

Body Language: Ballet as Form in Literary Modernism, 1915-1935

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation undertakes an examination of the evolving relationship between text and dance via the ballet texts of literary modernism.

My selected texts illuminate a spectrum of performativity, ranging from the blueprints for performance used in the collaborative enterprises of European ballet companies like the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois to later unperformed works by canonical writers. Some texts serve the utilitarian purpose of instructing production, but others independently claim their own aesthetic importance. My study reveals how text infiltrated ballet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, in turn, how ballet came to serve new expressive purposes on the page.

As most of these texts have never been performed, a new question arises: what does it mean to *read* a ballet? Ballet texts invite a method of reading unique to their own formal experiment: the stylistic range of these texts invites a study of the borders between types of language in a given piece, the materiality of dance, and the word-play that implicated the human body into the space of poetry and prose so intricately in the modernist period. In the contexts of literary modernism and dance and performance studies, I propose my project as a unique and useful tool with which to appreciate and interrogate historical and continuing relationships between text and performance.

Critics, scholars, and dance and theatre practitioners have avoided confronting these works, but I propose that it is precisely through their challenging nature that they are essential to a more comprehensive study of individual careers and an expansion of the boundaries of modernism. From Jean Cocteau in 1915 to E. E. Cummings in 1935, the climate that turned writers to ballet demonstrates the value of tradition in a specifically nuanced modernist project that negotiated a concrete cultural past in the context of artistic revolution.

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2014

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It is my hope that this humble thesis might find some use in the hands of scholars of dance, literary modernism, and theatre—and anyone interested in their shared artistic territory.

## INTRODUCTION

*There are many ways to interpret the appearance of these small, fragile figures, lost in the sheet of paper without any direct relation to space, or time, like the reoccupation of an existential envelope, at once cutaneous and graphic...*

*...One can also find here the projection of a state of isolation with respect to living matter, from which the straying figurine is detached, a fetish, a doll, a tiny human hieroglyph, inscribing its silhouette as best it can in the already saturated text of the history of bodies...<sup>1</sup>*

### I. Foundations

The relationship between dance and text is as multi-faceted as it is permanent. While performances are often viewed and studied as texts, it is the printed text, serving its purpose alongside performance, that forms the basis of my new exploration into literary modernism. As I hope to illuminate, the metamorphosis of the ballet text—from the testing of its own formal qualities to its variable positioning in and around physical performance—creates a parallel trajectory to modernism’s reimagining of artistic media as “endlessly interpermeable, a set of fluid systems of construing and reinterpreting, in which the quest for meaning engages all our senses at once”.<sup>2</sup> While the shapes and contours of artistic media began to shape-shift out of conventional modes, so did their practical and expressive purposes. Caught up in this evolution, the ballet text performs along a spectrum of practical and impractical aims.

Ballet history is, of course, full of text: for a fundamentally transient art form, the text is what dependably remains among ephemera, in correspondence, orchestral scores and souvenir programmes. The technology with which we capture dance for posterity in the

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Louppe. *Traces of Dance*. Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1994, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Albright. *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp 6-7.

present day has altered the sanctity of these remnants, and perhaps it is a given that for ballet's early days, all that is left is literature. There is, of course, the process of notation by which movement is articulated in abstract language and figures on the page. Interestingly, however, the presence of text *in* performance changed dramatically over the course of the ballet's maturation into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Text no longer served merely as blueprints for performance, but as its own performative field in the modernist ballet.

For context and reference, it is helpful to look at more traditional modes of dance notation. Ballet has its own tradition of written notation, a language of mechanical clarity that is meant primarily for instructional means. In the nearly seven hundred years of its history, dance notation has been referred to in a range of terms in the attempt to characterise its shape and purpose. Notation has acquired structural terms, as a kind of "architecture." Additionally, terms normally for linguistic systems are applied, such as "vocabulary" or "grammar." Because the nature of notation is technically as a means to an end (performance), little attention has been paid to the intricacies of the written dance as a form in and of itself. In the case-studies of the ballets by Cummings and other poets, however, notation actually constitutes the aesthetic object; how does the aesthetic value of the formal text serve its contents?

Because of its role in collaborative work, notation has undergone many revisions in order to standardise or universalise the method of writing dance—a process that deemphasises textual performance. Today, dance is widely recorded on video. However, on paper, the science of dance notation is a shifting reaction to one 1928 publication by Rudolf von Laban. "Labanotation" is rooted in 14<sup>th</sup> century practice, and depicts geometric figures broken into quadrants representing the arms and legs. Metrical divisions and directions indicate the dancer's movement in relation to music and the performance space. In this system, the choreographic score need not possess its own aesthetic meaning.



Laban's notation possesses the spirit of utility, and was crafted not just for the recording of artistic movement but for the study of various industrial kinetics. His catalogue of human movement could be applied to factory work just as easily as *barre* work. In its rather optimistic origins, therefore, Labanotation is a kind of shorthand by which all the nuances of human physicality might be articulated.

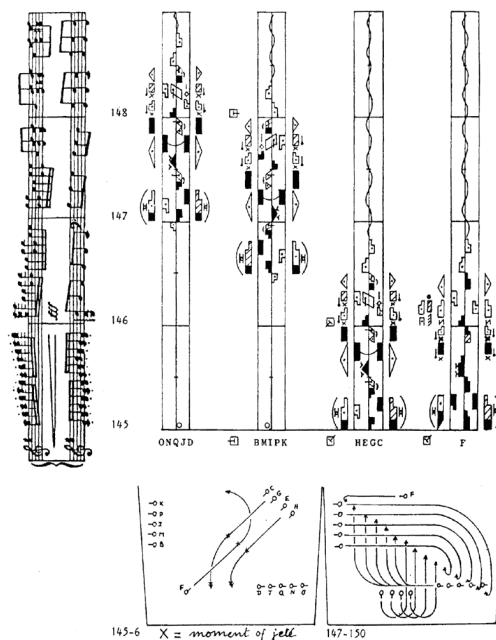


Figure 1. Floorplan and Labanotation from the ballet *Serenade* by George Balanchine, 1950.

A Labanotation score includes only the technical directions for body movement: no other theatrical elements are mentioned, nor is what we might call the poetic coloration of the movement set out. It is separate to the orchestral score, stage design, and all other elements of performance. This strict textual isolation of movement marks a primary differentiating element between conventional ballet scores and those written by poets and novelists. In E. E. Cummings's 1935 *Tom: A Ballet*, for example, all elements of the dance's diegesis (including atmosphere, attitude, scene, shape, depth, height, colour, movement, word, sound) are synthesised into one text that actually excludes the living body.

Long before Laban’s day, dance notation lacked a unifying codified system, but served its purposes in allowing dancers and dance-masters to preserve and recreate social dances. The first abstract or non-pictorial system appears in publication in 1700, in Raoul Feuillet’s “Chorégraphie, ou l’Art de décrire la Danse,” which Anne Hutchinson describes as a “track”-based method of drawing movement.<sup>3</sup> Feuillet’s system is understandably basic, setting out a representation of the dance floor, the pathways the dancer is to take, and specific right and left leg movements.

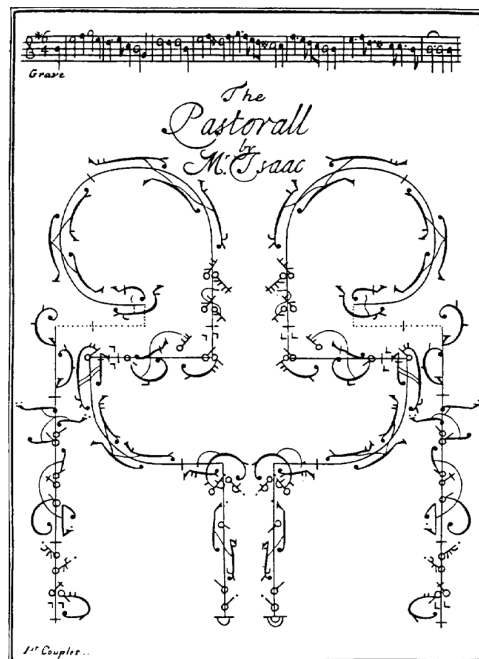


Figure 2. A page of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation from *Chorégraphie; ou, l’art de décrire la danse* by Raoul-Auger Feuillet, 1700.

What this system leaves out—whether for the sake of interpretation or because of conventional understanding—are movements of the arms, head, and torso. Also absent are instructions for the durations and tempos of particular movements and steps. This was adapted in small ways over the next century, until the 1852 publication of

<sup>3</sup> Anne Hutchinson Guest. *Labanotation, or Kinetography Laban*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p 2.

“Sténochoregraphie,” by Arthur St. Léon, a method reliant upon stick-figure representations of the dancing body placed parallel to the musical score.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, some of these early bespoke systems call aesthetic attention to notation document, regardless of the dance it informs. As artefacts from plans and performances, some of the earliest surviving records of dance notation appear to be, at first glance, ornamental illustrations. However, their bird’s-eye view of space correspond to the placement and paths of bodies. In fact, some of them demonstrate rather inventive manners of evoking navigation.

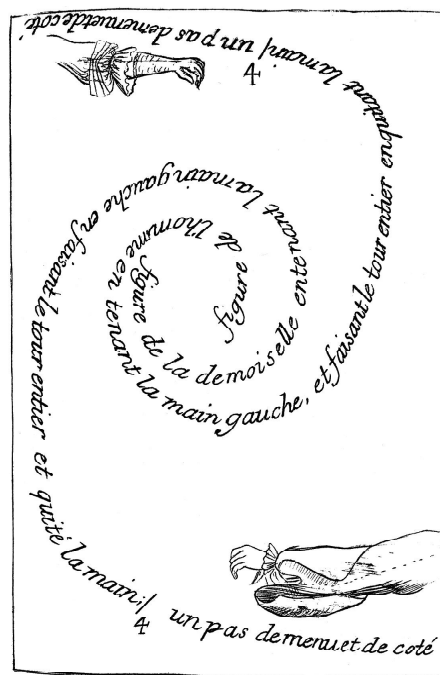


Figure 3. Illustration from *Le Maître à Danser* by Pierre Rameau, 1725.

This 1725 notation is an early precursor to the distinctive expression of the modernist dance text. The practice of sculpting script to suggest the movement of the body is akin to

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<sup>4</sup> Guest notes the deficiencies of stick-figure notation: “it is usually drawn from the audience’s point of view, so that right and left have to be reversed by the reader; the third dimension is not easily indicated by and it gives a description of position rather than movement. [...] timing must be indicated separately”, p. 3.

concrete poetry, yet still—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at least—with a practical purpose. Two hundred years later, the same experiment will surface again for a variety of *new* and radical purposes.

The Laban, Stepanov and Benesh systems, all in some degree adapted from the Beauchamp and Feuillet method, form the basis of modern notation as it is commonly used by choreographers and dancers. In one respect, my study focuses on the exceptions to that rule. Deviations away from conventional notation begin in small ways, with representative works of some of the prominent early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian choreographers. While Mikhail Fokine and Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes have garnered the most acclaim for their pioneering—even scandalous—contributions to dance vocabulary, they were among several contemporaneous masters working in and among the Soviet dance circuit. The radical innovation of ballet texts comes from this generation of ballet masters. Of course, the revolutionary spirit of the ballets produced by the Ballets Russes and the Mariinsky Theatre is best showcased in performance histories and in photographic and film evidence, as well as in dedicated revival. However, it can also be seen in uses of text. The place of text in the scheme of the ballet was not static: it was becoming a personal, no longer merely material, presence. Furthermore, the text would acquire new expressive qualities, whereas traditionally it only served to inform the eventual dance.

The premiere Parisian ballet company, the Ballets Russes, had since its foundation in 1909 been a melting pot of artists across genres and media.<sup>5</sup> A crucial participant entered the scene when the Ballets Russes enlisted a librettist who would single-handedly conduct the ballet text's transition from the page to the stage: Jean Cocteau. As we will discover, Cocteau's scenario for the 1917 ballet *Parade* primarily served the production in the

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<sup>5</sup> Despite their name, the Ballets Russes never performed in Russia. Founded by impresario Sergei Diaghilev, the company produced popular seasons combining ballets from the Russian tradition (i.e. *Les Sylphides* and *Cleopatre*) while debuting new and innovative works like *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *L'après-midi d'un faune*. The famous names of Ballets Russes collaborators include Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Gabrielle Chanel.

traditional way, by informing the content and sequence of the eventual dance.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1921 in Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Ballets Suédois premiered *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* with a libretto by Cocteau. Here, the audience encountered ballet text in an unfamiliar new way: Cocteau's words blasted through two human gramophones on either side of the stage. Text had been lifted from the libretto page, making what was understood to be fixed transient. Assertive, omniscient, and conspicuous in performance, it even seemed to prescribe the movement seen onstage. Fourteen years later, in 1935, the American poet E. E. Cummings had published his ballet, having failed to secure production onstage. Despite the apparent universal belief in the promise of its story, the radical language of the text was deemed impenetrable by choreographers and other would be collaborators.<sup>7</sup> The ballet was undanceable by the human body; it was already dancing on the page.

Cummings's ballet, as many others in this dissertation will show, demonstrates the complex role of dance in modernism, while at the same time re-emphasising the complicated nature of modernist studies overall. The debate surrounding modernist dance is perhaps best summed up by Susan Jones, who writes:

[D]ance's relative neglect within studies of modernism remains a complex issue. Prejudices about the peripheral status of dance have been inherited from the early years of modernism itself, and while Yeats, Woolf, or Lawrence welcomed a new-found freedom of bodily expression associated with new dance forms, others expressed anxieties about the body, reacting to what they saw as a decadent poetics associated with Baudelaire or Poe in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that, historically, the role of the scenario writer was separate from the work of the choreographer: we will see how that changes in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup> Cummings and Lincoln Kirstein, who commissioned the text, approached choreographers including George Balanchine. Kirstein wrote, "When I read Balanchine what [Cummings] had written, translated into demotic French, he said it might well be splendid prose or even poetry, but there were no pretexts therein for dancing...How could I ever explain to so eminent an author that what he had written at our command was, for us, quite useless?" Lincoln Kirstein. *Thirty Years: Lincoln Kirstein's The New York City Ballet*. New York: Knopf, 1978, pp. 42-3.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Jones. *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.

In the established contexts of literary modernism and performance studies, my research interrogates the rich relationships between text and performance. These scattered ballet texts are marginal, but nonetheless significant. The time has come for a dedicated look at the libretti and scenarios the period yielded, as well as those texts which blur the line between blueprints for performance and texts that conduct performances in and of themselves.

This dissertation consequently undertakes a new reading of literary modernism through a specific and rarely studied kind of material: printed ballet texts by modernist poets and novelists written between 1915 and 1935. Importantly, the ballet text's metamorphosis coincides with the evolution of literary modernism. The main writers involved in this examination are figureheads of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and art, but the ballets are among their ignored, forgotten, or otherwise obscured works. I argue, however, that just as well as a poem, novel, or painting, these texts illuminate modernism's audacious negotiations of received conventions of genre and medium.

In fact, the writing of ballet is akin to the modernist evocation of movement across artistic media. For example, reflecting on his famous painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Marcel Duchamp explained that "the idea of describing the movement of a nude coming downstairs while still retaining static visual means to do this, particularly interested me".<sup>9</sup> The same impulse to make the static kinetic is the foundation of the texts in this dissertation. In modernism, Duchamp reflected, "[t]he whole idea of movement, of speed, was in the air".<sup>10</sup> Movement was such a modernist preoccupation that text, too, was stretched to accommodate it.

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<sup>9</sup> Marcel Duchamp in an interview for the BBC program "Monitor", 29 March 1961; published in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen* Katherine Kuh (ed.), New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

In the following six chapters, I will establish the breadth of writers' involvement in the conceptualisation and production of ballet between roughly 1915 and 1935, a period marked by an insistence on the wedding of text and movement that yielded an overlooked body of texts. I will examine the limitations of conventional tools and methods of expression in the face of unconventional content. How did the modernist climates of poetry and dance interact to enable the trading of formal elements? How does this partnership illuminate a unique type of Modernist text that conflates language with the body? My work will establish the ballet text as the archetype of that exchange.

My selection of texts conducts its own performance that sheds new light on literary modernism. Together, these texts illuminate a spectrum of performativity ranging from the collaborative enterprises of preeminent European ballet companies like the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois to later published but unperformed works by individual writers. As Margaret Davies has observed, "it would seem that increasingly the problematic of modern technique was situated in the search to open up the space of the poem in order to encompass the multiple, random, simultaneous disorder of lived experience, and at the same time to find even more supple subtle ways of containing it".<sup>11</sup> In using the ballet both as an object of cultural reverence and as a subject for subversion, poets gained a new medium that proved versatile, challenging, and sometimes shocking. I attempt to explain how ballet text came to serve new expressive purposes in an unlikely form in print as in performance. This dissertation examines how text began to occupy a new prominence on the ballet stage, the culmination of which led to the eventual displacement of the body.

A concentration on this new archive presents new ways of reading the role of ballet in literary culture. One issue is the performative capacity of print versus texts that lead to actual performance. What is the purpose of dance in print? If the dance works of writers

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Davies. "Modernity and Its Techniques". *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*. Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones, Albert Wachtel, eds. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 153.

like Cummings, Loy, Huxley, and Brecht engage the concepts and languages of movement, when and how do written, implied movements become directives, and then actual movements? My study considers texts that use sections of movement as well as those completely comprised of dance. Various textual shapes invite a consequent study of the borders between types of language in a given piece, the materiality of dance, and the kind of word-play that implicated the human body into the space of poetry (and vice versa) so intricately in the modernist period.

At a time during which the edges of different artistic media were increasingly blurred, conventions of the ballet were opening up the possibilities of the page; at the same time, new attitudes toward the art surfaced in print. Through the appropriation of the classical movement vocabulary, for example, Loy and Cummings put uptight, haughty bodies in motion: a pirouette was suddenly derisive. Lee articulated global slaughter through dance. Her inscribed theatre is a hell, and the ballet the means by which the world ends: certainly this was a new connotation for the art. Huxley, in turn, explicitly asks his readers to think differently about the form, calling his two works “ballets in criticism”. Through his self-proclaimed critical works, we are encouraged to think critically of ballet and, in turn, high culture and its related aesthetics.

These ballets come at the same time that T. S. Eliot was calling for a return to verse drama to elevate the popular experience of art. “What I should like to do is this:” he wrote, “that the people on the stage should seem to the audience so like themselves that they would find themselves thinking: ‘I could talk in poetry too!’”.<sup>12</sup> Eliot urges his field to use the tools of tradition not to alienate or even challenge, but to provide their audience with brighter sensations. “Then they are not transported into an unaccustomed, artificial world; but their ordinary, sordid world is suddenly illuminated and transfigured. And if poetry

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<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, from ‘The Aims of Poetic Drama’ as quoted in Eric Sigg’s *The American T. S. Eliot: A Study of the Early Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 72.



cannot do that for people, it is merely superfluous decoration”.<sup>13</sup> I see the incorporation of ballet into the action of plays and prose to be an echo of Eliot’s vision.

Modernity mingles with traditionalism among the works of the modernists, producing deviances that bear resemblance to one another.<sup>14</sup> The option to write movement proved fruitful for many writers. When embedded within prose, it can signify a moment of rhetorical difference that encourages a fresh emphasis on the physical properties of the stage and its inhabitants. For some, the ballet becomes the singular framework for an entire work which, although printed, lends a new vitality to text. If, then, the poetic and prose works of writers like Huxley and Cummings engage the concepts and languages of movement in these multifarious ways, when and how do the words of implied or imagined movements become directives—and then actual movements? For the purposes of this study, I reject texts that have been extensively performed, because those texts answer the question too objectively. Instead, I focus on texts by these writers that use sections of movement, or else comprise complete dances, and yet have not been fully realised through performance.

