negative instance that forestalls the transparency of living and moving that literally comes to mind and consciousness: a headache, something in my eye, a paper cut on my finger, the chafing of my prosthetic leg. Writing of the lived body and what he calls its general and foundational absence as a focal point of our existence, Drew Leder points to the emergence of its presence in a negative mode as a 'disappearance': 'Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction; we then experience the body as the very absence of a desired or ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self'.²⁸ The desired or ordinary state of our bodily being is its transcendence of its own immanence – that is, its enabling absence. Thus, pain, disease, social breakdown, the physical inability to do something make us conscious of the absence of that absence – this sort of double negative creating a disruptive positive, and forcing us from our outer-directedness to an implosive self-consciousness of our immanent bodily presence.

Nonetheless, while this kind of bodily presence to mind may be generally born of dysfunction, more particularly and rarely it can – and is – also born of creative or constitutive attention. The choreographer and performer in creating a dance, the prosthetic user, prosthetist, and physical therapist in constituting a fluid and cadenced movement find more than occasional pleasure in the body's presence and hermeneutic status, in taking up the body as figure even as it also serves as absent and taken-for-granted ground.

Victoria Marks (Choreographer)

'I despise dancing, and I love dancing....Every time I make a dance, I have to make an argument of why it must happen. I cannot take it for granted'.²⁹

Given that tracing my choreography here may have seemed to characterize my prosthetic leg as more of a bodily burden than an incorporated enablement of my being, let me – for a brief and somewhat romanticized moment – dance on it. This was a dance that had to happen, that was argued for as both an act of closure and an opening. While I cannot describe my steps with precision since I (as my body) was transcendently absent to the particulars of my presence – although not to the particulars of my pleasure – I can describe both the staging and the transformation of my movement.

Five years ago, on the occasion of his fortieth birthday, my prosthetist – the man who carefully and lovingly made my leg – threw a party at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas to celebrate. He invited family and friends and a band and rented a large room deep in the bowels of what is, spatially, one of the largest hotels in the city. Indeed, it was no easy task just walking across the length of the lobby and then to my room. That evening, I wore a dress for the first time in a long while – this so all of Steve's family and friends could see and admire his extraordinary handiwork (or, more precisely, his leg work). And I wore high (or, at least, higher) heels – this to show off the graceful shape of the cosmetic foam cover he had sculpted to cover the cold mechanics and hydraulics beneath. All dressed up, I not only felt pretty; I also – and in celebration – felt like a testimonial. After all, this was the man who knew my aging body and my ageless will perhaps more intimately and approvingly than had any other man in my life, and I wanted to thank him.

Unfortunately, when we met in the lobby and found out how far away the party was being held, it was clear that I would need a wheelchair to get there – and so, wheelchair provided by the hotel and pushed by my prosthetist, a group of us set off. For me, this was a literal 'come down' from my pre-party 'high'. You are cut down a peg or two in a wheelchair: all the talk and action goes on above your head and, even as you are pushed, you are sometimes forgotten. (The alternative is literal condescension – which cannot be avoided as people stoop to talk to you.) Although I had started the evening in a state of transcendence (I was, after all, wearing a flirty dress and high heels), I was now sitting in my own foreshortened immanence, my shoes (both of them) planted awkwardly on the foot supports, and being – what seemed endlessly – wheeled across a red carpet that threaded its way through long, empty, and cavernous hallways.

The room for the party was a rather barren square of a place with temporary tables hidden under tablecloths and undisguised folding chairs, some balloons and streamers, a buffet table, and a bar (for which I was deeply grateful). I began the evening somewhat stiff-leggedly – awkward from my wheelchair entrance, studied as I introduced myself to relatives and friends not my own, and exhibitionistic as I announced myself as Steve's former patient, lifted my skirt a little, and showed off my prosthetist's limb. A little drink and talk loosened me up and, during the actual testimonials, I spoke quite eloquently – and singularly – about the impact that the guest of honor had had on my life, my gratitude for his care and artistry, and for the strange intimacy that had turned into friendship. Then the music began – the 'band' all of two people with a synthesizer – and I sat down to watch as guests got up to dance. But not for long.

