

THE COSMIC DANCE

Reflections on the 'De Musica' of St Augustine

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RELIGIOUS thought and feeling in the West have never, for a reason which will become apparent, evolved so direct and satisfying a symbol of divine activity in the world as that of Shiva dancing. Those who are even slightly conversant with the iconography of this Hindu god will recognize that, whether we find him represented in the wild, destructive dance which expresses his purgatorial power, as in the seventh-century stone-carvings of Kanchi, or in the gracious *pas seul* of the later bronzes, where his primitive force has been confined within the flowing rhythms of an exquisite art-object, here at least we are faced with the embodiment of an experience of the universe which is prior to all commentary.¹ Our ability to recognize this fact is, however, the most immediate and sufficient proof that the experience as such is not the peculiar property of the peoples of India. I do not know whether it has ever been suggested that St Augustine's *De Musica* may be considered as a fully developed treatise on this theme, perhaps even unique in its kind, but I propose in the following pages to present it in this way. Certainly I myself have found that with the representations of Shiva as an imaginative support, many of the more hidden connections in a work which involves not a few obscurities become psychologically intelligible, and that what might be judged to be a dialogue of purely antiquarian interest assumes a quite contemporary importance. As the divine activity in the world takes more than one form, so Shiva has more than once dance, and at first sight it is difficult to convince oneself that the hostile destroyer and the wholly sympathetic performer of a dance which is pure delight are figures of one and the same god. Coomaraswamy in a short essay² has shown how real the connection is, and it is odd that one who was so interested and so learned in Western parallels makes no allusion to the fact that Augustine also explores what is radically the same problem, and brings to bear on it both his Christian dogma and his personal insight.

1 I owe my own acquaintance with these figures to my friend Dr Cohn of the Department of Eastern Art, Oxford.

2 Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, Bombay, 1948.

That there is, indeed, what can only be called a 'cosmic dance' is a notion which is thoroughly biblical, though in reading the Scriptures nowadays we find it less in evidence, largely because we have lost all sense of the Hebrew conception of time. The most familiar passage on the subject, Ecclesiastes 3, 1-17, which asserts that 'all things have their season', that there is 'a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up . . . a time to mourn and a time to dance', scarcely makes its proper impression until scholars like Pedersen remind us that 'for the Israelite time is not merely a form or frame. Time is charged with substance or, rather, is identical with its substance; time is the development of the very events.'³ Events move in a rhythm of which in a certain way the sun, moon and stars are the masters, not being set merely as some chronometer for casual reference, marking the time. They make it, with its signs and seasons. They 'rule over the day and over the night', as the opening chapter of the Bible declares. How like us, who have learned to make daylight when we require it, to miss the tacit acknowledgment of Genesis that the celestial bodies are genuine powers which men could almost be excused for worshipping were they not told that they too are creatures and that 'the Lord who dwelleth on high is mightier'. Indeed, without that ultimate assurance of the divine overlordship, things which are not by nature gods, become so. Shiva considered, not as an admirable symbol, but precisely as a god, is an understandable expression of a very real fact of experience, and his birth in the imagination as a being distinct from the one Lord is envisaged in the warning of Deuteronomy 4, 19. Once lose touch with the experience it presupposes, and the warning loses all significance too.

To this scriptural and dogmatic statement St Augustine's *De Musica* is, as we shall see, strictly complementary, or perhaps one should rather say ancillary. The work belongs to his early, philosophical period, having been started in Milan during his catechumenate in 387 and most probably completed not more than two years later on his return to Africa. H. I. Marrou, however, argues persuasively for supposing the sixth book, as we now have it, to have been a revision which must be assigned to some time during Augustine's episcopate.⁴ Whatever new features this

³ J. Pedersen, *Israel*, I-II, p. 487.