For the writers besides Cocteau, who was a prolific ballet librettist, the ballet texts I have gathered are the only ones they wrote. The writers’ use of movement invites a consequent study of the borders between types of language, the materiality of dance, and the kind of word-play that implicated the human body into the space of text so intricately. As most of these texts have never been performed, many questions arise: for example, what does it mean to *read* a ballet? I offer this “second canon” of ballet texts as a particularly nuanced lens through which to view the arc of literary modernism along its evolution and to further extend its definition. Critics, scholars, and dance and theatre practitioners have avoided confronting this difficult group of works, but I propose that it is precisely through

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, the American history-based works by William Carlos Williams and Cummings, and the popular revival of Greek drama frequently employed by Robinson Jeffers, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), William Butler Yeats, and Ezra Pound, the latter of whom also crafted plays in the Japanese *Noh* tradition. Writing ballet is another common enterprise.

their challenging nature that they are essential to a more complete study of individual careers *and* an expansion of the boundaries of working concepts of literary modernism.

That so many poets and novelists turned to writing ballet demonstrates the value of tradition in a specifically nuanced modernist project that negotiated a concrete cultural past in the context of artistic revolution. While ballet texts generally serve (and have served) the utilitarian purpose of instructing production, some ballet texts claim independent aesthetic importance. In the case of Cummings's *Tom: A Ballet*, for instance, the printed ballet captures the emotional magnitude of its narrative merely in its *imagined* execution. A ballet such as *Tom* challenges readers to think back to canonical or national histories (*Tom* is an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), to consider new articulations of the body in time and space, new experiences in readership, and to navigate a new hybrid of prose and dance.

## II. The archive

The individual works that make up the archive of this dissertation have been gathered from drastically different textual origins. The texts addressed in Chapter One were found among the ephemera of the two great Parisian modernist ballet companies as well as in various studies of Cocteau's writings. The central text of Chapter One, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, was transcribed from a book about the prolific but short-lived activities of the Ballet Suédois. Bertolt Brecht's *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, the focus of my second chapter, was included in the author's collected works in German, as well as in an English translation that appeared in a scholarly journal. The focus of Chapter Three, Vernon Lee's *Ballet of the Nations* (1915), was published as an illustrated booklet and again as an interlude in a later drama.<sup>15</sup> Aldous Huxley's ballets "Callot" and "Scriabin, or, the

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<sup>15</sup> Vernon Lee is the pseudonym of Violet Paget (1856-1935). Born in France to British expatriate parents, Lee authored a prolific oeuvre of arts criticism and theory, as well as fictional works including several "supernatural" novels and stories.

Voluptuous Dentist” which feature in Chapter Four appeared first in *Vanity Fair* and then in a collection of his essays. The focus of Chapter Five, Mina Loy’s “Crystal Pantomime” (undated), was published for the first time in 2011 among the writer’s stories and essays. Lastly, the ballet by Cummings that forms the focus of my final chapter, *Tom* (1935), exists in the form of a rare monograph and reproduced in an anthology of Cummings’s dramatic writings. Although it is my belief that they do belong together in the space of this dissertation, this is a group of texts that has heretofore seemed to resist collection.

In addition to their material breadth, these texts also demonstrate the geographical reaches of modernist literary experimentation. Cummings represents the American (specifically New York City) aesthetic; his ballet conflates American literary and social traditions with the avant-garde formal experimentalism of the 1930s metropolis. Mina Loy, on the other hand, embodies the brand of trans-Atlantic writer who signified the literary scenes both in New York and across Europe; Aldous Huxley, too, bridges the Atlantic in his work. While Brecht changed places frequently, Jean Cocteau was working steadily at the helm of the Parisian literary and theatrical circuit.

Furthermore, wherever these texts *have* been read, they have been read as instances of avant-garde theatre rather than of dance or ballet: I insist that they offer fruitful study specifically as ballet texts *within* the rich scholarly discourse of the avant-garde theatre. I have selected an archive of texts that illuminate important moments in the burgeoning relationship between body and text in the genesis and performance of modernist ballet. This thesis thus acts as a miniature canon enabling an exploration of one of modernism’s less understood subcategories. I have arranged my work into three parts (each containing two chapters) denoting thematic groupings. For the sake of context, each part is preceded by an introduction explaining the major events and changes to the ballet itself, out of which my literary examination unfolds.

In Part One, I establish a practical foundation for the examination of modernist ballet both in its gradual incorporation of text and in its development as a literary form. Chapters One and Two consider the dynamic and sometimes tenuous relationship between poet and choreographer in the artistic process. The work of the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois from 1915 to 1925 relied upon the participation of poets in the genesis of numerous productions and informally promoted writers like Cocteau to the role of poet-choreographer, an unfamiliar role in the scheme of classical ballet. I will use several of both companies' productions to illustrate this, including the Ballets Russes project *Parade* (1917) as well as *L'Homme et son désir* (1917) and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), both produced for the Ballets Suédois in Paris.

The influence of the poet's hand manifested itself differently among these ballets. In the work of the Ballets Russes, the ballet text remains part of the artistic process, whereas in the other company's work, the literary space of the synopsis gained a new level of expression, and later, text, speech, and a visible/audible narrator permeate the ballet's performed aesthetic. Spectators in the auditorium of Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées were implicitly (or even explicitly) instructed to pay a new level of attention to text and narration. Franko has explored the significance and influence of audience libretti distributed in the French court theatre, questioning "whether the body and the playing text were not dramatically counterposed".<sup>16</sup> My work extends that question into the new site of modernism.

Still in the territory of performed texts, my thesis then undertakes a reading of Brecht and Kurt Weill's 1933 collaboration, *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*. Defined as a *ballet chanté*, this work further complicates the boundaries between the body and the text by physically dividing them into two vessels. One half of the protagonist, Anna, is called Anna I, and she communicates through Incidentally, there

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<sup>16</sup> Franko, p. 4.

seems to be no dedicated study of the body in Brechtian theatre: this chapter acts as a gateway into that enterprise.

Parallel to the emerging imprint of text on ballet is the range of possibilities it offered participating writers who wished only to publish ballets, and not have them performed. Part Two, containing Chapters Three and Four, interrogates the appropriation of the ‘dance of death’ motif, prevalent in medieval iconography, in writers’ ballets. The writers involved here, Huxley and Lee, both use ballet to evoke human atrocity in historical and contemporary wars. Both writers were uninterested in the production of their ballets, but rather wanted to use ballet’s inherent kinetic power either to activate other art forms or to warn against ignorance and destruction.

Chapter Three establishes a concentration on ballet’s satirical mode with Vernon Lee’s 1915 work *Ballet of the Nations*. Here we see ballet subverted for polemical use in war time. At the outbreak of the First World War, Lee, a staunch pacifist, embeds her warnings against war in an illustrated allegorical ballet that depicts the world’s nations tearing one another limb from limb. Here, the use of ballet is particularly complicated: its aesthetics framework provides a structure of decorum and beauty within which human brutality registers as ritualised and dangerously cyclical. Lee’s portrayal of ignorance and violence within the confines of an imagined ballet unsettles the reader through the contrast between the form and its content.

It is at first difficult to position Vernon Lee within the framework of modernist innovation. A noted and outspoken British female pacifist, she has always been best known for her philosophical prose writing focused more on the study of aesthetics than on challenging actual formal structures. Writing from 1880 to 1932, Lee amassed a prolific and varied canon, comprised of works which “range across philosophy, fiction, evocations of place, musical theory and reception, moral and immoral essays, ghost stories, aesthetics,

and feminist argument”.<sup>17</sup> Kirsty Martin observes that “Vernon Lee was on the edge of modernism, her work falling within both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and her work intimates the need for characteristically modernist modes of writing”.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Lee’s work was comparatively neglected during the modernist era. I would argue, however, that Lee’s adoption of ballet as literary form most palpably attaches her to the formal and aesthetic attitudes of modernism, regardless of the author’s early time span and other literary pursuits. I situate Lee’s ballet text in context with F. T. Marinetti’s “Manifesto of the Futurist Dance”, which also puts war, with a starkly different attitude, on an inscribed stage.

Chapter Four takes up an analysis of Aldous Huxley’s two ballets, which he called “ballets in criticism,” titled “Callot” and “Scriabine, or the Voluptuous Dentist,” published together in 1926 in Huxley’s *Essays New and Old*. While both are defined as “ballets in criticism” (a definition I interrogate), they undertake somewhat different agendas. The first of the two, “Callot”, extends the narrative and scene of another art work, an etching depicting the Thirty Years War, suggesting the ballet’s usefulness in Huxley’s experimentation with the medium. Looking closely at the text, we can see that ballet allows the writer to activate what is otherwise static, and how Huxley manipulates dance to craft his own version of the *danse macabre*. In Huxley’s ‘Callot’ ballet, which forms a second book-end to Lee’s warnings against the Great War, we see the flexibility of the ballet text’s polemical power in Huxley’s satirical reflection.

Part Three turns to another use of ballet which culminates in a text that ultimately displaces the idea of, and indeed the need for, the human body. First, in Chapter Five, I turn to Loy’s undated ballet text, “Crystal Pantomime”, which until 2011 had never been

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<sup>17</sup> Gillian Beer. “The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: Satan the Waster and the Will to Believe” in *Women’s Fiction and the Great War*. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Kirsty Martin. “Vernon Lee’s Empathy” in *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 10. Martin goes on to suggest that Lee’s formulation of the concept of literary empathy anticipates the overt attention paid to the “sympathetic experience” of readership shown by more definitive modernist writers.

published or performed. In this ballet, Loy concentrates on the potential for ballet to animate the material world: in it, places, inanimate objects, and human bodies all exhibit kinetic power in a universe that is also always moving and changing shape. For Loy, the ballet is a means of activating what might otherwise remain static. Her ballet was performed in New York City shortly after publication in a production that layers text over action, rather than extracting action *from* text, again showing a marked difference from the concept of practical dance notation or text.

My final chapter further interrogates the relationship between text and the body through the study of a ballet that performs the *replacement* of the body by text. E. E. Cummings's 1935 *Tom: A Ballet* does not inscribe the dancing body with the written word; instead, Cummings imbues the written page with movement. The fact that *Tom* was in fact meant to be performed by the human body, however, complicates the way in which it virtually sacrifices the body to the printed word. For all its apparent liberalism, a text like Cummings's *Tom* is built according to specific structures, particularly the poet's devised system of language. As for the world of the ballet, the narrative of *Tom* articulates human submission to systems. I will demonstrate that by combining the strict system of verse and the inherent limitations of the human body, Cummings reiterates the entrapment of the human in the system of slavery and the primal struggle for freedom.

Following my final chapter is a series of appendices containing partial or full primary texts. Because so many of the texts in question are not readily available, I have provided what I deem necessary for the reader's reference. Some of the texts are my translations from the original French. In total, this dissertation offers a detailed examination (though by no means complete) of what I propose to be an alternative modernist archive. It illuminates the specifically nuanced ways in which textual presence shaped the evolving art of the ballet and, in exchange, how ballet took residence on the page, becoming a new textual form in literary modernism.

### III. Critical contexts

Although much has been written of the state and role of ballet in the scheme of modernism and its vibrant inter-textual and intermedial scope, little has been done to collect and appraise the resulting literature. Consequently, there has been a limited consideration of the significant handprint of the many writers who were involved in the ongoing metamorphosis of the modernist ballet. While there are many studies on their involvement from an historical standpoint, a comprehensive study of modernist ballet texts has not previously been undertaken. As I hope to demonstrate, these scattered fragments and sketches constitute a surprisingly rich archive that tells the story of the work of the poets who joined ballet's modern collaborative enterprise.

While no previous study has presented a comprehensive examination of modernist ballet texts, there are two related avenues of study that have been well explored over the last hundred years. They illustrate the boundary over which my own is set. The first avenue comprises scholarship on the modernist ballet itself, made up of the impresarios, choreographers, visual artists, and composers who collaborated within the prominent ballet companies of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the Ballets Russes.<sup>19</sup> There is an interesting discrepancy between the extent of academic attention paid to the Ballet Russes above its contemporary company, the Ballets Suédois. As Nancy Norman Van Baer notes, "Dance scholarship has largely tended to ignore the company, treating it as a historic curiosity and a pallid imitator of the Ballets Russes. Among the reasons for this neglect are the troupe's multidisciplinary approach, which defied conventional categorization".<sup>20</sup> It is, I argue,

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Lynn Garafola's book *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-Époque Paris* by Davinia Caddy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*. Nancy Van Norman Baer, ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995, p. 32.



because of its bold experimentation with text that the works of the Ballets Suédois resist neat categorisation and are integral to this study.

The second critical context involved in my project is the far more saturated study of literary modernism across the genres.<sup>21</sup> Here the other, lesser-known resources that have informed this dissertation, beginning with those that isolate the partnership between literature and dance as separate from other disciplines and media. Afterwards, I will outline the critical ties the modernist ballet text bears to a range of sub-fields with which I have engaged.

There are many works concentrating on dance and literary modernism, the relationship that forms a foundation for my study. Susan Jones writes that “literature’s interrogations of time, space, and the body in this period provide an explanation for its turn to dance as a model for formal experimentation”, echoing the general focus of modernist dance studies.<sup>22</sup> Dance history anthologies inevitably include entries on the subject of the merging of the arts, including ballet, in the modernist era, usually as illustrated by the work of the Ballets Russes. Studies of the relationship between dance and literature in the era tend to consider the wider influence of dance on canonical writing. Terri Mester’s *Movement and Modernism*, for example, details the exchange of influence between dance culture and the written work of Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, and Williams.<sup>23</sup> Jones provides another focused look at the literature yielded by the relationship between two genres in *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*, where she explains that “the reciprocal relationship

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<sup>21</sup> My readings of literary modernism have focused on critical writings by the authors represented in this work as well as others by Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein. I have also consulted the work of various modern and contemporary scholars and theorists including Pericles Lewis, Raymond Williams, Theo Hermans, Bonnie Kime Scott, David Trotter and Bryony Randall. Lastly, I have pulled from sourcebooks such as Jon Cook’s *Poetry in Theory*, Lawrence Rainey’s *Modernism: An Anthology*, and the anthology by Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, et al. While these critics are not explicitly referenced, their work formed the foundation of my study.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Jones. "Knowing the Dancer: Modernism, Choreography, and the Question of Authority" *DQR Studies in Literature* Vol. 43, 2008, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> Terri A. Mester. *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth-Century Dance*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1997.

between literature and dance represents one of the most striking but understudied features of modernism”, concentrating on the deep influence of the Ballets Russes, “a company that attracted writers to dance performances in droves”.<sup>24</sup> Jones articulates the doorway through which dance entered and proceeded to shape literary invention and “at times constituted the very substance of discussion” in the period. Other studies provide a portrait of the richness of ballet as it spilled into modern dance in the United States and Britain following the Diaghilev era.<sup>25</sup>

I have mentioned the eventuality that, in the trajectory of the modernist dance texts collected here, the living body becomes replaced by text. This is a crucial focal point for my study because the body is one of the central objects of fascination in literary modernism. The consideration of the role of the body in my work is slightly different to the typical discourse of the body in dance studies, where the living body is known as the vessel of choreography.<sup>26</sup> The primary texts I have gathered ask instead to consider the inscribed body and the way it “moves” on the page. I have found some support in studies about dance notation (Labanotation, for example), and the ways in which the writing of the body’s placement in performance space has been negotiated over time. For example, in *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*, Mark Franco identifies some of the first dance texts whose structures attempt to record or to prescribe physical movement. Although his concentration is on the ballet libretti of the French court, the kind of reading he conducts

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Jones. *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> This kind of study tends to be geared toward either the British or the American dance scene. For example, in *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) Ellen Graff considers the link between modern dance and leftist political activism in the city, suggesting that dance was as active a social fixture as an artistic one. See also Julia L. Foulkes’s *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Helen Thomas’s *The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Sondra Horton Fraleigh’s *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987) and André Lepecki’s *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

has informed my own approach to modernist ballet texts, especially in their more performative moves on the page.<sup>27</sup>

My particular mode of enquiry derives in part from extant modern studies of the relationship between modernism and the body. One important volume, Tim Armstrong's *Modernism, technology and the body: A cultural study*, has informed my approach to the ballet text as an extension of the era's "fascination with," as Armstrong puts it,

...the limits of the body, either in terms of its mechanical functioning, its energy levels, or its abilities as a perceptual system [...] Modernism is, then, characterized by the desire to intervene in the body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical, or behavioural".<sup>28</sup>

If we pursue the idea of intervention, the relationship between the body and the text is certainly relevant, as the texts in my study, in varying ways, intervene in the body by narrating it, doubling it, or even replacing it. As Armstrong suggests, the systems of 'unstable movements between body and text' are central to Modernism and its discourse, especially "the will-to-power involved in those moments where modernist writers seek to link text and body, to resolve that constitutive uncertainty".<sup>29</sup> I argue that my study of modernism's ballet texts contributes many such 'moments' to this very corner of the field.

The modernist period, as Armstrong and many others chronicle, hosted major medical and scientific advancements in efforts to correct, extend, and repair the human body. In a similar way, the ballet's newfound use in text expanded the modernist body as well. Although merely inscribed, the written body was able to 'perform' the impossible, as we will see in works by Huxley and Loy, in particular. This creates a parallel between scientific advancement and textual innovation, both pushed to make the body new and better. For the ballet text, the page acquired new possibilities in exchange. The study of the

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Franko. *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*. Cambridge, USA and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

body in modernism tends to come from this angle: the human versus the industrial. However, the significance of the treatment of bodies in ballet texts necessitates a reading of how bodies are destroyed by means of dance, particular because of their inter-war situation. Thus the body in modernism can be interpreted as a waste product of its time.

These works, however formally scattered, all share a common context in the years between World War One and World War Two. I will unpick the writers' use of ballet on the page in wartime from both prophetic *and* reflective angles. My reading of ballet texts benefits from extant writing about modernism and the body *and* modernism and war. While none has specifically confronted ballet texts, several academic works examine modernist notions of corporeality. Those focused specifically on articulations of the body post-World War One are of particular help to me. I have been struck by the prevalence of dance and choreography as metaphors and physical analogues for war. Several of the texts in this study extend the allegory of war to take up the medieval motif of the *danse macabre*, showing how the body's futility, obedience and mutilation subverts the idealised body of beauty normally associated with the classical ballet. While the body is changed, so is the very notion of dance: rather than a medium for the display of corporeal decorum and virtuosity, it becomes instead a fatal procession.

In his book *In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation*, David Sherman brings modernism's unique negotiations of death into view, arguing that the era's "engagements with the dying and dead bodies of its time, engagements that demanded astonishing innovations of literary technique, expressed anxieties about modern death that still trouble the West and are a reason so many continue to read modernism with urgency".<sup>30</sup> For a ballet writer like the pacifist Vernon Lee, the pending Great War seemed a cold, methodical and certain means by which a generation of men would die. Her choice of ballet

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<sup>30</sup> Sherman, David. *In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 3.

as an allegory for that process illustrates what Sherman says about “astonishing innovations of literary technique” by demonstrating specific, overlooked formal experimentation.

In her reading of the modernist body, Ana Carden-Coyne interrogates the turn to classicism in the midst of modernist formal experimentation, particularly in the years following the First World War, as a means of cultural reconstruction. “Classical and modern ideals,” she argues, “assisted people wanting to renew their bodies through the living principles of balance and dynamism in the aftermath of war”.<sup>31</sup> Ballet is theoretically rooted in the classical; its conventions allude to the chorus while its subject-matter has consistently looked back periodically to the narratives and aesthetic tropes of antiquity. I argue that the borrowing of ballet for certain inter-war writers parallels others’ use of the classical: ballet evokes similar ideals that lend themselves effectively to political and aesthetic subversion. In one of my chapters, Carden-Coyne’s work (which is very much focused on post-War writing) provides a valuable foil to Vernon Lee’s ballet—written just before World War One—and its blatant reliance upon classical imagery.