When the music slowed, my prosthetist came to my table and asked me to dance. My first reaction was, in no small part, terror. Not only was my body suffused with memories of dancing badly in public even before I had a prosthetic leg, but it was also stiffened by the fear of falling – or was it flying? 'I can not', I said. But Steve would not take 'no' for an answer. 'You can', he said. (CandoCo, indeed!) And he pulled me up from the table, took my cane from my hand and hung it on my chair, and, putting my hand on his shoulder and his around my waist, he moved me into a space on the dance floor. 'Listen to the music and trust me', he said – and I realized that, unlike all those teenage

boys whose lead I refused to follow, I could – and I felt myself relax, yield to the music and the rhythm and the improvisational give and take of the bodily movement we made together. I forgot to look at my feet. I forgot to think choreographically – that is, in specific terms of my individual steps and also ahead of them. And although, unlike Catherine Cole, I did not end this dance with a pirouette on one leg, for the moment I did displace focus on my bodily immanence to the transcendent ensemble of our movement and I really began to waltz.

Of course, to end here would be far too romantic and give too much symbolic weight to what, after all, was a moment and movement now re-remembered – its conferral of grace the product (and project) of nostalgia. Indeed, I still do not dance. Despite my deepened intimacy with my body, my past sense of stiff-legged awkwardness still overshadows the specificity of my present disability – although I am glad to use the latter as a convenient alibi. More important, however, I have what are for me far better things to do – which are, in fact, the things that I do better. The choreographic arrangements and articulations of the movement of my thoughts more easily find their substance, temporality, and expressiveness on the page than on the stage. Nonetheless, even as my effortful determination and (occasionally) effortless grace emerge in the transcendent immanence of writing rather than of dancing, they do so from – and in continuity with – my deeply lived sense of bodily movement, rhythm, and meaning. Although, in context, it may seem a way for me to side-step the dance floor, to speak of thought and writing as choreography and dance (or, for that matter, of choreography and dance as thought and writing) is not to constitute a metaphor. Rather, it is to acknowledge the lived and living body as the common ground that enables all of our thoughts, movements, and modes of expression, however differentiated their myriad forms and satisfactions. Indeed, as Alphonso Lingis so eloquently reminds us: ‘Human bodies...move in the world...leaving traces...rustlings, footsteps, murmurs, coughs, sighs, echoes, winks, sweat, tears. Their freedom is a material freedom by which they decompose whatever nature they were given and whatever form culture put on them, leaving the lines their fingers or feet dance in the street or the fields, scattering their colours in the sunlight and shadows’.³⁰

Notes

- ¹ Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 77.
- ² Smith 2001, p. 6.
- ³ Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 77.
- ⁴ Amputee sports web site.
- ⁵ Feliciano 2002, pp. 59–61.
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 61.
- ⁷ Ward 2002.
- ⁸ Lee 2003, p. 11.
- ⁹ Young 1990, p. 150.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 148.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p. 149.
- ¹² Ibid. p.151.
- ¹³ Singer 2002.
- ¹⁴ Ihde 1974, p. 271.
- ¹⁵ Ward 2002.
- ¹⁶ Lee 2003, p. 10.
- ¹⁷ Feliciano 2003.
- ¹⁸ Amirrezvani 2003.
- ¹⁹ Cole, quoted in Jacobs 2001.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Levin 2003.
- ²² Feliciano 2003.
- ²³ Young 1990, p. 147.
- ²⁴ Chew 2000.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Scott 1999.
- ²⁷ Young 1990, p. 147.
- ²⁸ Leder 1990, p. 4.
- ²⁹ Marks quoted in Feliciano 2003.
- ³⁰ Lingis 1993, p. 167.

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