⁴ H. I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, Paris, 1949, p. 580 ff.

revision incorporated into the first draft, it seems improbable that the general line of argument departs substantially from the original plan, which from the beginning envisaged an unexpectedly lofty philosophical denouement. For the *De Musica*, itself only one of a projected series of manuals on the liberal arts, is ostensibly concerned simply with an exposition of the rules of 'music', as understood in the schools of the time. We should, today, think of it as a metrical treatise, dealing almost exclusively with the rhythm and structure of verse. It is only at the opening of the sixth book that Augustine reveals an ulterior motive for this secular pursuit. We realize that after the lengthy ascetic exercise of considering number as it relates to quantity in metre, and so as it pertains to the science of right rhythm or modulation in a limited and technical sense, we are to be led by the contemplative ladder of other kinds of numbers to a science of right rhythm as it pertains to the whole creation. The prospect of being brought face to face with that strange, Pythagorean, mathematical world which so fascinated Augustine is not perhaps an encouraging one. Yet the *De Musica* provides a quite exceptional opportunity for perceiving why he found it so adequate to his purposes. We may even find upon closer examination that it is, in his mind, a rather different thing from what we had supposed.

Anyone who was asked to say what, in general, was the most strikingly modern feature of Augustine's thought would almost certainly name at once the impression that the world is in a continuous state of flux. If we may draw a somewhat unfair contrast, it is the very antithesis of the thirteenth-century world which is, one feels, assuredly lucid even before one reflects upon it, and static before one sets it in motion. Augustine's problem, in a world in which space expands, time is forever passing,⁵ and the deliverances of the senses are an habitual betrayal,⁶ is to find anything still enough for him to begin to think at all. Intelligibility starts precisely at that point where a recognizable pattern emerges from this chaotic movement and gives it even an impermanent definiteness. It is this definiteness that is expressed for Augustine in terms of number. For only let a thing assume a certain shape, or behave in a certain regular manner, and at least a world of

⁵ 'illa tument, ista praetereunt.' (*De Musica* VI, xii, 34.) (All references are to the Maurist edition of St Augustine.)

⁶ Augustine uses of them the adjective *lubricus*, 'slippery', 'deceitful'. (*ibid.*, VI, xi, 33.)

relationships is set up. From this, of course, follows only a relative intelligibility, which depends a good deal upon the point of view one takes up,⁷ but still a thing's proportions within itself, its disposition, temper and line of development, as well as its likeness to other things may now be expressed numerically,⁸ or perhaps one could more conveniently say, rhythmically. If there were not intervals of space between the eyes, nose and mouth there could be no face; if one note did not succeed to another there could be no music; a sound may depend for its effect upon the silence that follows it, an isolated object upon its relation to the place in which it stands⁹. The rhythmic development of a growing tree in space presupposes also a temporal rhythm, the whole cycle of its life being set in motion by the most secret rhythm that brings it back to the seed.¹⁰

As we shall see later, for Augustine, these rhythms as they are realized in the world carry with them an impression of being only approximations to, or imitations of, patterns which lie deeper than the things themselves. Indeed it is this that makes the delusion of sensation so baffling, for there can be no real suggestion of being cheated where there is no hint of a hidden truth withheld. Hence, too, our delight in the things of the senses, in colour and music, cakes and roses, and the soft touch of the flesh.¹¹ They call us back to something that in them we never discover. What is it?

It is when we reach that aspect of proportion, affinity and likeness in things which gives rise to a sense of beauty that we are ready to understand the principle on which the *De Musica* is constructed. Referring to the work in one of his letters, St Augustine explains that he has chosen in the *De Musica* to discuss the function of rhythm and number in speech because it is easier in this way to come to an understanding of the importance of number in the movement of all things.¹² It is easier, one may say,

7 'quia nihil in spatiis locorum et temporum per seipsum magnum est, sed ad aliquid brevius: et nihil rursus in his per seipsum breve est, sed ad aliquid majus.' (ibid., VI, vii, 19.)

8 As a general statement showing how numbers and their multiples are thought of as types and exemplars of all kinds of proportion one might cite: 'Ubi autem aequalitas aut similitudo, ibi numerositas: nihil est quippe tam aequale aut simile quam unum et unum.' (ibid., VI, xiii, 38.)

9 All the examples, except the first, occur in the course of *De Musica*, VI.

10 ibid., VI, xvii, 57.