Lastly, I have used critical bibliographies, biographies, collected letters, and reappraisals of individual writers to contextualise each ballet project. These will factor into the following chapters as new names enter discussion. Such resources will help me to discover how their ballets might be rationalised as part of each individual career. Spanning twenty years and the trans-Atlantic breadth of Western modernism their texts, as I have mentioned, represent a spectrum of performativity on and off the page. While the range can seem vast, the texts are all bound together by similar narrative and physical issues.

These texts illuminate overlooked corners of literary modernism while, at the same time, offering new perspectives to the individual writers involved. It is my hope that individual forays into ballet writing might be useful to the ongoing conversations about

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<sup>31</sup> Carden-Coyne, Ana. *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 3.

Cocteau, Brecht, Lee, Huxley, Loy and Cummings. In each chapter, I will outline the extant scholarship of these writers—in particular, the most recent critical responses to their work—to show how their ballet writing extends more established enquiries into their canons of work.

A pervasive motif in literature about dance in the period is the metaphorical exchange between the body and the text. I begin my examination just after the era of Stéphane Mallarmé, who wrote that “the dancer is not a woman dancing [...] but a metaphor summarizing one of the basic aspects of our form—a sword, cup, flower, etc. [...] with a body that would require paragraphs in prose as well as descriptive dialogue to express in writing: a poem free of any scribal apparatus”.<sup>32</sup> If a dancer is a paragraph, then the act of choreography is an act of writing.

Advancing this discussion into a 20<sup>th</sup> (and indeed 21<sup>st</sup>) century debate, Laurence Louppe calls dance choreography “an immanent writing, an autonomous composition that the paper bears within itself, even before human intervention lays down the slightest sign [...] all the possible surfaces that movement haunts in their very texture, yet still leaves blank, unmarked”.<sup>33</sup> There is in Louppe’s statement a connection to my claim that ballet texts exhibit the paradox of writing movement. The choreographer’s role is to facilitate a lived event from a record that is at a certain point expendable. Even in theory, then, the notion of written dance is loaded with questions of existence and value. The prioritisation of language over practical instruction cost a writer like Cummings any certainty of success for his ballet in performance. It denied the necessary tools for execution, encouraging

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<sup>32</sup> Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Divagations*, Bibliothèque-Charpentier: Fasquelle, 1897 (pp. 171-178). Translated by this author from: “...la danseuse n’est pas une femme qui danse, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu’elle n’est pas une femme, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur, etc, ...avec une écriture corporelle ce qu’il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction : poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.”

<sup>33</sup> Louppe, Laurence. *Traces of Dance: Drawings and Notations of Choreographers*. Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1994, p 13.

unconventional ways of experiencing and appreciating language. In such a text, the abstract coding of movement that normally *enables* art is displaced by notation that instead *is* art.

To Tim Armstrong and others, modernism marks a decisive turn towards “an attention to embodied thinking”.<sup>34</sup> “modernists with quite different attitudes to social and technological modernity saw the body as the locus of anxiety, even crisis; as requiring an intervention through which it may be made the grounds of a new form of production”. I see a similar shift taking place with respect to the ballet text and its metamorphosis in the same era, particularly in Armstrong’s last phrase. The body, a mortal vessel in an unstable word, had to be re-negotiated scientifically, culturally and artistically in order to withstand change. At the same time, literary texts expanded and warped into myriad new formulations as a means of better representing the world—and the bodies within it.

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<sup>34</sup> Tim Armstrong. *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 65.

—PART ONE—

From Page to Stage: the Text in Performance

My study begins in Paris at the height of ballet's modernist revolution under the auspices of the Ballets Russes. Led by the impresario Serge Diaghilev and incorporating the work of numerous eminent composers, artists, designers, and choreographers, the modern ballet of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century bore traces of the classical art while indulging in a new sense of experimentation across the arts. The growing presence of the ballet text coincides with this greater metamorphosis, particularly in the hands of the poet and artists Jean Cocteau, whose 1917 ballet *Parade* serves as the starting point of my exploration.

Once Cocteau moved from Diaghilev's company to Rolf de Maré's Ballets Suédois in 1921, his role as writer expanded. Moreover, he joined the leagues of other poets writing for the company, including Paul Claudel and Blaise Cendrars, whose scenarios I will offer as a foundation to Cocteau's experimentalism. Chapter One ends with a reading of the Ballets Suédois's 1921 production *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. In this production, the text, penned by Cocteau, took a new place of prominence in performance, so much so that ballet was narrated throughout by the poet's words.

I then move on in Chapter Two to a production by the group Les Ballets 1933, formed by choreographer George Balanchine and company. Bertolt Brecht's collaboration with Kurt Weill and George Balanchine, the ballet chanté *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*, raises questions of authorship in a text whose creation is equally split between the writer and the choreographer. It also encourages a focused discussion of the body's relationship to text.

All of the texts covered in Part One were preoccupied with the performances they ultimately inspired, which allows my study to draw comparisons between the text on the page and on the stage. Over the course of a decade, the ballet text had been drastically



transplanted from its pre-production role to a new prominence in souvenir programmes, to a position of artistic authority alongside the dancing body.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1921: Jean Cocteau, the Ballets Suédois, and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*

#### I. Ballet companies and the writer in residence

The story of text's growing presence in modernist dance begins with the work of the world's two preeminent companies who together comprised the zeitgeist of the new ballet. In 1920, Rolf de Maré brought the Swedish Ballet, the Ballets Suédois, to Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to provide commercial and artistic competition to Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in the same performance space. Notoriously, the two companies battled for the claim to the glitzier premiere evenings and most colourful celebrity audiences. Both companies grew to be hugely popular in Paris and on tour, easily monopolising the ballet scene.<sup>35</sup>

We can see the early tremors of challenges to ballet's sacred framework as early as 1910, some of which register now as fleeting experiments, and some of which foreshadow a steadier progression away from the sanctity of the physical dance. Many of these challenges, I propose, were caused by the growing influence of writers and their impression of text upon production and performance. Both companies sought to make ballet an inclusive enterprise by recruiting exciting composers, painters, and designers who together “created a synthesis of dance, dramatic action, music and painting. It was spectacularly colourful, dramatically engaging and sensuous, not to say sexy [...] it was the whole, unified, colourful expression that made the audience hold their breath”.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The Ballets Russes was criticised for a degree of elitism by restricting their tour stops to fashionable cities. The Ballets Suédois, on the other hand, strove to reach a wider demographic by touring throughout a more representative range of metropolitan and rural venues (including small towns in the United States).

<sup>36</sup> Erik Näslund in interview with Thomas Persson. “Rolf de Maré and Ballets Suédois” (.pdf) <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/blogs/themoment/posts/10rolfdemare.pdf> [accessed 10 Nov. 2013].

Although both companies shared similar artistic achievement, they have never been equal in lasting legacy. The Ballets Russes, formed in 1909, was a transplant from Russia and the cultural model for dance artists of vast influence and capital, and therefore held a certain clout that the Ballets Suédois could not match. Furthermore, the work of the Ballets Suédois was referred to as inferior to the Ballets Russes in physical prowess, beauty of choreography, and lavishness of spectacle. The abilities of Jean Börlin, the Vaslav Nijinsky of the Ballets Suédois, were barely comparable.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it was said that the artistic and physical prowess of the Suédois's stars "was of a lower level than that of any of the corps de ballet-dancers with the Ballets Russes".<sup>38</sup> The latter's superiority was underlined by the two companies' working proximity in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

The list of writers devoted to the development and production of the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois is an impressive one. The Ballets Suédois boasted scripts by Francis Picabia, Paul Claudel, Blaise Cendrars, Luigi Pirandello, and most prominently Jean Cocteau.<sup>39</sup> Cocteau was the only writer to work for both companies; Pablo Picasso followed suit in set design and costuming. There seemed to be something missing from the evocative range of the ballet without the poet's touch: Rolf de Maré wrote of asking Pirandello to write a ballet scenario because of the writer's skill in depicting the picturesque atmosphere specific to Sicily and indicative of the peasant dances by which de Maré had always been "seduced".<sup>40</sup> In these moments of correspondence and ensuing artistic experiments, the impulse to merge writing and dance is evident, never more so than in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>37</sup> Pascale De Groote. *Ballets Suédois*. Ghent: Academia Press, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Gilson MacCormack. "The Swedish Ballet". *Dancing Times* (12), 1924.

<sup>39</sup> Claudel and Cendrars will be introduced as they appear in this chapter. The Italian writer Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) penned the scenario for *La Jarre* in 1915, and the avant-garde artist Francis Picabia (1879-1953) wrote *Relâche* (1924).

<sup>40</sup> "J'ai demandé a Pirandello d'écrire un sujet de ballet pour nous, non point seulement parce que Pirandello est le grand auteur du jour, mais aussi parce que nul mieux que lui ne pouvait depeindre l'atmosphère pittoresque de cette Sicile pleine de Soleil dont les danses paysannes m'avaient toujours séduit..." (my translation).

However, variations of textual presence in the ballet must be read in the context of the rich inter-mediality of avant-garde ballet.<sup>41</sup> Just like their collaborators, writers were aware of the changing scene of ballet as it related to the whole spectrum of the arts: in music as in film, in painting as in dance, convention was being replaced by a more psychological verisimilitude coupled with a new ambition to test and challenge the received boundaries of media. Especially in Paris, the ballet was the crossroads of the arts. In the words of the poet Blaise Cendrars (whose participation in the ballet we shall consider) wrote, “The Paris dance venues [...] are the great boulevards, the stations, Le Bourget airport [...], the motor-racing track”.<sup>42</sup> In this metaphor, Cendrars’s vision of Paris conflates art and industry and articulates the kinetic energies of modern life. If the dance venue is a “motor-racing track”, then it embodies a sense of daring and competition, not to mention the attraction of avid spectatorship. Not only was the Parisian ballet the “place to be” in the first decades of the century, but it also housed the crossroads of artistic innovation.

Still, dance was slow to quantify text’s new purpose in the scheme of the art.<sup>43</sup> The rhetoric surrounding ballet texts is ambiguous and indicative of modernist intermediality; for example, *Le Chant de Rossignol* (*The Song of the Nightingale*) by the trifecta of composer Igor Stravinsky, artist Henri Matisse, and choreographer Léonide Massine is subtitled a “choreographic poem”, while others are titled “danced poems”, and still others

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<sup>41</sup> The art of the Ballets Russes (in particular) was faithfully archived and has been extensively reproduced; see, for instance, Nancy Van Norman Baer’s *The Ballets Russes and Its World* and Alston Purvis, Peter Rand, Anna Winestein’s *The Ballets Russes and the Art of Design* for overviews, as well as production-specific volumes such as Deborah Menaker Rothschild’s *Picasso’s Parade: From Street to Stage* and Andrew Wachtel’s *Petrushka: Sources and Contexts*. In addition to the many illustrated volumes that stress the cross-genre audacity of the companies and their practitioners’ collaboration, biographies of Diaghilev, Cocteau, Stravinsky, et al, inevitably morph into biographies of one another.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Bengt Häger, *Ballets Suédois*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1990, p. 280.

<sup>43</sup> The rising prominence of text even presented financial and legal complications, as seen in a letter from Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau regarding *Parade* in 1917: “Because of the importance of the libretto of *Parade* the authors agree between themselves that M. Jean Cocteau alone shall receive author’s royalties on each performance until these reach the three thousand francs of the premium which he cedes entirely to M. Erik Satie; after which royalties shall be divided in the usual way between composer and librettist.” (Quoted by Richard Buckle, *In the Wake of Diaghilev*. London: Collins, 1982, p. 93.)

are printed under the classifications of libretti, scenarios, plans, concepts, ballet pantomimes, and compositions. Whereas in a work like *Giselle* a carnival scene is described over several paragraphs and thus resembles a more familiar style of narrative, in the avant-garde script we see only clipped, list-like compositions. Take, for example, Cocteau's first scenario for *Parade* in 1917 (see appendix for the translated text) which also appeared in the company's souvenir programme for that season:

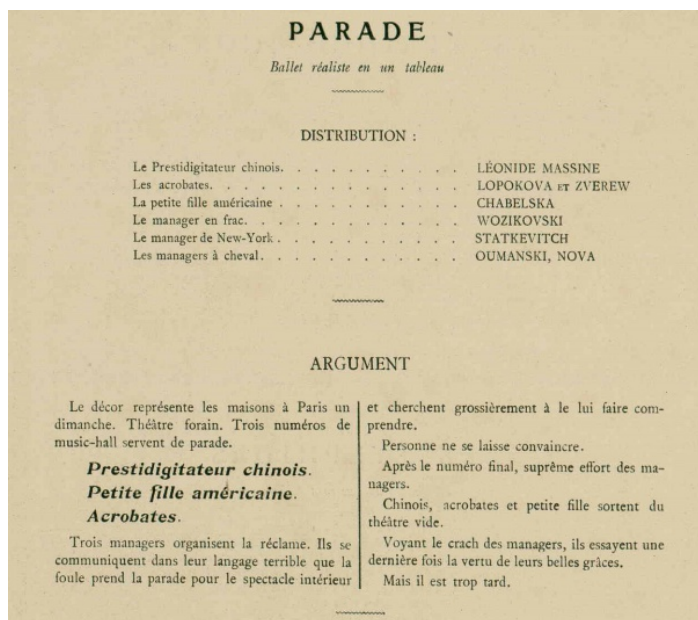


Figure 4. Character list and 'Argument' for *Parade* in the Ballets Russes 1917 season souvenir programme.

Cocteau's text begins in the paragraphed structure of prose, but breaks up into itemised figures. Visually, the arrangement is more akin to that of a poem. Importantly, it is also playful and mysterious in content.

Perhaps because of their variable styles, even at the time of their creation, poets' ballet libretti seem to have been problematic or even forgettable, "While [Madame] Perdriat's libretto for *Marchand d'oiseaux* is rather a summary affair, and though it is easy to imagine (without wishing to sound malicious) that our poets could offer a thousand

richer topics...” wrote a reviewer in 1923.<sup>44</sup> In the same set of reviews appeared this sensible suggestion: “A scenario? You want a scenario? Why? The handsome young man who sells birds embraces one of the most beautiful young women in the world, and that is in every way enough”.<sup>45</sup> It is only in retrospect, perhaps that the importance of the textual archive of the modernist ballet is proved.

Just as the examination of the changing presence of poetic text in the modern ballet is best begun with the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois, from an individual standpoint the trajectory begins with their shared poet-in-residence, Cocteau. Cocteau penned the libretti and scenarios for many of the two companies’ seminal productions, from *Le Dieu Bleu* in 1911 (Ballets Russes) to *Les Biches* in 1924 (Ballet Suédois). In doing so, he established a new and essential place for writers in the artistic process of ballet, and consequently forms a useful starting-point for the study of modernist ballet texts. After the demise of the two companies (in 1925 for the Ballets Suédois and 1929 for the Ballets Russes) Cocteau’s ballet writing would extend into his last years, ending with *Le Fils de l’air* (1978).

In his comprehensive study *Jean Cocteau and the Dance*, Erik Aschengreen explores why the poet “very deliberately turned to dance [...] to express his visions better than words or words alone”.<sup>46</sup> It is easy to pay full attention to the numerous contributions Cocteau made to all aspects of avant-garde ballet without isolating one from the rest. But, if we do, we see that in actuality Cocteau plays a critical role in the changing presence of text both in preparation and performance. As early as 1912, he establishes possibilities for text’s

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<sup>44</sup> Häger, p. 176.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Erik Aschengreen. *Jean Cocteau and the Dance*. København: Gyldendal, 1986, p. 12. In addition to being the only in-depth study of Cocteau’s full ballet career, Aschengreen’s book (originally a doctoral thesis for the University of Copenhagen) also contains each of Cocteau’s ballet scenarios, chronologically reprinted in French. I have primarily turned to this and to Bengt Häger’s *Ballet Suédois* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1990) for the scenarios studied in this chapter, which were translated in that book from the original French by Ruth Sharman. All other original text has been translated by me, as indicated in footnotes.

involvement in ballet that will later conclusively define that aspect of modern ballet and its influence on the work of fellow writers.

## II. Early Influences

After his years with Diaghilev's company, Cocteau found a more fitting home for his experiments with text. The Ballets Suédois allowed text to seep into the realm of performance, beyond its usual, merely practical, boundaries. Text was given equal status in an art form typically dominated by the visual, the sonic, and the kinetic, and was important to Rolf de Maré and his team even outside the space of production literature. In fact, the company's artistic aims were announced in a 1921 publicity pamphlet containing the following manifesto:

Only the Ballets Suédois "DARES." Only the Ballets Suédois represents contemporary life. Only the Ballets Suédois is truly against academicism. ALL ACADEMICISMS. Only the Ballets Suédois can please an international public because Rolf de Maré thinks only about the pleasure of evolution. The Ballets Suédois seeks neither to be old or to be modern; it stands beyond the absurdities mounted under the pressure of THEATRICAL ART; it propagates REVOLUTION by a movement that every day destroys convention by replacing it with invention. LONG LIVE LIFE.<sup>47</sup>

A manifesto, by its textual definition, is not something the Ballets Russes publicised. Its rival group the Ballets Suédois, on the other hand, chose to assert its philosophies first through language—then through dance. This was one rhetorical device among many, which combined appeared to deemphasise dance in favour of other expressive elements. In fact, the company's liberal experimentalism often cost them respect: "Between 1920 and 1925", writes Hélène Laplace-Claverie, "there was an incessant interrogation of the very name of the company installed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: why call it "Ballets Suédois"

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<sup>47</sup> (quoted in) Garafola, Lynn. *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, p. 109.

when [in their work] choreographic art has such a minor space?”<sup>48</sup> For audiences and critics at the time, it was unorthodox to embed the dance within so many other media and within such bombastic public rhetoric.

A comprehensive analysis of Cocteau’s influence would not be complete without referring to the earlier work of the poet and playwright Paul Claudel.<sup>49</sup> Claudel penned the first scenario for the Ballets Suédois with a text that signified a move from the pragmatic rhetoric of Cocteau’s *Parade* to the more poetic documents to follow. I would argue, in fact, that *L’Homme et Son Désir* (see appendix), Claudel’s 1921 “danced poem” marks, significantly, the first step toward the equality—if not supremacy—of language over dance in a ballet production. The scenario attempts to dictate not just steps, but the quality of movement:

Dance of passion. A back and forth movement, increasingly ardent and desperate, as the animal meets the wall and keeps returning to the same place. Maybe without the feet, change position. All possible ways. For example, instead of an obstacle, you can imagine sometimes a scent so delicious that it disables all of the senses. Or a hand which goes out searching, and returns with the opposite. Then the movements of obsession and desperate desire recommence.<sup>50</sup>

Compared to Cocteau’s scenario for *Parade*, which only visually resembles poetry, this dance text is expressive even in stasis. Claudel provides suggestions for the feel of the dance, not just a succession of entrances and exits. Furthermore, in contrast to typical

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<sup>48</sup> “Entre 1920 et 1925 reparaît sans cesse la même interrogation sur le nom de la compagnie installée au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: pourquoi s’appeler “Ballets Suédois” quand on n’accorde à l’art choréographique qu’une place mineure?” Hélène Laplace-Claverie, “Les Ballets Suédois sont-ils des ballets? Petit dictionnaire des idées reçues en matière d’art choréographique” in *Arts en Mouvement: Les Ballets Suédois de Rolf de Maré*, Paris 1920-1925. Josiane Mas, ed. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2008, p. 23 (my translation).

<sup>49</sup> Paul Claudel (1868-1955) was the brother of the famed sculptor (and lover of Auguste Rodin), Camille Claudel, and it makes sense that her work in three dimensions somehow, whether consciously or not, tempted Claudel to challenge the boundaries of the page.

<sup>50</sup> “Danse de la passion. Un mouvement de va-et-vient de plus en plus ardent et désespéré, comme l’animal qui rencontre la paroi et revient sans cesse à la même place. Peut-être sans que les pieds changent de place. Toute espèce de modalités possibles. Par exemple au lieu d’un obstacle on peut imaginer parfois une odeur si délicieuse qu’elle lui ôte tout sentiment. Ou une main qui vient le chercher et qui le ramène en arrière. Puis l’idée fixe et le mouvement de désir désespéré recommencent” (my translation).



notation, there is no technical advice for execution, but rather guidance for the choreographer and his dancers to find ways to embody the written word.

Both Claudel and Cendrars were considering the metaphysical properties of verse in earlier work, publishing pieces under the subtitles of *poèmes plastiques* (Claudel) and *poèmes élastiques* (Cendrars). These terms can be seen as a step toward the textualisation of dance, as they seem to attribute unfamiliar material properties to text, in a similar way to the influence of text upon the purely physical concept of dance. In the souvenir programme for *L'Homme*, Claudel tried to articulate the mission and approach of the team: “How strange it is, at night, when it begins to fill with movement, sounds and glimmers of light! And it is precisely one such night that our poem seeks to represent”.<sup>51</sup> In terms of the stage design, *L'Homme* was admittedly challenging for the spectator. Claudel explained,

We have not tried to reproduce the inextricable matting of the forest flora photographically. We have simply thrown it down like a carpet of purple, green and blue [...]. The stage is vertical, perpendicular as you look at it, like a painting on a wall, or a book while one is reading it. It is also, if you like, a page of music where each piece of action is written on a different stave.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Claudel describes a kind of visual score suggesting that the staging sought to replicate text quite literally (see Figure 5). The emphasis on horizontal lines, each of which holds its own line of narrative, resembles both musical and literary text: bodies move like notes and words. With this kind of visual structure to back it up, *L'Homme et Son Désir* deliberately offers a synaesthetic view of text and textuality, blurring distinctions between word, music, and movement, and forcing the spectator to confront the various levels of language always present but rarely individually articulated in ballet.

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<sup>51</sup> Häger, p. 125.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.



Figure 5. Audrey Parr's curtain background for *L'Homme et son Désir*.

Two years later, another established poet attempted the challenge. Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) came to the Ballets Suédois originally as a friend and associate of de Maré's.<sup>53</sup> Later, he penned a single work for the Ballets Suédois—*La Creation du Monde* (1923). Cendrars had earlier seen the Suédois production of *Skating Rink* (1921), based on a poem by the Italian Futurist and cinema theorist Ricciotto Canudo.<sup>54</sup> As Barbara Zabel notes, Cendrars based *La Creation du Monde* on his previous prose work *Anthologie nègre* (1921), which itself echoed and reimagined the themes and narratives of nineteenth-century missionary writings. It tells a creation myth through the birth out of chaos of primordial,

<sup>53</sup> The Swiss-born poet Blaise Cendrars (born Frédéric-Louis Sauser, 1887-1961) wrote in his poem "Ma Danse", "I am this genteel type crossing ever unchanging Europes in/fabulous/express trains and looking out of the window in dismay/You see I am no longer interested in the landscape/but the landscape's dance, ah well, the dancescape..." Blaise Cendrars. *Collected Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1966, p. 154.

<sup>54</sup> I have excluded *Skating Rink* from my study, but is still noteworthy for its unusual format. As it appears reprinted in Häger's book, Canudo wrote the ballet's events as a list; however, within the framework of a list, he maintained the poetic structure of line enjambment and, overall, the language has a highly poetic and expressive quality. The first line serves as a summary: "1. They turn. They turn. They *turn!* In vague eddies of madness" (Häger, p. 162). For a proper analysis of Canudo's work and its intermediality, see Christopher Townsend's "A new dictionary of gestures": Chaplin's *The Rink* and Ricciotto Canudo's *Skating Rink*" in *The Popular Avant-Garde*. Renée M. Silverman, ed. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010.

“aboriginal” beings.<sup>55</sup> Cendrars’s scenario (see appendix), rather than attempting formal innovations in and of itself, typifies at first glance the kind of system used by many other ballets. Its inner matter however, moved toward an unusually expressive rhetoric, even resorting to hyperbolic language that implies an artistic, rather than practical, method of interpretation and production.

Cendrars’s text fluctuates between the practical and the impractical, the directive and the poetic. He alternately references the stage and its illumination and the creation of the world with such phrases as: “The stage has gradually become lighter in the course of creation, and with each new animal it is brilliantly illuminated”.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in its growing luminescence, the stage animates a “world”, or, even better “the world”. The ballet asserts the symbolic properties of stagecraft as an illusion of chaos and darkness (everywhere but the stage), and the realm of knowledge and systems (the stage). The balletic text, therefore, serves as a kind of intermediary, or map, between what the reader senses and what the spectator experiences in the theatre.

It is in his approach to writing movement that Cendrars’s ballet most overtly parallels his poetic work. How has he rewritten creation mythology for the stage and for the readership of an audience in need of a synopsis? Like most of the scenarios covered in this dissertation, the poet’s text would have appeared in the programme, the programme thus becoming a vehicle for text present during the moment of performance. Accepting the unlikelihood that a spectator would necessarily alternate attention between the stage and the programme during performance, it is important to consider the text as a real physical presence in the space of the performance nonetheless. Moreover, the programme provides a familiar forum for the poet; in constricting (however momentarily) the expressive characteristics of the ballet form back into two dimensions on the page, the poet exercises

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<sup>55</sup> Barbara Beth Zabel, *Assembling Art: The Machine and the American Avant-garde*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004, p. 162.

<sup>56</sup> Häger, 190.

normative challenges of economy, clarity, and compression. But there is also room for expression even on the page, even though scenarios can embody a simpler, more pragmatic tone. Cendrars in *La Creation du Monde* does not embellish his prose, but he does employ hyperbolic (and poetic) speech in an attempt to describe what technical, visible moves mean.

Because of its reliance on abstract visual tropes (Fernand Léger created the scene), there was, perhaps, a risk that the ballet could become too esoteric.<sup>57</sup> But instead, Cendrars establishes the cast of characters (all lifted from African folklore) and links their visceral activities onstage to the less visceral creation myth. In terms of articulating intended movement, Cendrars suggests through his continuous conflation of the specific and the general, the past and the present, that dance and creation (or Creation) are one. Near the end, “All of a sudden, two torsos straighten, cling together: this is man and woman, suddenly upright. They recognise one another: they come face to face”.<sup>58</sup> By enacting the dance, so man and woman materialise. Furthermore, by dancing they create a nucleus around which the remaining creatures and energies revolve to climax. The figurative speech that induces the dancers to do so is beyond the scenario: it is both directive of movement and suggestive of its poetic articulation. It is, essentially, choreographic.

Cendrars and Léger worked together to provide further explanation in the programme. In their description of the staging, they emphasise the scenario’s rhetorical combination of the very prescriptive and the vague:

Notes on rules for staging. General rhythm grave and slow; accentuated at moments, but remaining rather solemn and ceremonial. Local colour: white, black, ochre. Mobile stage lighting intermittent (chiaroscuro effects), partial lighting (avoid total lighting). Continuous mobility of stage via displacement of mobile sets and real or fictitious characters. Animation of stage through birth of a tree and of various animals.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The painter, filmmaker, and printmaker Fernand Léger (1881-1955) was one of the visual artists frequently enlisted to design sets for the Ballets Suédois.

<sup>58</sup> Häger, p. 190.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, Cendrars's message to the audience and his prompting of their understanding extended beyond the boundaries of the technical scenario into a lengthy prose piece reiterating and elucidating individual narrative moments of the work. The poet seems to sense a lingering need to explain the visual poem, not only in terms of its narrative events, but in its emotional meaning and deep symbolism. That the deeper meaning of the work is essentially thereby prescribed is unusual in the context of modernist theatre.

However, I do not think that Cendrars sought to spoon-feed meaning or to compensate for any potential lack of understanding in the digestion of work so dependent on its abstraction. I believe, instead, that Cendrars (and in certain cases Cocteau and Claudel) saw the programme, the press clipping, and the casual vignette as extensions of the space of performance. Consider, for example, the following passage from Claudel's programme entry. In it, one moment, although already present in his scenario, receives a more evocative treatment during which elements not necessarily in the staging of the work are suddenly animated:

Man begins to come alive in his dream. Now he is moving and dancing. And what he dances is the eternal dance of longing, desire and exile, the dance of captives and abandoned lovers, the dance that sends fever victims, tormented by insomnia, tramping back and forth across their veranda all night long, the dance of menagerie animals hurling themselves repeatedly against the impassable bars.<sup>60</sup>

Cendrars expands his subject beyond what is on stage to the outer reaches of human emotional experience when he inscribes the behaviours of "fever victims, tormented by insomnia." These are remarks that would have helped to inform choreography and other facets of production, but it is also readerly embellishment—the poet's flair is embedded here. As we will see expanded in the following chapters, passages such as these advance into the territory of performance, enacting the dance along with, or in spite of, present bodies.

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<sup>60</sup> Häger, p. 126.

### III. Cocteau's Style

While the ballets written by Cendrars and Claudel both helped to forge a place for poets in ballet repertoires, their efforts read more like fleeting phases than a persistently tested formal involvement. The singular work of Cocteau, on the other hand, developed a whole range of stylistic methods as the poet negotiated a new place for text in the scheme of ballet. Cocteau was a true balletomane, invested both personally and artistically in the possibilities afforded by ballet. As one critic observed,

M. Jean Cocteau has written charming verses; he has rhythm in his head and not in his feet like so many versifiers: He is a poet. But since he does not always succeed in literally expressing the sensations that assail him, he must call upon all the other arts to speak to us. Will he resort to the writing of dance, to the plastic art of music, to the art of mimicry of sounds and to the sonorities of colors?<sup>61</sup>

Cocteau committed his energies throughout his career to exploring and developing the capacities of the ballet through his collaborations with artists: a commitment represented vividly even in his written works. His beliefs are an extension of the mantras evident in the work of Ballets Suédois and Ballets Russes. “We see developing in France, little by little...” wrote Cocteau in 1922, “a theatrical genre which is not properly speaking ballet, which has no place in the Opéra, nor at the Opéra-Comique, nor in any of the fashionable theatres. It is there, in this margin, that the future is being sketched”.<sup>62</sup> He continues:

This new genre, more consonant with the modern spirit, remains unexplored land, rich with possibility [...] wide open to explorers! The new generation will continue its experiments in which the fantastic, the dance, acrobatics, mime, drama, satire, music, and the spoken word combine to produce a new form [...] the plastic expression and embodiment of poetry itself.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> G. de Pawlowski. “Le Boeuf sur le toit” *Le Journal* Feb. 22, 1920 (reprinted in “Le Bœuf sur le toit”, Darius Milhaud, et al., *The Drama Review* 16:3 (1972), p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Cocteau cited in William Anthony Sheppard. *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

We have seen this notion of plasticity before, which evokes a new materiality of text; in addition, it is important to point out that at the same time that poets were writing ballet, they were writing *about* writing ballet. Cocteau's statement above epitomises the rhetoric with which the experiment was recorded: ballet was one member of a whole barrage of art forms liberally interwoven to make a "new genre", something synonymous with "the future".

As Cocteau's debut with the Ballets Russes, the 1917 ballet *Parade* is an archetype both of its era and genre and of the working mantra of Serge Diaghilev's collaborative powerhouse.<sup>64</sup> *Parade* is significant for its impressive artistic team, which included Erik Satie (composer), Jean Cocteau (librettist), Michel Fokine (choreographer), and Pablo Picasso (set and costume designer). As the most famous Cocteau-penned ballet (probably because of its famous associations), *Parade* is useful as an introduction to the poet's ballet work. Spurred on by Diaghilev's command, "astonish me", Cocteau set about establishing a concept for the ballet.<sup>65</sup> That Cocteau, as representative of the literature of the production, was an equal partner in the proceedings illustrates the literariness of the ballet of the time, when a poet's concept carried enough cultural clout and artistic significance to encircle a whole production around it.

Cocteau's text demonstrates the issue of existence that plagues the literature of ballets. Searching the vast commentary on the output of the prolific Ballets Russes yields only a few references to a "text" of the poet's work, and the references that do exist only promote an ambiguous understanding of the shape and importance of that text (and, indeed, whether or not it exists). But browsing through a collection of Cocteau's canon of prose, verse, and dramatic works, there appears the text of *Parade*. *Parade* was well documented

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<sup>64</sup> For more on *Parade* and its modernist facets, see Nancy D. Hargrove's "The Great Parade: Cocteau, Picasso, Satie, Massine, Diaghilev—and T. S. Eliot". *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 31:1 (1998), pp. 83-106.

<sup>65</sup> "Etonne-moi"

in its other artistic aspects; it had included Picasso's drawing and set model, and Satie's score for the production is widely accessible. The score resembles the majority of ballet scores in its formal characteristics; indeed, without reading the title page, the fact that the score is a ballet does not necessarily matter. But the title page prioritises Cocteau's role only second to Satie's, suggesting a sense of equanimity between the collaborators. Turning the page, however, the text of the "theme" by Cocteau does not appear; it is displaced entirely by the orchestration.

Interestingly, it is only through reading the orchestral score that dance's intended shape, tempo, and colouration can be mentally conjured. The score is partitioned by its episodes for different dances: "Prelude de Rideau Rouge/Prelude of the Red Curtain", "Prestidigitateur Chinois/Chinese Magician", "Rag-Time du Paquebot/Ragtime of the Packet Steamer", etc. The conflation of titles and pieces of score promotes an understanding of the time frame of the production, providing a certain duration and cadence that Cocteau's text diminishes by its very nature. We also get a sense of colouration in the score that Cocteau's text standardises. Satie has indicated moods and attitudes for particular portions of the score: "Triste", "Tres convenable", at one point indicating a trembling like a leaf near the end of the ragtime. It seems by viewing the separate texts that, in addition to rhythm, duration, and speed, the orchestral score could essentially impact or direct the aesthetic quality of the dance by providing an example of colouration.

Lynn Garafola observes a rhythmic impulse in Cocteau's notes for *Parade* that foreground the growing presence of such texts amid the musical and visual layers of production:

Free Words Invention of Words/...Onomatopoeic Description/Total Music and Art of Noises.../Machinism Eiffel Tower Brooklyn and skyscrapers/Polyglottis/Pure Civilisation/Epic Nomadism/urban exploration Art of Voyages and promenades/Antigraceful/Direct quivers at great free spectacles circuses music halls, etc.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lynn Garafola. *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2009, p. 100.



Here, the style of Cocteau's notes mimics and/or foreshadows the montage-like quality of the application of *Parade*'s avant-garde movement vocabulary. In fact, a sense of the photographic, the clipped, and of "free association" colours Cocteau's ballet work overall. In this case, we see that preliminary note-taking, or text normally discarded as essentially separate from its realisation, bears stylistic characteristics of the art it instructs. As he attempts to articulate his vision to Satie, he attempts to approximate *via text* the very tempo and irreverence of the imagined production.

Despite its impressive pedigree (and subsequent lasting legacy), *Parade* does not actively assert its textuality in performance nearly to the extent embodied by Cocteau's project four years later for the Ballets Russes's rival company, Rolf de Maré's Ballets Suédois. His work in 1921 achieved an unprecedented marriage of text and movement while fostering the company's innovative aesthetic. It is better to briefly consider Cocteau's inaugural piece for the Ballets Suédois, *Le Bœuf sur le toit* (1920) (see appendix). Cocteau's introduction states, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Le Boeuf sur le toit is the name of the bar where our play takes place. Do not look for significance in the name, any more than you would in the names 'The Smoking Dog' or 'The Blind Horse'".<sup>67</sup> This prologue exemplifies the general irreverent attitude of the piece, which showcases a trivial act of violence in an unimportant bar. Humorously, the only concrete text present in *Le Bœuf* (in performance) is the simple alibi posted in the bar's window when the police arrive: "ON NE BOIT DU LAIT" (WE ONLY DRINK MILK). Interestingly, when justifying the new aesthetic of *Le Bœuf*, Cocteau wrote that, "*Parade* still contained literature and intention".<sup>68</sup> If *Parade* contained literature, where was it? Cocteau's comment, although difficult to rationalise, indicates that much of *Parade*'s meaning and essence was, perhaps, nonetheless transferred to life by its skeletal scenario. Of note in the production of *Boeuf* is Cocteau's characteristic

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<sup>67</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Bœuf sur le toit* as printed in *The Drama Review* 16:3, 1972, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

hands-on approach, “Jean Cocteau was not, however, merely the librettist of *Le Boeuf sur le toit*,” writes Aschengreen:

...He was producer and choreographer as well. In *Parade*, Massine had ‘translated’ Cocteau’s ideas and inventions into a choreographic pattern. In *Le Boeuf*, there was no intermediary between the poet and his performing artists. It was Cocteau who demonstrated the movements. He had a very supple body, and he mimed and showed how things were to be done...<sup>69</sup>

With Cocteau himself as not merely a supervisory presence but choreographer of *Le Boeuf*, his text naturally acquired a more prominent presence in production and in performance.

An examination of Cocteau’s textual influence on ballet must include his comprehensive involvement in certain productions, especially in his last works. In Cocteau’s *Le Train Bleu* (1924), we see yet another angle taken in the effort to write movement with the balance of precision and freedom characteristic of Cocteau’s scripts; here, the specificity of movement is subordinated by the depiction of place, narrative arc, and human dynamic. Charles Batson has analysed the inherent stylised rhetoric in *Le Train*, likening it to the “sculpting” of bodies in *Les Mariés*.<sup>70</sup> He notes that, “these dancers, already engaged in a self-aware staging that shows that they do what they do precisely because they know they are doing it for an audience, become the material for their own simulacra, in which their poses enter into a *mise en abyme* of continuing self-reflecting poses”.<sup>71</sup>

In its obsession with physicality and male virility, or rather its obsession with its own awareness of such things, *Le Train* presumably followed that attitude in terms of its movement quality; the movement, although we cannot experience it live, is continuously asserted in Cocteau’s libretto in his allusions to other media forms: postcards, cinema, cabaret, calisthenics, etc. In nearly all of his ballets, Cocteau anthropomorphises or

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<sup>69</sup> Aschengreen, p. 90.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Batson. *Dance, Desire, and Anxiety in Early Twentieth-Century French Theater*. Ashgate, 2005, p. 209.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

somehow mobilises kinds of texts: in *Le Train Bleu*, dancers pose for a tableau as in a postcard, in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, telegrams dance, et cetera. Thus, dance is never dance, but an adjusted reality of common *objets trouvée* and mundane activities. In *Le Train*, the triviality of the scenic contents is matched by matter-of-fact language:

Perhaps it would be good to put a man and a woman two by two in a line, in front of the stage, and to discern by the gesture of each couple the discord between the voices of women and men who sing badly. (Use the air distracted of hens who sing the assemblies and the smiles in the room). These sets have always a military side.<sup>72</sup>

This preoccupation with seemingly all arts and activities *other than* dance indicates an attitude that, as in many other poets' ballet scenarios, dance is a material with which to fill in the gaps inside a concrete structure.