11 The list is Augustine's. (ibid., VI, xiv, 44.)

12 'Verum quia in omnibus rerum motibus quid numeri valeant, facilius consideratur in vocibus', etc. (Epist. 131.)

both because the rhythms we are there concerned with make less exacting demands on our observation than patterns and alternations which may take a day, a month, or a year to unroll;¹³ and also because to begin thus is more naturally attractive. The first five books of the treatise are therefore intended as a gentle introduction to an abstruse question, and while being in themselves illustrative of what is to come, are at the same time meant to exercise the mind in abstract reflection. Augustine will use our innocent delight in the music and form of poetry as a hook to draw us from the world of sense to the world of spirit.¹⁴ It is further important to notice that this method displays admirably the role of intelligence in the life of contemplation as Augustine conceives of it. The heavenly wisdom, which is its gracious crown, is a divine gift coming to the soul from above. But that soul disposes itself for the gift by purifying itself from the illusions of the life of opinion,¹⁵ and by striving, as far as it can, to understand itself and its relation to the world in which it lives. It is significant that in the *Retractions*¹⁶ Augustine speaks of the *De Musica* as dealing with one of the ways in which 'the invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made'. It is thus largely what we should call a work of natural theology in intention. But travelling along these ways of earthly wisdom, the heavenly wisdom shows itself to us joyfully, running out to meet her lovers as she sees them coming.¹⁷

For our present purposes we must take the ascetic preparation for granted.¹⁸ Book six of the *De Musica* begins its contemplative ascent from a single line of a hymn of St Ambrose, *Deus Creator Omnium*. As we say the line over to ourselves a number of different rhythms come into operation. There is first of all the sound itself, the purely physical effect of vibrations in the air, such as may be produced by drops of water falling even when no one listens. These vibrations find a response in the ear of the listener and a biological change occurs there as he attends to the speaker. The

13 *De Musica*, VI, vii, 19.

14 His enim haec scripta sunt, qui litteris saecularibus dediti, magnis implicantur erroribus, et bona ingenia in nugis conerunt, nescientes quid ibi delectet. (ibid., VI, i, I.)

15 The 'opinabilis vita' (ibid., VI, xi, 32) is the uncritical life of a world of phantasy.

16 *Retract.*, I, vi.

17 'in quibus viis ostendit se sapientia hilariter, et in omni providentia occurrit amantibus.' (Epist. 131.)

18 This is unfortunate because the *De Musica* is a subtle work and depends very much for its effect upon a sustained reading. If the following bald outline should, however, stimulate anyone to turn to the original, he can be assured that he will find it worth his pains.

speaker for his part is moving his tongue and the muscles of his mouth, and at the same time calling upon a pattern of sound and sense which is stored in his memory. In distinguishing between these four rhythms, and particularly between spontaneous activities like the pulsation of the blood in the veins, breathing or muscular movement on the one hand, and the active response of sensation on the other, it becomes clear that there is also a fifth kind of rhythm or attunement, supervening upon the mere possession of faculties, which determines the purely natural reactions of acquiescence in, or distaste for, the other kinds of rhythms. The sound of twenty-seven trumpets being blown at once is not difficult to hear, though it is very difficult to enjoy, even if one has no ear for music. This initially instinctive attunement or tempering of the soul and its powers, as though it were a string at concert pitch, Augustine calls, for the moment, the rhythm of discernment.¹⁹

It is in attempting to classify these five kinds of rhythm in a hierarchy that the tension between a Platonist suspicion of the body, and the recognition that the Incarnation is a descent to the flesh itself is most keenly felt. The Incarnation has, after all, taught us that not everything that happens in the soul is necessarily better than what happens in the body. The real tree we are looking at is better than any tree we might see in a dream, even though such a tree be in the mind.²⁰ For the true in the body is better than the false in the mind. Nevertheless it is essential to remember that man's present condition with regard to the body is neither what it was in paradise, nor what it will be in the resurrection. As things are, the soul does better to reform itself according to the pattern of divine wisdom rather than to conform itself to the patterns of carnal sensation. The body should be man's servant. 'Turned away from her Lord to her servant, the soul necessarily fails: but turned from her servant to her Lord she necessarily profits, and even offers her servant the easiest kind of life';²¹ easiest because, for Augustine, sensation is an act of attention on the part of the soul to what is going on in its body. Once turned from the body in contemplation, the inroads of fleshly business are cut off, the hubbub of the memory of it dies down, and the

¹⁹ Augustine's names for the last three kinds of rhythm are, respectively, 'progressive', 'ocursive', and 'judicial'.