The showy physicality of *Le Train* is reminiscent of an earlier Ballets Russes piece, *Jeux*, by Diaghilev's star Vaslav Nijinsky. In fact, the interactions between virile young people engaged in leisure appeared and reappeared in avant-garde ballet repertory. That setting differs importantly from other chosen representations of worlds and scenarios. In the score of *Le Train Bleu*, synopsis/description of physical movement is separate from the musical score—it appears at the front of the booklet, but not spliced throughout, as opposed to in *L'Homme et Son Désir*. This was the norm: for example, the plan for *Trapèze* (Serge Prokofiev and Boris Romanov, 1924) appears as a simple list of actions, some of which are essentially physical and some which are more emotionally or atmospherically-minded. The action is kept separate from and description of setting. References to dancing are encompassed only by the term 'dance'; therefore, the quality of movement is left ambiguous, to be determined elsewhere.

Formally, the libretto of *Le Train Bleu* (1924) emphasises a chapter-like compartmentalisation, thereby maintaining the idea of scene-based theatricality. Importantly, it was not printed in the ballet's programme, but, rather, interjected into the

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Aschengreen, p. 126 (my translation).

work's orchestral score—an arrangement that further enforces its purpose and consequently didactic aesthetic. We have seen in *Parade* (1917) the most concise scenario list, and in contrast in *Le Dieu Bleu* (1912) the extended prose narrative.<sup>73</sup> *Phèdre* (1950) returns to the list format, but gives each danced action a more liberal poetic space in which to develop. In addition, he introduces the sketch with a poetic prologue:

A myth is a myth because poets resume and prevent death.  
Everyone should be aware of Phaedra, daughter of the sun,  
By the speech or dance glorifying her.<sup>74</sup>

The last line suggests that Phaedra's grand persona may just as well be represented by her dance or her speech—her movement or her text.

Cocteau's last two ballets, *La Dame à la licorne* (1957) and *Le Fils de l'air* (1978) continue the same trope, signaling a return back to the more practice-interested scenarios which came before and after the ground-breaking innovation of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Aschengreen provides two scenarios for Cocteau's failed *Le Fils de l'air*, the first of which comes from archival notes, and the second of which Cocteau reworked for inclusion in his published *Cahiers* (1978). The first sketch, the one more closely related to an intended performance, closes with a speech by the mountebank character, or *le bateleur*. Had the piece reached production, it would have been a resurrection of the ballet narrative seen earlier in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, to which I now turn:

And there you are: it is dangerous to read too much.  
It is dangerous to go walking on Sunday.  
It is dangerous to be a mother.  
It is dangerous to be a little boy.  
All things are dangerous in this world.  
And the mimodrame which you have just witnessed  
was, for the record the words and costumes of Jean Cocteau.  
For the music of Hans Werner Henze... [*etc., as he continues to list the credits*]

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<sup>73</sup> *Parade* is just one example of the many ballets (of both companies) whose scenario (or "Argument") appeared in the programme (see figure 2).

<sup>74</sup> "Un mythe est un mythe parce que les poètes le reprennent et l'empêchent de mourir./ Nul ne doit ignorer celui de Phèdre, petite fille du soleil./ Par la parole ou par la danse glorifions-le" (Aschengreen, p. 274).

Gute nacht. Good night. Bonne nuit. Curtain.<sup>75</sup>

In Cocteau's vision, *le bateleur* inhabits a liminal territory in which he morphs from ballet character/dancer to speaker, from speaker to commentator, and thus from someone inside the world of the drama to someone outside its boundaries, referencing his own creator. As a result, the speech constitutes a rhetorical spectrum that sets dance and text as both contrasted and synthesised tracks.

*Les Mariés* premiered in January 1921, followed by *L'Homme et son désir* in the same year. Nancy Van Norman Baer sees the company's two 1921 productions as "vanguard works" that "confirmed the company's intention to create theatrical spectacles in which all aspects of a production, including the choreography, were subordinated to the *mise en scene*".<sup>76</sup> While Baer is right to acknowledge the company's prioritisation of spectacle over conventional foci of the ballet (music and choreography against a backdrop of everything else), I would argue that in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, the Ballets Suédois emphasise text as much as spectacle. One might say, in fact, that text in this ballet governs every structure of its *mise-en-scène* as well as the effect of the sum of its parts.

#### IV. A more rounded vision: *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*

*Here, I renounce the mysterious. I illuminate everything, I underline everything. Sunday vacuity, human ugliness, ready-made expressions, the disassociation of ideas from flesh and bone, the ferocity of childhood, the poetry and miracles of everyday life.*

Jean Cocteau, "Preface", 1924<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> "Et voila: il est dangereux de trop lire./ Il est dangereux de se promener le dimanche./ Il est dangereux d'être une mere./ Il est dangereux d'être un petit garçon./ Toute chose est dangereuse en ce monde./ Et le mimodrame auquel vous venez d'assister/ Etait pour l'histoire, les paroles et les costumes de Jean Cocteau./ Pour la musique de Hans Werner Henze. [...] Gute nacht. Good night. Bonne nuit. Rideau." (Aschengreen, p. 264, my translation)

<sup>76</sup> *Paris Modern*, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Jean Cocteau. "Preface". *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924.

Jean Cocteau's *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* is the most significant first achievement in the evolution of the ballet of words. The pervasiveness of text in the piece marks at once a shift in the definition of ballet as well as an expansion of its technical possibilities. *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* is certainly innovative in many respects, but, importantly, it conspicuously places the human voice (and the text it speaks) in prominence onstage alongside the dancing body. In that respect, it is worth reconsidering Cocteau's experiment as a critical moment in ballet's formal shift. Through Cocteau's text, it is possible to read the radical changes the Ballets Suédois promised to make. When Cocteau joined the team (having formed a close friendship with founder Rolf de Maré) he was third in a line of poets-in-residence for the company, after Claudel and Cendrars. *Les Mariés* was Cocteau's first ballet project outside of the Ballets Russes, and demonstrates his deep interest in ballet even while unattached to the magnetic Diaghilev.<sup>78</sup>

In *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, what is classically presented as the subject of ballet (romance, magic, myth, etc.) is unapologetically displaced by the study of urban ennui. The subject of the piece is a wedding luncheon on the first level of the Eiffel Tower which, after a series of colourful entrances and exits, ends in massacre. The cast of characters includes "Le photographe", "La cycliste", "La baigneuse de Trouville", "Le général", etc., resembling a pageant of Parisian archetypes. But their apparent normalcy is set in contrast to less likely dancing bodies, such as an ostrich, a lion, and two phonographs. Cocteau's incorporation of technical devices into an already ambitious visual scheme refocuses the spectator's attention from what it is used to (the ballet dancer) to what is new (technology). Cocteau attempted an effect that was both synaesthetic and epic, layering the production with the score by Les Six.<sup>79</sup> The performance featured voices projected through and

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<sup>78</sup> In his dramas, Cocteau experimented with various narratological presences, such as the omniscient Voice in *The Infernal Machine*. Instead, I am concerned here with the narration's specific relationship to Cocteau's dance.

<sup>79</sup> 'Les Six' is the collective name for Parisian composers Georges Auric (1899–1983), Louis Durey (1888–1979), Arthur Honegger (1892–1955), Darius Milhaud (1892–1974), Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), and Germaine Tailleferre (1892–1983). Bound as a group by their common idolisation of

amplified by offstage narrating gramophones, Noh-inspired oversized masks and physically limiting costumes (see Figures 6 and 7), and electrical effects.<sup>80</sup>



Figures 6 and 7. Cocteau's costumes and scenic design for *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.

Cocteau's preface to the 1924 *Nouvelle Revue Française* edition contains an illuminating exposé on his intentions and methodology in the case of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.<sup>81</sup> He positions himself at the helm of the ballet project first and foremost as a poet:

The poet must leave objects and feelings of their sails and their haze, show suddenly so bare, so fast that the men hardly recognize them. They then hit with their youth. This is the case of platitudes, old, powerful and universally accepted as the masterpieces, but whose beauty, originality does surprise us more strength to use. In our show, I rehabilitate the common place.<sup>82</sup>

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Erik Satie and represented informally by Jean Cocteau, Les Six represented the active modern experimental composers working for and alongside the two ballet companies.

<sup>80</sup> The nature of the production's language and text is of course the focus here, but it is important to keep in mind the overarching ambitious innovation of Cocteau's work for the Ballets Suédois.

<sup>81</sup> When Cocteau worked to compile the selections for publication in his complete theatrical works, he included *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* and, in 1928, Librairie Gallimard published *Les Mariés* alongside Cocteau's version of *Antigone*, the two of them alone in one volume, sharing permanent space. These intertextual associations or distinctions, by asserting cultural value as well as a sense of equality between an avant-garde ballet and perhaps the ultimate canonical text, claim for the work a significant measure of literary value.

<sup>82</sup> Jean Cocteau. *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924.

The latter claim represents a sensibility present not only in the avant-garde ballet but throughout the context of modernism. To rehabilitate (we might say to “reposition” or “reintroduce” it through aesthetic elevation) the ordinary is the blatant mission of *Les Mariés* in its subject-matter. However, in its execution, it is anything but the identifiably common; instead, Cocteau offers the unfamiliar, remodeled vision of the common-place as something that perhaps should not be viewed as such.

Allan Pero has noted Cocteau’s own definition of the ballet as “a drop of poetry under a microscope”.<sup>83</sup> It is a fruitful metaphor when we consider Cocteau’s desire to interrogate norms, even the mundane, in the unlikely setting of the ballet stage.<sup>84</sup> But Pero goes on to say that Cocteau’s work “places the poetic work itself under a microscope in order to investigate the otherwise invisible worlds that exist within it”.<sup>85</sup> I wish to manipulate the semantics of this observation to suggest that Cocteau’s work deliberately reintroduces “otherwise invisible” *words* into the theatrical scheme, incorporating his own poet’s voice in the guise of narration into the very performance, producing an effect unfamiliar to conventional classical ballet. I see Cocteau’s conflation of physicality and language as one mechanism among many through which he attempted to negotiate a new place for text in the changing modern definition of dance.

Whereas for his sketch of *Parade* Cocteau resorted to an overtly practical kind of rhetoric resembling an inventory of characters and actions, here, the text tells the whole story of the ballet’s action. In its completeness and its appeal to readership, the scenario establishes itself as bearing its own aesthetic value and usefulness as a companion piece to the more abstract ballet. Excusing its obscure meaning, Cocteau’s opening quatrain encourages the reader to recall and reconsider his established identity as a poet:

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<sup>83</sup> Alan Pero. “The Feast of Nemesis Media: Jean Cocteau’s *The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*”. *Modern Drama* 52:2 (Summer 2009), p. 192. For an extended analysis of Cocteau’s 1922 ‘Preface’ to the ballet and its influence on his dramas, see Annette Shandler Levitt’s “Jean Cocteau’s Theatre: Idea and Enactment” *Theatre Journal* 45:3 (Oct. 1993), pp. 363-372.

<sup>84</sup> Pero, p. 193.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



I imagine their eyes upturned towards the temples  
While in the middle of a hot pool  
They exit the Lotus; we see prints  
Round his pale pillow...<sup>86</sup>

The quatrain is recognisable as poet's rhetoric, and consequently imbues the text that follows with a sense of artistic value. The very presence of this "argument" in the hands of the audience indicates that they were meant not to forget text when confronted with a purely sonic/visual art, but were challenged to "read" the ballet while viewing and listening. The act of reading is merged with spectatorship.

## V. Dancing through the gramophone

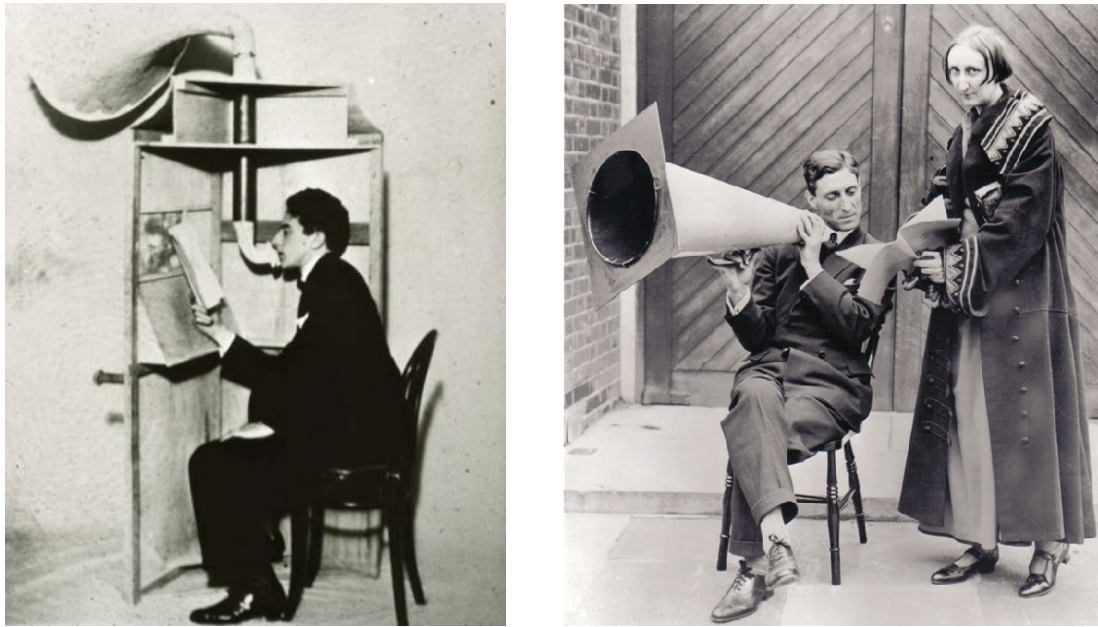
Not only does *Les Mariés* present text as integral to performance, but its choice of the vehicle for the text makes conscious claims about modern communication at the same time that it mechanises the poetic voice. Cocteau's text originates from a human-gramophone device, a hybrid source residing in a side-stage booth.<sup>87</sup> Thus, for Cocteau's masked dancers and for his narrative voice, concealment colours the piece's entire aesthetic. In other words, the same experimental techniques applied to kinetic and visual properties of the piece (for example, through the masking of the body by large costumes) are applied to its aural facets as well. In modern ballets like Cocteau's (and especially in this one) the roboticisation or mechanisation of the human body is extended into other media, into the territory of the voice. Moreover, in its amplification across the stage, the act of speech is both cloaked and manipulated in its transmission. Cocteau's placement of the text in the front line of performance would influence others: the poet Edith Sitwell, who

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<sup>86</sup> "J'imagine leurs yeux retroussés vers les tempes/ Lorsqu'au centre d'un chaud bassin/ Ils sortent du Lotus qu'on voit sur les estampes/ Arrondir son pale coussin" (Aschengreen, p. 265).

<sup>87</sup> According to Bengt Häger, the part of Gramophone One was played by Cocteau himself in the premiere. In contemporaneous publications of the text, however, he is not listed as part of the cast. Cocteau poses in one of the gramophone booths in publicity photos (see figure 4). It is worthy of note that Diaghilev had turned down the idea of gramophone narration when it was proposed for *Parade*.

was certainly familiar with Cocteau's *Parade*, if not *Les Mariés*, used a similar technology in her *Façade* (see Fig. 9). Sitwell narrated her poetry through a Sengerphone, "a large papier maché megaphone with an elaborate mouthpiece that fitted round the speaker's face".<sup>88</sup>



Figures 8 and 9. Cocteau posed as "Gramophone One" on the set of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*; Edith Sitwell demonstrating her Sengerphone with actor Neil Porter, circa 1922.

Another character in *Les Mariés* is, fittingly, a telegraphist. The commonplace, disjointed nature of the spoken text suggests that the movement probably followed suit. Moments devoted to movement appear throughout the text in a haphazard fashion, never necessarily warranted by the plot. There are dances as different as a classical quadrille and a dance of telegrams. But, for the most part, the meat of the work resides in its zany, seemingly random collage of entrances, exits, and interactions. The setting is the first tier of the Eiffel Tower (meaningful, as Pero notes, in that Cocteau means to reinforce his mission to depict the banal by choosing the least romantic or exciting part of the structure) and

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<sup>88</sup> John Pearson. *Façades: Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell* (Google eBook). A&C Black, 2011.

establishes the menial work day of the restaurant staff there.<sup>89</sup> A phone call announces the pending arrival of a wedding party, for which the staff attempt to “set the stage”.

As the following excerpt illustrates, while Cocteau’s style promotes a sense of frantic absurdity, its apparent simplicity underlines and amplifies a self-reflexivity which bears broader claims about art and communication:

*Gramophone two.* Ladies and gentlemen, the plot thickens, since the director of the Eiffel Tower suddenly realizes that the telegram bears his address. *Gramophone one.* He opens it. *Gramophone two.* “Director Eiffel Tower. Coming wedding lunch, request reserve table.” *Gramophone one.* But this telegram is dead [i.e. out of date]. *Gramophone two.* It’s precisely because it’s dead that everyone understands it.<sup>90</sup>

Besides the overt criticism of tired tradition and its pandering to the masses (people can only process, understand, and appreciate the obsolete), the most important aspect of passages such as this is the air of commentary which distances text from the world of the play. Consequently, Cocteau’s critique that technology moves too quickly for humans to keep up is just as significant as the logistical fact that a luncheon group is about to enter the scene. The gramophone, a human/machine hybrid in Cocteau’s creation, has an omniscient sense of this.

Just as the ballet reaffirms the subordination of the human body to devices like the overblown masks and costumes, so too does it use textual layers to suggest words as authoritative, even suffocating, presences in the story-world. “Just as mirages are characters,” writes Daniel Albright, “...so words are characters, too: a gang of telegrams can descend on the stage to dance a waltz. Breton believed that he could create new objects [...] simply by saying the words; Cocteau illustrates on stage this easy commerce between noun and physical thing”.<sup>91</sup> The importance of Cocteau’s dancing telegrams extends beyond their noun-to-thing transformation: fundamentally, a telegram is a text. By physicalising the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Reprinted in Häger, p. 141.

<sup>91</sup> Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 280.

telegrams, Cocteau animates text in a way that mimics the ballet's overarching system: all movement is prescribed and transcribed by the text of the narrating gramophones. In other words, the dance of the telegrams miniaturises the work's very foundation.

When the Second Gramophone announces, for instance, that “[t]he telegrams calm down. They organize themselves in a line. The loveliest of them steps forward and does a salute”, the dance's text not only narrates the danced action, but essentially negates it.<sup>92</sup> Text renders the dance irrelevant, which is compounded physically by the dancers' restrictive costumes. By creating a character out of text via the telegrams that incessantly enter the scene, Cocteau also calls continuous attention to the dense idea of text and its and myriad possible applications. In addition, he emphasises the ubiquity of text in an age greatly marked by the proliferation of communication modes. Present on stage alongside the two human gramophones is a human camera; the text repeatedly references everyone's fixation on these devices. The anthropomorphism of them as they appear in the ballet emphasises the widespread social displacement of the human by the technological; the aesthetic effect of *Les Mariés* is the distinctive product of that conflation.

The gramophones, with their narrative task, also occupy a prominent place in the play's visual scheme. As Cocteau wrote in *La Danse*, “[the gramophones], instead of being—as tends to happen in the theatre—too small, too meagre in their reality, to hold their own against the luminous and decorative masses that make up the stage, are so ingeniously constructed, padded out, adjusted, touched up, that they do not go up like straw and fizzle out in the fire of the footlights and spotlights”.<sup>93</sup> What *could* be cast aside as yet another visual experiment insists, however, that we pay further attention. Cocteau concerned himself with fortifying (and making as conspicuous as possible) the ballet's underlying text.

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<sup>92</sup> Häger, p. 146.

<sup>93</sup> Reprinted in Häger, p. 148. *La Danse* appears to have been a paperback volume released in June 1921 containing a variety of photographs, artists' sketches, essays, and the Ballets Suédois's current season's programme.

Importantly, though, the text's purpose is not to express an underlying narrative but to actually drive the dance: the gramophones "comment on the action and recite the characters' parts. They speak very loudly and very fast, clearly enunciating each syllable. The scenes are performed in unison with their narration". By establishing an interdependence between movement and narration, Cocteau suggests that the dance cannot function with the text, or vice versa. Furthermore, within the world of *Les Mariés*, it is the narration that gives meaning to the dance, a relationship that implicitly challenges the ability of dance to both craft and communicate its meaning. By twisting the power relationship thus through these methods, Cocteau's text maintains a position of superiority over all it dictates.

Whereas in other text-focused ballets language is displaced by the body, *Les Mariés* is composed of a blend of movement and dialogue. In fact, the ballet creates a bespoke vehicle for text in the human gramophone, which is a deliberate hybrid of body and machine. More importantly than the human/machine fusion (which correlates to a popular trope in the avant-garde) is the immobility of the human gramophones, who remain essentially "plugged in" at either side of the proscenium. In other words, the disembodied voice is mobile while the body is stationed to the side. In the tradition of the ballet, of course, the body is what moves onstage, and the voice is never heard. Cocteau's human gramophone is more than a vehicle for text, but also a direct destabilisation of the very structure of ballet.

Similarly, Cocteau's text disperses poetic moments throughout its length according to an unintelligible system. See, for instance, the rhymed couplet appearing suddenly here (marked by my underline):

*Gramophone two.* The telegrams calm down. They organize themselves into a line. The loveliest of them steps forward and does a military salute.  
*Gramophone one, in the voice of a revue compere.* So, who are you, then?  
*Gramophone two.* I am the wireless telegram and, like my sister the stork,

I've come from New York. *Gramophone one*... New York! The city of lovers and blinds? *Gramophone two*. On with the music! Telegrams' dance.<sup>94</sup>

The frenetic effect of Cocteau's language carries a conscious statement about the malleability of language modes in the scheme of modern art. Text is just as able to change shape as music and visual properties are; indeed, it must be able to in order to keep pace. The playful, if destabilising, attitude of *Les Mariés* is due to the layering of the mundane and simple with lavish, overblown and seemingly random spectacle. In and of itself, Cocteau's language demonstrates a similar range: "Two human gramophones recite the text," commented Cocteau's friend and early witness, the poet Raymond Radiguet, "each using different tones of voice, which are to diction what capital letters, italics, etc., are to typography."<sup>95</sup> If stresses and inflections in voice can accomplish what typefaces do and mean in text, then, for Cocteau, movement was a third player in a trio of interchangeable, layerable languages.

## VI. The text is here to stay

In his persistent mission to magnify "a drop of poetry" in the space of the ballet, there is no chronological progression from Cocteau's earliest method to his last; he seems to have adjusted his concept of scenario to fit each writing situation. As a result, we can assume that the scenario's possibilities concerned Cocteau throughout his career. Whether or not his scenarios claimed any autonomous value for the poet, they remain, all the same. In an otherwise ephemeral art form, the scenario is a rich, sometimes sole, artefact.

And yet it is in *Les Mariés* that Cocteau's insistence on textuality is most evident and most essential to the technical stability and poetic meaning of the ballet; indeed, as Häger writes, in pitching the new project Cocteau "*read* it to Rolf de Maré at the home of

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<sup>94</sup> Häger, p. 146.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

the painter Jean Hugo”.<sup>96</sup> That it was read—not merely described or pantomimed, or explained through references to other dance works—is significant. Cocteau’s page and subsequent voice were, not only in the beginning but throughout the life of this particular ballet, the venue of chief importance. Generally, whatever scenario text is used in production vanishes at the moment of performance, into whose embodied, kinetic language the original text is subsumed. In *Les Mariés*, however, we have the first example of an omnipresent text. As Cocteau explained,

The action of my piece is imaginary while the text is not. I try to exchange a "poetic theatre" for "poetry in the theatre." Poetry in the theatre is a delicate lace impossible to see from afar. Poetic theatre would be a big lace; a lace rope, a ship on the sea. *Les Mariés* may have the brutal appearance of a drop of poetry under a microscope. The scenes fit together like the words.<sup>97</sup>

Here, as in the ballet, Cocteau explicitly asks his reader to synthesise modes of communication. Specifically *artificial* modes of communication are so integral to the humour and fantasy of the work that they reaffirm the overall deliberate artificiality of Cocteau’s theatre. In summarising Cocteau’s achievement in *Les Mariés*, Erik Ashengreen writes, “Everything was raised to a stylized plane, so that it became a ‘portrait of a wedding luncheon’ rather than a realistic representation of one”.<sup>98</sup> The camera, a mechanical universe, acts as a revolving door in and out of the stage space.

The ballet’s fixation on the mechanical reproduction of human experience lays a subliminal call for attention to numerous kinds of text. As the camera of the stage attempts and fails to trap images in the frenzy of human activity, so Cocteau’s narration tries to impose a sort of omniscient explanation over the same. However, instead of “reading” like captions, the narration repeatedly calls attention to its own, mechanically-sourced, nature. It

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29 (emphasis mine).

<sup>97</sup> “L’action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l’est pas. J’essaie donc de substituer une ‘poésie de théâtre’ à la ‘poésie au théâtre’. La poésie au théâtre est une dentelle délicate impossible à voir de loin. La poésie de théâtre serait une grosse dentelle; une dentelle en cordages, un navire à la mer. *Les Mariés* peuvent avoir l’aspect terrible d’une goutte de poésie au microscope. Les scènes s’emboîtent comme des mots.” Jean Cocteau. *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924, p. 18 (my translation).

<sup>98</sup> Ashengreen, p. 105.

is the only one of Cocteau's ballet texts to enforce a meta-narrative in performance. Cocteau's other ballet works represent, rather, a building textual presence that culminates in the audacity of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.

As Ashengreen notes, the ballet's emphasis on artificiality affects the way the dance is perceived. I would further argue that the ballet's emphasis on narration and the authority of text directly inform the ballet's aesthetic; just as the ballet is a 'portrait' of a wedding luncheon (and consequently takes its shape) so it is, too, a description of a dance. Existing notions of representation and reality already prevalent in the avant-garde are here extended by Cocteau, who interrogates how dance and text can combine to test old boundaries and craft new ones.

Reflecting on his achievement in 1921, Cocteau later wrote: "[u]ntil *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, the first work in which I owe nothing to anyone, which resembles no other work, where I found my formula, I forced the lock and twisted my key in all directions".<sup>99</sup> Although Cocteau does not attribute the success of his "formula" to his bold use of text, we can respect it as the main difference between it and Cocteau's other ballet texts. Furthermore, as a text as well as a theatrical event, *Les Mariés*, which was "both a personal showdown and a manifesto", would have a profound literary influence for writers to come:

Its genre was new and would have consequences for European theatre well into the century. Jean Anouilh and the whole Theatre of the Absurd willingly gave credit to *Les Mariés* as one of their literary forbears. To Anouilh, reading [it] was a revelation: "Jean Cocteau had given me a sumptuous and frivolous gift: he had given me the poetry of theater".<sup>100</sup>

Anouilh prefaced the above sentiment by explaining: "from the very first lines something burst in me a block of ice and impassable transparent that blocked my way".<sup>101</sup> For writers like Sitwell and Anouilh, and clearly for Jean Cocteau, *Les Mariés* had opened up new

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<sup>99</sup> Jean Cocteau. *La Difficulté d'être*. Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1953, p. 21.

<sup>100</sup> Ashengreen, p. 97 (my translation). Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) was a French dramatist and screenwriter.

<sup>101</sup> Jean Anouilh. *En marge du théâtre*. Efrin Knight, ed. Paris: La Table Ronde, 2000, p. 100.



possibilities for text in unexpected places. The next chapter builds on this spirit of carving new space for text. In addition, it invites us to think back to the notion of the choreographer alluded to in this chapter, and to see how the tension between text and body manifested itself in the evolving art of the ballet.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Text and body dualism in Bertolt Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins***

In the previous chapter, I considered the varying expressiveness and changing shape of ballet texts written in collaboration with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's two pre-eminent Western ballet companies. In the works of Paul Claudel, Blaise Cendrars, and in particular those of Jean Cocteau, we have seen the poet's role rise from the pre-production scenario writer to a fully integrated collaborative presence as well as the consequent rise in artistic importance and physical presence of their texts in performance. From that stand-point, this chapter provides an intermediary step between the examples of poets actively involved in ballet production and later situations in which the ballet writer struggled to find any collaborators or production possibilities at all.

When we read/see the ballets of Jean Cocteau and his colleagues, we read/see (to borrow Soraya Le Corsu's description) a "use of ballet as undertaking a plastic re-imagining of the theatrical in order to better capture reality by meditating on the problematic of media's interaction with material, tangible bodies".<sup>102</sup> The corporeal subject shares the stage with its immaterial, spiritual counterpart, and we read and see a "plastic re-imagining" of physiological/psychological difference made manifest through unexpected articulations of voice and body. Defined as a *ballet chanté*, Brecht's *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* further complicates the boundary between body and text by dividing them into two performative layers.

The alternating presence and absence of the work's text directly corresponds to the situation of the dancing body which, in this case, constitutes the meaning and heart of

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<sup>102</sup> Le Corsu, Soraya. *L'image surréaliste dans l'oeuvre de Jean Cocteau*. Paris: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2006, pp. 132-134 (as translated by Alan Pero in "The Feast of Nemesis Media: Jean Cocteau's *The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*". *Modern Drama* 52:2 (Summer 2009), p. 192.

Brecht's ballet. Earlier, Jean Cocteau's involvement with the Ballets Suedois marks the first permanent presence of the writer in the modernist ballet company and, consequently, the influence of the writer's text in performance. In the case of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, we have seen text, spoken through the gramophone, dictating movement. In that work, the text is a pervasive, dominating layer over the moving body. If the aesthetic aim of other writers' ballets is to suggest a merger of the body and the text (ultimately so that the latter replaces the former), I argue that Bertolt Brecht's *ballet chanté* consciously separates and distinguishes them.

Like Cocteau, whose work was specifically designed to inspire and direct performance, Brecht did not intend for his ballet to be consumed only through reading, where the body is subjugated to the material presence of language. However, the fact that we *can* read the work as a text marked by presence and absence calls attention to the work's particular tensions between body and language, dance and text. In all of the other texts covered in this study, movement is articulated and conducted via the text; Brecht gives us the only example of textual space in this dissertation which dance is meant to ultimately fill. His ballet allows a reading of the relationship between text and body both in and outside the event of performance. *Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* presents its protagonist, Anna, as two separate beings (see Fig. 1).<sup>103</sup> One, Anna I, represents the pragmatic moral figure: guided by the head, she sings Brecht's text. The second, Anna II, is the spiritual, sensual self. While virtually absent from the page, she is written by the choreographer and "speaks" through her dancing body. In performance, the text "reads" very differently: this ballet rejects and pushes the body away in order to draw attention to it.

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<sup>103</sup> In some citations, "the Lower Classes" is used in place of "the Petty Bourgeoisie". The New York production was titled *Anna/Anna*, *Anna-Anna*, or *Anna Anna*, variously. The Paris title was *Les sept peches capitaux*.



Figure 10. Tilly Losch and Lotte Lenya as Anna II and Anna I, respectively, in 1933.

Brecht's ballet challenges and demonstrates modernist sensibilities of corporeality. On the one hand, the dancing body is precariously missing from Brecht's text. In her inscribed absence, the text calls attention to the dancing Anna's material irrelevance. At the same time, however, her absence calls attention to its necessary manifestation through other means: through a body that resists inscription and insists on its own performative ephemerality. In the work's historical context, this begs a new question: how does the binary opposition of Anna's body and voice speak to contemporary views of the physical and the psychological? How does Brecht's text articulate a separation of naturally co-existing powers? Aesthetically, how does their separation reinforce their co-dependency? While both Cocteau's and Brecht's ballets both "reimagine" physiological/psychological difference, they use importantly different methods, visible even in their division of artistic labour. Cocteau's ballets encourage an identification of the poet as choreographer because

his language *is* choreography; Brecht's ballet requires the co-authorship of George Balanchine as choreographer to complete the work.

Further significant to the study of the work's formal structure, and the division of labour between writer and choreographer, I would argue that the bisection of Anna also implores us to consider the text against the dance. That mode of consideration has implications both on and off the page. Thematically, too, the ballet complements an object of Brechtian fixation. As Ronald Hayman observes, many of Brecht's other protagonists are split personalities:

After arguing in *Man is Man* that personality could be dismantled and reassembled, Brecht found different ways of splitting it. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan* he depicted a warm-hearted prostitute who, needing to defend herself against exploitation, disguised herself as a cold-hearted man; in *Herr Puntila and his Servant Matti*, Brecht introduced a land-owner who was generous when drunk and heartless when sober.<sup>104</sup>

In both of these other scenarios, the dualism of the protagonist is informed by the mind/body division. Clearly appreciative of the artistic value of split personalities and their manifestation on the stage, Brecht in *The Seven Deadly Sins* again divided the human in two halves, both individually operated by a separate artistic medium. I will return to the essentially Brechtian devices inherent in the *ballet chanté* later in this chapter as a means of placing the work within his canon, and offer my thoughts on reading Brecht's adoption of the ballet as a uniquely nuanced extension of his theatrical principles. To begin, I will explain the issues of writing, authorship, and interpretation that make Brecht's ballet worthy of critical attention. We will turn our attention to the text's formal structures both on and off the page, as well as their physical and psychological ramifications. I will then approach Anna's dualism with regards to corporeality and spirituality. If the sisters can avoid succumbing to the seven deadly sins, they will be repaid with a house for their family in Louisiana. The ballet is, therefore, the expression of a financial exchange. Anna I

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<sup>104</sup> Ronald Hayman. *Bertolt Brecht: The Plays (Contemporary Playwrights)*. London: Heinemann Education Books Ltd., 1984, p. 45.

demonstrates the pragmatism of the exchange while Anna II dances. Her dance is a language that does not work in the matrix of the exchange except for when it can be commodified (specifically, for sex).

## I. The collaborative enterprise

In 1933, when a young Lincoln Kirstein attended a performance of Brecht's ballet at the Savoy Theatre (the Strand, London), he deemed what he had seen a 'dance landmark'. *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* (*Die sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger*) was a collaboration between the poet and his frequent musical collaborator Kurt Weill.<sup>105</sup> The ballet follows the trajectory of a morality play through the struggling subject of an American woman named Anna, who is divided into two halves. The domineering and focused Anna I sings Brecht's libretto to Weill's score, while Anna II, as the embodiment of the emotional, sensual self, only dances. The separation of self into two duelling beings attaches important meaning to the act of singing and the act of dancing, but it also reaffirms the simultaneity of both selves in one vessel. Dualisms pervade the work, which bitinglly criticises the lower middle class, or "petty bourgeoisie".<sup>106</sup>

As Wayne Heisler observes, "[T]he members of Anna's family [...] refer to her in the singular. Thus, singer/dancer-Anna forms the basis to explore and deconstruct other

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<sup>105</sup> The project was first suggested by Tilly Losch, a popular Austrian ballet dancer and friend of Weill's. Brecht was recruited by Weill thereafter, and the work premiered in Paris for Les Ballets 1933 with choreography by George Balanchine and travelled subsequently to London and Copenhagen. Tilly Losch starred alongside the singer Lotte Lenya, who reprised her role twenty-five years later, when Balanchine brought the piece to the New York stage as a vehicle for the dancer Allegra Kent.

<sup>106</sup> "*Die Sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger* was originally called *Die Sieben Todsünden* [*The Seven Deadly Sins*], and in Brecht's lifetime it was produced only under that title. In this case, the current edition holds to Brecht's title correction and accepts the long version as the definitive one". Erdmut Wizisla and Marta Ulvaeus, "Editorial Principles in the Berlin and Frankfurt Edition of Bertolt Brecht's Works" *The Drama Review* 43:4 (Winter 1999), pp. 31-39.

apparent dualities, including classical-popular/cabaret music, opera-ballet, and sin-virtue”.<sup>107</sup> As has been noted by various critics, Brecht continuously omitted the text from publications of his collected works, only once manipulating the original script by adding a single “inked autograph addendum to the title (c. 1936)—‘*der Kleinbürger*’ (of the *petit bourgeoisie*)—as if the addition of a quasi-Marxist diminutive would sufficiently signal his half-hearted interest in the final product or perhaps resituate the piece within a post-1933 ideological/political environment”.<sup>108</sup> The text has never seemed to “sit” well in the printed ephemera of the Brechtian canon, perhaps because of its dependence upon the corporeal, which cannot be adequately articulated on the page. Indeed, the work has historically been more noteworthy as a vehicle for Weill’s celebrated score than for Brecht’s text.

Still, there has been identified a certain critical value to considering the textual presence of Brecht’s ballet, as has been most thoroughly detailed by Steven Paul Scher.<sup>109</sup> Scher balances his critique of Brecht’s evolving aesthetic as seen in the work with a constant reference to the text’s unstable history. *Seven Deadly Sins* was published first in 1959 in German and translated into English shortly thereafter by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, existing otherwise in various printed ephemera not readily available to readers. Fully dissecting the differences between the text’s printed versions is unnecessary for this discussion, which confronts the text’s dualism as well as that of its subject.<sup>110</sup> What is

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<sup>107</sup> Wayne Heisler. “The Seven Deadly Sins (Die sieben Todsünden) (review)”. *The Opera Quarterly*. Volume 22, Number 1 (Winter 2006), p. 166.

<sup>108</sup> Kim H. Kowalke. “Seven Degrees of Separation: Music, Text, Image, and Gesture in The Seven Deadly Sins”, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104:1 (Winter 2005), p. 11 (notes).

<sup>109</sup> Steven Paul Scher. ‘Die Sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger: Emblematic Structure as Epic Spectacle’ in *Essays on Literature and Music: (1967- 2004)*. Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf, eds. London: Rodopi, 2004.

<sup>110</sup> As a note for *Seven Deadly Sins* states in *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, an English-German version of the libretto can be found in the literature accompanying the American Columbia recording. The collection includes a French translation by Georges Ribemont-Desaignes and I. Grunberg in a souvenir programme published by Editions des Quatre Chemins, Paris in 1933. Auden and Kallman’s 1950s translation replaces the original full English version by producer Edward James, which has since been lost. There was reportedly a second translation (commissioned in 1981 by Lotte Lenya) by Michael Feingold for production by the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University.

certain is that the ballet was meant to incorporate and actually feature poetic text, even at the time of its conception. “Artistically,” wrote Weill, “I have requested collaboration with a poet of equal stature. I have a plan for which I need good texts, since under no circumstances do I want to write the kind of ballet others do”.<sup>111</sup> Although Cocteau was Weill’s first choice, the task fell instead to Bertolt Brecht, who was passing time in Paris in anticipation of his pending exile.

## II. Two Annas, two texts

The text of *The Seven Deadly Sins* is arranged in the manner of call-and-answer dialogue. On the page, Anna II speaks, but merely to reiterate her sister’s narration. Her real speech is delivered by her body:

### PROLOGUE

ANNIE I. So my sister and I left Louisiana  
Where the moon on the Mississippi is a-shining ever  
Like you always hear in the songs of Dixie.  
We look forward to our homecoming-  
And the sooner the better.

ANNIE II. And the sooner the better.

ANNIE I. It's a month already since we started  
For the great big cities where you go to make money.  
In seven years our fortune should be made  
And then we can go back.

ANNIE II. In six years would be so much nicer.<sup>112</sup>

The text's ambiguity grants producers freedom in casting and in the handling of the relationship between Anna I and Anna II, which is in fact the central theme, action, and picture of the work. Here, importantly, production determines text. *Seven Deadly Sins* is one of the only ballet texts to have been produced multiple times in the second half of the

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<sup>111</sup> Quoted in *Kurt Weill: a life in pictures and documents*. David Farneth, Elmar Juchem, and Dave Stein, eds. New York: Overlook Press, 2000, p. 134.