²⁰ *De Musica*, VI, iv, 7.

²¹ *ibid.*, VI, v, 13.

soul experiences a kind of sabbath of rest, in which the body cannot fail to share, since the true order of paradise is, albeit precariously, restored.

The hierarchy established as the term of this discussion places the physical rhythms lowest, then those of memory, then the responsive rhythms of sensation, then the spontaneous rhythms of self-directed activity, and finally at the head, the rhythm of discernment. Can we rise beyond this?²² Certainly there would seem to be a case for distinguishing between that kind of rhythm of soul which is judicial in an aesthetic way and that kind which is judicial in an evaluative way. There is, after all, a final court of reason where even that which is aesthetically pleasant to us is judged by a standard higher than the aesthetic. The very fact that the faculty of reason enables us to see that aesthetic activity is the pursuit of a beauty which is its own end, is a proof that reason is superior to that which it judges. It is reason, too, that forbids us to blind ourselves to the fact that even what we find aesthetically agreeable is but a pale imitation of what the mind in its own depths can conceive of.²³ (One thinks at once of public performances of music, which we always judge against a standard that may never in fact have been attained in any performance we ever heard.)

We are thus placed, as it were, between two delights: those below us in sense, impermanent and at best unreliable, and those above us in reason, having a savour of eternity. Now since delight is the soul's loadstone,²⁴ it behoves us to make a clear choice, if we are not to be pulled out of our course. Upon this choice depends our path in the universal movement of things which, in itself, is modelled upon a pattern laid up in eternity. 'And thus it is that earthly things being made subject to the heavenly, the spheres by the rhythmic succession of their seasons seem to join in the song of the great whole.'

This vision is not the product of a weak aestheticism, for Augustine immediately follows it with a candid admission that by no means everything in the universal movement as we perceive it is either orderly or well-planned.²⁵ This is because, in the first place, our perceptions are limited and we do not know

²² *ibid.*, VI, ix, 23.

²³ *ibid.*, VI, x, 28.

²⁴ 'Delectatio quippe quasi pondus est animae.' (*ibid.*, VI, xi, 29.)

²⁵ *ibid.*, VI, xi, 30.

in advance what good things divine providence has in store for us. 'The soldier in the fighting line cannot appreciate the dispositions of the entire army.' But to this purely natural limitation is added that which comes from the fall, when by his voluntary act man was diverted from the path designed for him. He who would not fulfil the law finds it fulfilled in himself. Original sin has thus established a certain penal rhythm which is, of course, included in the whole order of divine providence and must be accepted as such.²⁶ The result of our condition is that we experience a division between flesh and spirit which is agonizing, until by the exercise of the cardinal virtues we gradually break the impulses of the flesh, and turning our minds to the rhythm of reason, our whole life becomes converted to God. If, then, we are to perform our dance properly in the general movement of the universe, we must act in terms of the life of the virtues. Opposed to these is the deadly vice of pride, which tries to possess and feed upon the souls of other men in a closed and private world. Releasing our fingers from this outward possessiveness, and keeping the double commandment of charity, we enter into the peace and joy of the Lord.²⁷ He who cannot speak false says 'My yoke is easy'. The love of this world certainly is a great deal more laborious, and moreover, in loving things that are beneath its dignity, the soul loses its own.²⁸ It is quite consistent with such a view to understand that even physical things are the creation of God and that not one of them has he left without its own measure of beauty. But the man who realizes that his own soul is nobler than they, and thus learns to perform the rhythms of his life without getting entangled in them, shall we not call him a great man, and humane in the truest sense of the word?²⁹

26 'quicumque de nostra poenali mortalitate numeri facti sunt, non eos abdicemus a fabricatione divinae providentiae, cum sint in genere suo pulchri.' (ibid., VI, xiv, 46.)

27 ibid., VI, xiv, 43.

28 'Non igitur numeri qui sunt infra rationem et in suo genere pulchri sunt, sed *amor inferioris pulchritudinis animam polluit.*' (ibid., VI, xiv, 46.)

29 'nonne et istos omnes numeros agit et nullis eorum laqueis implicatur? . . . Magnum quemdam virum et vere humanissimum praedicat.' (ibid., VI, xiv, 45.)