<sup>112</sup> Bertolt Brecht. “The Seven Deadly Sins of the Lower Middle Class”. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6 (1961), p. 123. Subsequent quotations in this chapter (unless otherwise noted) are taken from this version of the text, which is the Auden and Kallman translation (see footnote 11); I will use the abbreviated title *Seven Deadly Sins*.



20<sup>th</sup> century, when documentation had advanced enough to provide vivid ephemera through which to decipher and compare various production elements. In addition, two film versions have been made. We must take advantage of these records while we can, as they allow a more penetrative, comparative study between individual negotiations of text in performance.

In performance, it is the choreographer's responsibility to manage Anna I's body. It is not as though Brecht's text gives her any physical instructions: rather, it ignores Anna I's corporeality just as it does her counterpart's. The 'fleshing out' of Anna I necessitates a new negotiation of the body. Even if Anna I remains anchored to one spot onstage, her body is nonetheless present and, therefore, a foil to Anna II. The mutual presence of Anna's bodies can be managed in countless ways. In a 1990 production at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus (which was filmed), Ute Lemper's Anna I maintained a forcefully patriarchal physicality, even wearing a suit and smoking. Anna II was danced by seven different women (one for each of the scenes and corresponding sins). Throughout, Anna II is depicted as a sexualised automaton. For example, in the second scene when the camera is close, we can see her bewildered, sleepy expression and her malleability in the hands of her master, Anna II. Anna I's arms hang limp at her sides until Anna II shapes them, and the latter repeatedly pats her counterpart on the face as if to revive her out of sleep.



Figure 11. Ute Lemper as Anna I with Anna II, 1990.

It is only when she is placed on show (for money) that Anna II seems to know what to do, robotically performing a series of erotic poses on table-tops. Anna II's commodification is thus shown as her natural, free 'mode'. As befits the duo's chemistry, Anna I is the backbone and puppeteer of both, a position that does not vary from one production of the ballet chanté to the next.<sup>113</sup> This indicates the importance of hierarchy in the body/text division. Taking the protagonist's dualism as a given, one might ask: who is Anna, actually? I would argue that the combined Anna is readable as a construction of her society: a circumstance which the text subsequently takes up as an artistic device. The resulting separation of the body and the text in Brecht's ballet chanté mirrors the forced separation of body and mind in modernity, when years of industrialisation had combined with wartime anxiety to force and reinforce the same division.

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<sup>113</sup> At the Landestheater Linz in 2012, Anna I was sung by Marianne Faithful, who at 65 was noticeably older than Anna II. The obvious age difference suggests yet another variation on the theme: Anna I experiences visions of her youth. Anna I and Anna II are not mutually present in either the danced or song world, but coexist due to the bridge of memory. Anna I seems nostalgic, even sad. She sings the moment of auto-communication, "Right, Anna?/Yes, Anna", the final echo of which seems to from the past, resurrected through Anna I's voice. Yet another configuration of the protagonist shaped a 2010 production at the Theater an der Wien, in which Anna I and Anna II appear to have been conflated and performed simultaneously by one woman. One filmed adaptation even presents Brecht's text in the manner of subtitles. The Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus production described above can be viewed online: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0PNiB8YyxQ>].

### III. Body vs. psyche

The binary division of Anna's character establishes a symbiotic relationship around which the ballet text revolves both in print and in performance. This section examines the division of the persona in the context of changing views toward dance and psychology and their effect of the artistic possibilities of dance and theatre. I will turn my attention away from the text's history in order to create an anatomy of the work's protagonist, Anna. One half of her, the silent, dancing Anna II is understood to be governed by her body, while Anna I is governed by voice and mind. The work's inscribed text belongs to the latter. I want to suggest that the second text's material absence influences the work on the page just as much as its physical realization influences the work's performance.

In the original text, Anna I speaks for both her selves, indicating that Brecht did not allocate spoken text for Anna II. The apparent stability (and would-be physical unity) of the character is compromised with statements like "We bought ourselves an outfit". The sameness of the two selves is further made clear by Anna I's continual question-and-answer monologue. The following passage contains a representative moment of self-to-self question and answer:

ANNA:  
My sister is pretty, I am practical;  
My sister is a little crazy, I am sane.  
We are not actually two people  
But in fact only one,  
And both of us are called Anna:  
We have a single past, a single future  
And one heart and savings account;  
And we only do what is best for each other.  
Right, Anna?  
Yes, Anna.<sup>114</sup>

Without the explanation of the double-subject concept, Anna's spoken mannerism calls to

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<sup>114</sup> Bertolt Brecht. *Die sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959, p. 10 (my translation).

mind the psychological impulse toward auto-communication. Anna's inner turbulence, which is actually combatted by her double-ness, is expressed by text that is, in this version, undivided. Thus Anna's character is marked by the gentle suggestion of simplicity, isolation, and even desperation.

One important change is apparent in the 1958 Auden/Kallman translation: here, Anna II is delegated an occasional line, a move that can be perceived as an artistic liberty taken by the English translators, but one that markedly changes the text's portrayal of Anna's character. Here, however vocally restricted in comparison with her sister, Anna II serves as a poetic echo, or confirmation, to her counterpart's speeches:

ANNIE I:

She's the one with the looks, I'm realistic;  
She's just a little mad, my head is on straight.  
You may think that you can see two people  
But in fact you see only one  
And both of us are Annie:  
Together we've but a single past, a single future  
And one heart and savings-account;  
And we only do what is best for each other.  
Right, Annie?

ANNIE II:

Right, Annie.<sup>115</sup>

In a way, then, the text's division normalises Anna's auto-communication at the same time that it preserves it and depends upon it, even after it splits Anna's body and voice into two factions. The script never explicitly dictates how the text, whether split or unified, is to be negotiated in performance. Kim Kowalke identifies a moment that occurs "after Anna I reminds her sister of the costs of losing self-control" when, "a twenty-one measure coda makes Anna II's spoken, "*Ich weiß es*" ("I know that") almost superfluous".<sup>116</sup> The juxtaposition of Anna I's twenty-one measure monologue and Anna II's truncated response is both comical and fitting: it is understood that Anna II's voice is not a voice at all, but her body.

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<sup>115</sup> *Collected Plays*, p. 70.

<sup>116</sup> Kowalke, p. 34.

Conducted through Anna I's voice, the two aural planes of the work, Weill's score and Brecht's text, engage in the same push-and-pull activity as Anna I and Anna II, therefore suggesting certain connotative values to each element. Here, dance is emotion; text order. To sacrifice one or the other is to sacrifice either movement or voice: "Whenever Anna II tried to respond to her questions, Lenya [Anna I] covered Losch's mouth and recited her lines for her, thereby rendering the dancing Anna entirely mute".<sup>117</sup> Brecht's text is Anna I's spoken prerogative, and although Anna II feels impulses to participate, her vocabulary must necessarily be her body. In contrast to the Cocteau dancer, who translates the poet's text via the body, Brecht's Anna II can only inhabit the negative space carved out by the text. In other words, her freedom and autonomy can be exercised only in Brecht's pauses while Anna I sings the poet's text.

Weill revised all but two of Brecht's stanzas in the original libretto, a circumstance necessitated by Brecht's physical absence from the production for most of the work's genesis. Weill's adjustments are mostly mechanically-focused changes in syllable count, rhetorical stress, and other musical elements, but he also added a few poetic verses himself, indicating a certain equanimity between him and Brecht as collaborators. "After Brecht's typescript has been exhausted", Kowalke notes,

Weill then again interpolates, as a commentary on the preceding dialectic between the words and the music that Anna has just sung, the final words we will hear, a last spoken exchange between the two Annas: '*Nicht wahr, Anna? Ja, Anna*' ('Right, Anna? Yes, Anna').<sup>118</sup>

Just as typically 'modernist' as Brecht's *ballet chanté* is in terms of its 1930s Berlinesque aesthetic and (as we are seeing now) its complicated use of textual properties, the work is perhaps more critically valuable in its portrayal of the psychological and corporeal composition of its protagonist. Anna's dualism into body/soul and voice/brain is an identifiable, common trope in modernism; however, this ballet text's ambiguity makes

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>118</sup> Kowalke, p. 33

its interpretation a particularly volatile practice. The balance between Anna I and Anna II is what creates the central force of *Seven Deadly Sins*. Left to the choreographer-writer to decide what that balance ought to be for a given production, the work changes shape accordingly. The text's play on material presence/absence suggests that production should maintain a separation between the speaking and dancing Annas. The importance of Anna I as narrator lies in her limitations; Anna speaks for herself up until the point at which her body, Anna II, must take over. The text confirms over and over again through its split tactics that Anna's body (Anna II) and Anna's mind (Anna I) fulfil roles that are exclusive to either half, and reiterates the condition that without one, the other loses its power and meaning.

It is possible that the relationship between the Annas is a more active, more forceful one than the stark separation their split-textuality suggests. What does the text tell us about that relationship? Martin Esslin described Anna I's purpose as "admonishing" Anna II.<sup>119</sup> The ballet is fundamentally, after all, a morality tale. On the surface, the text is one-dimensional in its repetitious lessons:

ANNIE I. [...] It took time to teach my sister wrath wouldn't do  
In Los Angeles, the third big town we came to  
Where her open disapproval of injustice  
Was so widely disapproved. I forever told her:  
"Practice self-control, Annie,  
For you know how much it costs you if you don't."  
And she understood and answered:  
ANNIE II. You're so right, Annie.<sup>120</sup>

Below the surface, much more is happening. When we read Anna as one being, we see her in passages like this explaining, admonishing, and teaching herself. The effect is schizophrenic. It also seems as though Anna is self-creating a foil to her alpha-female side

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<sup>119</sup> Martin Esslin. *Brecht: The Man and His Work*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961, p. 63.

<sup>120</sup> *Seven Deadly Sins* (Auden/Kallman translation), p. 126.

who can act as a scapegoat for all the mistakes she has/they have made. Anna subconsciously makes puns that emphasise her composition:

ANNIE I. Don't try *to sit between two stools*," I told her;  
Then I went to see her young friend  
And said: "If you're kind, you won't hold her,  
For this love will be your sweetheart's bitter end.  
"Girls can have their fun with money  
When the money is their own to give,  
But for girls like us it's not funny  
If we even once forget the way we live".<sup>121</sup> (emphasis mine)

This typically Brechtian language style emphasises a neat, didactic frame within which a more troubled, corporeal mode of expression sits. Anna II is, by nature of her dance, neither able to represent herself by these means, nor is she represented by it. We read Anna II's body as more able to perform truth than her self-assured, know-it-all other half. It is important to read Anna I and Anna II as a binary of the woman in modernity. What Brecht and Weill suggest through her division is that many women (especially the typical modern kind) are marked by similar mind/body divisions. One half of Anna is (to borrow a Brechtian term) alienated from the other, and it is only by virtue of division that she can be wholly expressed.

The complexity of Anna's identity is expanded by her family who, although many-bodied, behave as one mind and one body in their attempts to reign in Anna II's susceptibility to immoral and vain behaviours:

FAMILY. We've gotten word from Philadelphia:  
Annie's doing well, making lots of money.  
Her contract has been signed to do *a solo turn*,  
It forbids her ever eating  
When or what she likes to eat.  
Those are hard terms for little Annie  
Who has always been very greedy.<sup>122</sup> (emphasis mine)

Anna's family is portrayed by a male quartet who appears, like a Greek chorus, intermittently to pray for Anna's moral fortification. Their presence problematises the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

protagonist's binary structure of communication by diffusing the moral tone and adding new aural elements. In addition, they add additional bodies to the corporeal world occupied by Anna II. At the same time, their staunch mental and physical collective forms the inverse of Anna's divided self. Whereas texts that inscribe the body make language somehow visceral, Brecht's project permanently separates the visceral body from the text. The resulting presence of the body (through its material absence) is subjective when the text is read and objective when it is performed. Materially speaking, Anna II is conjured by performance, and stifled by text. The formal matrix of *Seven Deadly Sins* suggests that Anna cannot possibly be represented on stage but through two halves: here division *is* her simple reality.

Judith Butler's reading of Merleau-Ponty's belief that "the body is an historical idea [but also] a set of possibilities to be continually realized" is useful here. She explains:

The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of the bearing is fundamentally dramatic [...] [T]he body is not merely matter, but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body [...] one *does* one's body...<sup>123</sup>

Anna II "does" her body by obediently performing the expectations of her exploitative society; but, in that sense, it is not she who "does" Anna II, but Anna II herself. She is a mere puppet (see again Figure 11). The "meaning" that Anna II's body bears is meaning felt by others, namely her family—that they can earn something by using her. Similarly, Anna I feels authoritative and confident, but she still has a body that is rendered superfluous to her voice. In a way, Anna I does not "do" her body; as a consequence, neither of Anna's bodies are fully free or self-informed.

It is interesting to note that the split nature of Anna is never referenced by herself or those around her: the way she is "materialized", to borrow Butler's term, seems to be a

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<sup>123</sup> Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory". *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Sue-Ellen Case, ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 272.



condition of her very existence. Perhaps Anna's accepted, even ignored, dualism means to demonstrate how deeply ingrained her two selves are in two different but parallel realms: the natural and the commodified. Anna is seen as two people, and is thus represented as such; her deviant, sexualized, dancing side must necessarily be separate from her rational, speaking side if she is to survive the matrix of her society. Perhaps only the spectator sees two bodies onstage: perhaps Anna's inability to reconcile her two selves remains invisible to the ignorant bodies that surround her.

#### IV. Balanchine vs. Brecht

Balanchine, Kirstein wrote, "knows ballet as ballet is dead." Instead he had reinstated another term, "choreodrama," and according to Kirstein, planned a revolutionary kind of theatre around it. The form would be that of the old ballet—Kirstein argued that revolutions preserve the best elements of the past, which included balletic form—with new content delivered in new ways.<sup>124</sup>

Although *Seven Deadly Sins* creates a peculiar textual dynamic in retrospect, Lincoln Kirstein and others saw it as part of the 1933 season at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées, the former home of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois. It was during that same summer that Kirstein would ask George Balanchine to relocate to New York City as ballet master of his fledgling School of American Ballet (and later the New York City Ballet).<sup>125</sup> As we have seen in the scenarios of the Parisian companies, the writer and the choreographer worked in tandem to complete the embodiment of the text through production. In retrospect and in isolation from the archive of a given project of the Ballets

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<sup>124</sup> Gay Morris. *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006, p. 42.

<sup>125</sup> Diana Menuhin, a dancer in *Les Ballets 1933*, recalled: "Balanchine took me for a walk round and round the square afterwards in the warm July night. 'Dianochka,' he said, 'today a man came to see me, an American man, and said he could offer me a school and company if I go to America—would you please come?'" Diana Menuhin. "Les Ballets 1933". *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 6:2 (Autumn 1988), pp. 74-75.

Russes or Ballets Suédois, the dance text is understood to be dependent on other partner plans for music, scenography, costumes, et cetera. In production, textual harmony is confirmed by the continuous presence and teamwork of the collaborators. In contrast, Brecht dismissed himself from the artistic process as soon as the text of *Seven Deadly Sins* was delivered to his collaborators.<sup>126</sup> Echoing his physical absence, as it stands now, the dance is technically missing from the page, and if a reader is unaware that Brecht's sung text is meant to be accompanied and balanced by a dancing body, the dance is missing from the work as a whole. This pushes the experiences of reading and seeing *Seven Deadly Sins* into opposition in a manner wholly different to other dance texts.

Whereas other works discussed in this study necessitate the creation of a bespoke reader-spectator, the *Seven Deadly Sins* project forbids it. The dance exists only in the event of the work's performance; otherwise it occupies an *implied* space alongside text. The embodiment of the word cannot be completed in the text because Brecht carved out *space* for dance without articulating its contents. The fact that embodiment can only occur in production invites us instead in this case to consider the *choreographer as writer*. Etymologically speaking, this is not out of order.<sup>127</sup> The consequent ambiguity that Brecht's partial text affords extends a particularly free invitation to the choreographer. As Susan Jones explains:

What so intrigued the literary Modernists about dance was the immediacy with which the dance draws attention to problems of creative authority, the way that it so readily brings into focus an issue of creativity that resides in the body and outside the medium of words.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> As Steven Hinton notes, Brecht flatly resisted any credit for the work after its premiere, insisting in a Danish radio interview, "Weill wrote [the text] based on a poem, which I had made, but he is himself responsible for the making of the dialogue." (quoted in Stephen Hinton's *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012, p. 204) In the same interview, Brecht seemed to resent his artistic differences with Weill. It has been noted that the two had experienced something of a falling out following their collaboration on *Mahagonny*, and *Sins* would be their last.

<sup>127</sup> Modern English derivative of the French *chorégraphie*, from Greek *khoreia* "dance" and *graphein* "to write".

<sup>128</sup> Susan Jones. "Knowing the Dancer: Modernism, Choreography, and the Question of Authority" *Dance Quarterly Review Studies in Literature* Vol. 43, 2008, p. 204.

Part of this so-called “intrigue” comes from the intervention of the body into the performance of the textual plan. The separate-ness between the body and the word problematizes the control of authorship at the same time that it reiterates the very tension around which Brecht’s ballet is crafted.

With Brecht long gone from Paris and the ballet’s written scenario technically superfluous, *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* in 1933 was primarily Balanchine’s work. Balanchine was solely responsible for the original “live” production in Europe and the New York premiere, having established the work’s ‘authentic’ choreography, which capitalized on the qualities of dancer Tilly Losch as Anna II.<sup>129</sup> “Balanchine would eventually take advantage of Losch’s considerable expressive, dramatic, and acrobatic abilities as the piece evolved more as a pantomimed morality play than a ballet, emphasising character and narrative over ‘pure dance’”.<sup>130</sup> That is one way in which *Seven Deadly Sins* fits comfortably into the company of other ballet texts. The text’s ambiguous presence did not just allow Balanchine to move away from “pure dance”, but demanded that he do so. Balanchine became, in the choreographic role, an equal partner in the text’s authorship. In fact, *Seven Deadly Sins* became so inextricably “Balanchine” that when Lotte Lenya (who had been contracted to reprise her role as Anna I) learned that the 1950s revival was abandoning Balanchine’s choreography, she exited the project.

Now the work’s autonomous “writer”, Balanchine himself seems to have held conflicting opinions of the place of text in dance. “In later years [Balanchine] declared that a good ballet required no program note. Yet the beautifully produced and illustrated [souvenir programmes] for this company are full of lengthy, even poetic, ballet

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<sup>129</sup> For a detailed account of the two Balanchine productions, see Susan Manning’s “Balanchine's Two Productions of ‘The Seven Deadly Sins’, 1933 and 1958”. *Dance Chronicle* 9:1 (1985), pp. 96-118.

<sup>130</sup> Kowalke, p. 29.

synopses”.<sup>131</sup> The souvenir programmes of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois are so littered with textual ephemera that the concept of dance fades into the background until the work is performed. *Seven Deadly Sins*, in its current published state, obscures the dance to the point of non-existence. Even if, as editors have noted, Brecht cared little for his brief dalliance with the ballet project beyond its natural capacity for political statement, it is nonetheless a member of a family of like texts. The text only dictates the spoken part of “Anna I” with a mind to the eventual presence of the dancing “Anna II”: it in no way prescribes the quality of the danced action. This invitation to interpretation is demonstrated by the long line of choreographers who have taken up the work after Balanchine.<sup>132</sup> However, the ballet in performance has sometimes met with lukewarm—even antagonistic—reception that illustrates its complicated textuality. “It is barely ballet”, wrote a critic in *Le Midi* on 9 June, 1933, “But it is very much art”.<sup>133</sup> As Niels Krabbe notes,

One of the stumbling blocks was, at the time, and is, still now, the work’s genre affiliation: in print and in performance reviews, both from 1933 and later from the production in Copenhagen in 1936, we meet diverse genre designations like *cantata*; *short opera*; *ballet-chanté*; *ballet pantomime*; *pantomime*; *a story acted, danced and sung*; and so on. The audience was thus having a difficult time attuning its expectations in the proper direction and the traditional ballet audience, in particular, felt disoriented.<sup>134</sup>

The earlier critic’s doubt of the ballet’s faithfulness to genre (“It is barely ballet”) echoes the text’s reluctance to fit into any easy classification on the page.

In performance, the blurred authority between the body and the text is likely to blame for the ballet’s confused reception. “Nothing in Balanchine’s Franco-Russian ballet background could have prepared him to cope with the foreign aesthetic, text, and scenario

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<sup>131</sup> Anna Kisselgoff. “Dance View: Taking Fresh Stock of Les Ballets 1933”. *The New York Times*. August 19, 1990 <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/19/arts/dance-view-taking-fresh-stock-of-les-ballets-1933.html> [last accessed 10 June 2015].

<sup>132</sup> Lynn Taylor-Corbett notes that Pina Bausch, Kenneth MacMillan, Richard Alston and Donald Byrd all have interpreted the ballet anew.

<sup>133</sup> André Coeuroy, “Les 7 péchés capitaux”. *Le Midi*. June 9, 1933.

<sup>134</sup> Niels Krabbe. “Kurt Weill’s *Deadly Sins* in Copenhagen”. This article can be read online: <http://static6.oneclick.nielskrabbe.dk/2013/10/559ab808c676a885aa60ca7c09af13665bcfedec221.pdf> [accessed 22 May 2014].

of Weill's ballet chanté", writes Kim Kowalke. "Weill's score demanded a different relationship between dance, music, and the other elements. As an idiosyncratic orchestral song cycle, it was virtually complete in itself, resistant to staging, except as a type of mimetic enactment of the narrative implicit in the lyrics".<sup>135</sup> While I agree that Weill's work contains some aspects that presented unfamiliar challenges to the choreographer, in particular the negotiation of the corporeal presence of the non-dancing body of Anna I, I would argue that Balanchine was primed for a production built of various aesthetic elements and corresponding challenges. Furthermore, that the work "was virtually complete in itself" is a problematic view. To say that the work was resistant to staging is to ignore its intended purpose—to lead to a live performance in which body and text rely on one another in order to achieve full expression and meaning.

If the dance's absence problematises the way in which *Seven Deadly Sins* was and is conceptually negotiated, how does the work function as a printed text? There are further implications for the reader of the text because of the author/choreographer division of labor. As I claimed in the beginning of this section, because the *Seven Deadly Sins* project forbids the creation of a reader-spectator, who through visualisation bridges the gap between text and performance, the experience of the text is restricted to one of two possibilities. Either it is a printed song-cycle that can be read in the same manner as a poem, or it is an event that brings together all the textually disparate elements of music, text, and body. Reading is severely restricted, but can we more successfully rationalise the relationship between text and dance by placing the printed text alongside historical incidents of performance? It is a given that Brecht's text was present in performance through the voice of Anna I, and possibly in the printed program of the Les Ballets 1933 season. In performance, the space left for dance was suddenly filled with the absent companion-text to the libretto. That text, however, is ephemeral.

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<sup>135</sup> Kowalke, p. 36.

Because dance is not dictated by Brecht's text, no 'authorial' version of the ballet exists outside the products of Balanchine's direction, and even then it is impossible to "read" this dance. There is no film recording of either the original production of 1933 or the New York production in 1958 and no record of Balanchine's choreography, but Allegra Kent, the New York production's Anna II, recalled her danced part in a magazine article in 2011, vividly revealing the freedom which the sparse libretto afforded Balanchine and his dancers in imagining movement. We can also get a sense of Balanchine's movement vocabulary from photographs and first-person accounts of the production. How does text seem to have influenced the production process? Of the third episode, Kent recalled:

"Anger" explodes in Los Angeles, where "every door is open to welcome extras." Anna II has movie work. Dressed like a circus girl and riding side-saddle, I'm up on a giant, white-lace horse supported by two men. We prance around the stage. Then in a moment of stillness, I slide off my high horse into an entrechat six, feeling ebullient. All these movements are filmed against a candy-cane background by a cameraman who looks like Groucho Marx. But I become enraged when I see a stagehand tormenting an animal. Uncontrollable fury rises in me and I beat him savagely with my riding crop. L.A. is over.<sup>136</sup>

The bombastic quality of the ballet as described by Kent stands in sharp contrast to the evenly metered composition of Brecht's text. We cannot know how Weill's score and Brecht's text worked temporally with Balanchine's movement: if and when passages of synchronicity made room for extended phrases of movement, and so on. It is thus ironic that Kent references the presence of a diegetic cameraman who films and captures her movements.

Balanchine inscribed the missing half-text of *Seven Deadly Sins* in the same way that Anna II inscribes what Anna I cannot through her own means. Conversely, Anna I through her detachment from Anna II's means of expression provides the necessary framework for what Anna I *does*. In a parallel manner, the contributions of Brecht and

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<sup>136</sup> Allegra Kent. "Sinful Memories" *Dance Magazine* (May 2011) <http://www.dancemagazine.com/issues/May-2011/Sinful-Memories> [accessed 14/02/2013]

Balanchine are separate but inextricably bound; they structure and inform one another in terms of mutual boundaries of space and time. They also respond to one another by projecting alternately contrasting and harmonizing emotions. It is a relationship negated outside of performance. The place for Brecht's text in that case is relegated to the aural track of Anna I's lyrics, while Balanchine's text claims supremacy over the combined effect.

It seems that Balanchine's contribution defied narrativity in a manner similar to its fundamental textlessness. According to company member Diana Menuhin, the dancers loathed the piece,

...because any left-over dancers (like yesterday's cold meat) had to pull on huge cloaks which covered the head as well and rush on vaguely brandishing poles and exuding either sin or the punishment of same. Tamara Sidorenko and I never did find out what we were doing; while Pavel Tchelichev and Balanchine, together with four kilometres of white silk and some very ingenious lighting, put Tilly into a marvellous dress of emerald green satin with a great wide train which we would gather up in the wings and let fly as Tilly ran on looking suitably bewildered.<sup>137</sup>

Whatever the result, Balanchine was indeed well-suited to fill the space created by Brecht precisely because of its emptiness. For Balanchine, Brecht's text meant freedom and, for Brecht, Balanchine meant completion. It is no wonder that, two years later, he would refuse to choreograph Cummings's *Tom: A Ballet*, a text which, as we will see later, did not need him.

The audience also complained that there was "nothing to clarify or elucidate the heavy darkness of the Germano-American text...".<sup>138</sup> Considering that the role of Anna II is partly to "elucidate" Brecht's text through her corporeality, what about the text might have caused a perceptible, even problematic, "heavy darkness"? Presumably it was the work's overbearing, even pedantic handling of its subject. It is also curious to note the *Dancing*

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<sup>137</sup> Menuhin, pp. 66-67.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted by Esslin from a contemporaneous anonymous review in *The Dancing Times* from August 1933.

*Times* critic's reference to the text: that could indicate that the audience did have the text in their hands in the souvenir programme, or else that it had been released to critics ahead of the premiere. In either case, one spectator at the very least was cognizant of Brecht's text while viewing the ballet. Like the two Annas, the two texts were conflated in the moment of performance, and yet signalled to one another's difference as well.<sup>139</sup> *Seven Deadly Sins*, in production, is characterised by the shared visions and dual texts of writer and choreographer; we can now turn to the parallel psychological/physiological opposition of the work's protagonist.

## **V. Conclusions: the epic body**

*The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie* is partly structured by a typical device of Brechtian theatre: the *mise-en-scène* employs a board that announces each of the deadly sins that the Annas encounter. This establishes a textual presence in the most literal sense into the scheme of the performance. In his text, Brecht also outlines the rest of the scenography in a language which quickly sublimates into the metaphysical: "Likewise on the stage is the continually fluctuating market on which Annie I launches her sister." The metaphor of the market echoes Brecht's claim in his poem "The Playwright's Song" (1935) in which he declares, "I am a playwright. I show/What I have seen. In the man markets I have seen how men are traded. That/I show, I, the playwright".<sup>140</sup> The ballet critiques the commodification of the body as Anna II succumbs to a series of demeaning jobs and relationships with men. The singing Anna I, at least consciously separate from her

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<sup>139</sup> Another film version (1993) by the Lyon Opera, directed by Peter Sellers and starring Teresa Stratas as Anna I, deemphasises the corporeal subject in favor of a close composition that unifies the Annas through their means of communication. Although Stratas delivers nearly all the text, Anna II also speaks an intermittent line. They both exhibit the same emotional vulnerability and earnestness as the other.

<sup>140</sup> Bertolt Brecht. *Bertolt Brecht: Poetry and Prose*. Reinhold Grimm, ed. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2003, p. 85.



corporeal self, is able to coach her separate, physical body through various American states and cities, each representing one of the seven sins. The body is metaphorically writing Anna's path into and out of moral trouble. Her journey references dance in other ways, furthering the sense of play with which the body is treated. When the sisters enter Memphis, for example, the corporeal Annie II takes a job as a cabaret dancer, signaling her willingness to compromise morals for money. Dance is offered as a conduit for immorality at the very same time that it communicates Anna's truth and, in turn, the ideologies of Brecht's theatrical vision.

While *Seven Deadly Sins* marks an important moment in modernism's artistic negotiation of body and text, it also extends the central tenets of Brechtian theatre, namely *Verfremdung* and *Gestus*. For example, Anna I single-handedly demonstrates the concept of Brecht's *Verfremdung* by performing a critical (literal and physical) separation from her weaker self, Anna II. As defined by Brecht originally, *Verfremdung* as a theatrical device seeks to "free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" in order to allow the spectator to "recognise" the subject through unfamiliarity.<sup>141</sup> As an individual comprised of two tracks, Anna must dissect herself in order for her spectator and listener to know her. Moreover, her dual performance allows herself to perform Anna I and Anna II as two women who alternately perform and respond. All other characters on the ballet stage are homogenous because they are stable entities. Archetypal characters like Anna's corrupt manager and her seedy clients do not appear as binaries because they do not question themselves. Anna's family, a unified group, appear as a chorus because they *behave* like a chorus. Even though the chorus is fundamentally composed of multiple people, their singleness of mind and body is their essence.

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<sup>141</sup> Bertolt Brecht. "A Short Organum for the Theatre". In *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, eds. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 30.

As we have seen, Brecht's creation and articulation of a double subject of text and body invites nuanced psychological and physiological "reading". In fact, this binary construction encourages several different readings, one of which relates to the ongoing discussion of practices of writing movement in this dissertation. Furthermore, the ballet provides a rare opportunity in Brechtian scholarship to analyse what we might call the "epic body" both in and out of performance. The separation of Anna into two halves is a clear extension of Brecht's insistence on the necessary distinction between all elements of the theatre (a defining stance laid out in Brecht's "Short Organum for the Theatre" of 1948). Phoebe von Held and Aura Satz see Brecht's general performance philosophy as a defiant turn against theatrical practices of "becoming", or "transubstantiation" in which, "[t]he actor 'transforms' himself, just as during Mass, bread transforms itself into His flesh".<sup>142</sup> Indeed, it was during this time that the Stanislavskian approach was encouraging and enabling actors to perform this transformation.

However, as von Held and Satz observe,

While for Stanislavski's followers the identificatory transformative element generated the intensity, stringency and psychic energy necessary to keep the spectator mentally and emotionally engaged in the fragile experience of theatrical illusion, Brecht saw in this spectator-audience relationship a form of dictatorship in which the spectator would be robbed of his own identity and his capacity to think and feel differently.<sup>143</sup>

Anna's dualism keeps her selves separate so as to not too closely mimic reality: she is therefore observable to the spectator and easier to study. Brecht had also seen Chinese theatre (as his concept of *Verfremdung* (alienation) continued to materialise) whose actors seemed to be multiple people at once, both performing and watching themselves. It is not clear how literally we are meant to read *Sins* against these writings, but the halved Anna must have given Brecht a vehicle through which to experiment with the ongoing challenge

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Phoebe von Held and Aura Satz's 'This is (not) my body': transubstantiation as a metaphor for acting in Brecht'. Original source: *Brecht 1988-2000: XXII* [1993], Book 1, p. 279.

<sup>143</sup> Phoebe von Held and Aura Satz. 'This is (not) my body': transubstantiation as a metaphor for acting in Brecht'. *Journal of Romance Studies*, Volume 8, Number 3, Winter 2008, p. 27.

of representation. Both halves of the protagonistic self, therefore, communicate alternately through the flesh and through the void of a single text.

An earlier Brecht/Weill collaboration, the opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930) had anticipated the moral dialogue eventually performed in the ballet by the two Annas. Here, however, the effects of immorality are illustrated through the corruption of the human collective, as seen through the citizens of the city of Mahagonny. Premiering only three years later, it is certain that in their ballet chanté, Brecht and Weill were continuing that narrative in the new vehicle of a split character, and the new artistic possibilities it afforded them. The opera establishes a series of aesthetic dualisms that foreground the ballet; for example, “The ‘Alabama Song’ breaks into two halves: one full of yearning and sentiment, the other hard bitten and melodic”.<sup>144</sup> The most prominent socio-ideological conversation in both plays, virtue and corruption, is communicated anew in the ballet through the literal commodification of Anna II’s body.

Anna’s self-echo, like the ensemble nature of her chorus-like family, produces an effect similar to *Gestus*, another tenet of Brecht’s epic theatre. We can read dance like another kind of gestural performance that is built of abstractions that extend the possibilities of pure *Gestus*. “A theatre where everything depends on the gest cannot do without choreography,” declares Brecht in ‘A Short Organum’: “Elegant movement and graceful grouping, for a start, can alienate, and inventive miming greatly helps the story...

...The attitudes which people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes which would appear to be quite private, such as the utterances of physical pain in an illness, or of religious faith. These expressions of a gest are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Edson M. Chick. *Dances of Death: Wedekind, Brecht, Dürrenmatt, and the Satiric Tradition*. (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture Vol. 19) Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1984, p. 99.

<sup>145</sup> “A Short Organum for the Theatre”, p. 31.

*Gestus* is meant to turn the person inside out, and thus to betray essential meaning, but it also stresses the choice of one gesture among infinite possibilities. Dance can be read like a sequence of “gests” in Anna II’s negotiations with the outside world as she moves between episodes and their corresponding sins. Dance is Anna II’s language because her body is her value. As one single (admittedly complex) “gest”, Anna II’s dance works as a physical counterpart to Anna I’s voice in a medium that is just as strong and just as essential as language. But Anna II’s dance is not just any dance: it is ballet. The choice of ballet as partner for song is loaded with meaning, as we will see in the next chapter. Why ballet in Brecht’s case?

Taking note of certain stylistic parallels, we might suggest that ballet is to dance as epic theatre is to drama. Throughout his canon of plays, Brecht’s reliance on *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestus* gives corporeal shape to the human spirit, purposefully calling attention to the fundamental split between what a human body *is* and what a human body *means*. The Brecht body is masked and dehumanised, inscribed not with organic freedom but with political oppression. In *Seven Deadly Sins*, Anna II is allowed to dance a language of freedom. However, the condition that she must dance as an echo to her sister (who is simultaneously her own rational conscience) undermines what it means to dance. Ballet extends Anna II’s physical subordination because of its attached vocabulary and classically rigid structures. Thus, what appears to be a disjointed system of written and embodied texts actually reiterates and projects the heart of the work and the integral role the dance plays in it.

Even the narrative surrounding the original production reinforced the work’s “alienating” potential. The text was sung in German, and the program contained only a transcription of the draft, lowercase text, and a literal French translation, which, of course, didn’t match a good portion of what was being sung on stage. There was no printed scenario to aid the audience in deciphering the ‘contradictions’ of the ‘sung ballet’ they

were witnessing”<sup>146</sup> How does this structure affect the experience of reading the *ballet chanté*? We might begin to answer that question by working through the classification itself. ‘Ballet chanté’ translates into ‘sung ballet’, creating a synesthetic concept. Just as the term ‘danced opera’ would place emphasis on the object (opera) and use ‘danced’ to modify its expression, the term seems to subjugate voice to the body. According to the work’s self-definition then, Weill’s songs are not danced, but Brecht’s dances are sung. That the libretto does not inscribe a dancing body but implies it through space makes the text in print materially dynamic. If we continue the trajectory of the work’s title, then the printed object is a written sung ballet (‘ballet chanté écrit’?) that calls attention to layered modes of experience that, in this case, vary greatly between the page and the stage.

If we think back to Cocteau’s gramophone, we can compare two negotiations of the disembodied voice. Cocteau redirects human voice through a machine that both amplifies its volume and reach, and alienates it from its organic source. Brecht accomplishes something similar in *Seven Sins* by reinforcing the division between body and voice—but he suggests that this division is internal and innate to the human. Cocteau’s comment on voice, then, is that it has become increasingly managed by technology, while Brecht’s message suggests that the psyche is comprised of a voice/mind and body/spirit who alternately work with and against one another. The divide is autonomous and self-regulated. That the voice/mind works in tandem with an external orchestral score and the conventions of the English language further reinforces the relationship between systems, order, and convention against the storm of the spiritual, emotional, and corporeal.

Whereas Cocteau’s ballet prescribes and describes the movement of bodies on the stage (whether they are imagined or real), we cannot read the Brechtian body without seeing his ballet performed in the same way. Instead, we read its absence and extrapolate what it means to the message of the work. Brecht’s dance is evoked in print by a textual

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<sup>146</sup> Kowalke, p. 42.

void that calls attention to itself. In performance, the task of reading absence is fulfilled by corporeal presence, and through the synthesis of all artistic elements which prescribe the correct 'way to read' *Seven Deadly Sins*. In a less directed manner, readers apply a reading that is either kinetic or static, or some hybrid of the two. Built into any modern reading of the text is the implicit eye of the choreographer who, in the role of co-author, supplants the void. *Seven Deadly Sins* is consequently two very different works in either forum much like Anna I and Anna II are two very different beings.

Brecht's text diverges from the writing of the body in the sense that it does not dictate movement and therefore may seem to mark a departure from the central premise of my thesis. However, by *not* prescribing the body's movement, as we have seen, but instead signaling its essential symbolic or eventual presence, *Seven Deadly Sins* provides a lens through which to momentarily look at the modernist dance text's expression of self. Much of modernist study is devoted to the evolving relationship between psychology and art in the post-Freudian era, especially with regard to abstraction and its communication of social and individual conditions. Everywhere in the arts, we see the interior made manifest. Dance was a prime component in the expanding tool-box of the modernist artist, and while its modern genesis is also a popular subject, it is worth dissecting one unique project that illustrates through performance (as well as through text) broader interrogations of the spirit, the body, and their representation.

Brecht's project with Weill emphasises dualism both in the artistic process and in the handling of the protagonist, for whom spirit and body are necessarily divided. As we will see, however, that dualism is a brief pause between Cocteau's dancing people and those in the ongoing writing of the dancing body upon the page, where the singularity of the body and the spirit resounds. The following two chapters turn our attention to ballets without performative intent or realisation. While the body is united with the spirit in the dance, that unity is tried by a range of other challenges. In the next chapter, Vernon Lee's

*Ballet of the Nations* demonstrates the polemical power of balletic conventions—and textual conventions—at the dawn of war. Afterward, in the ballet texts of Aldous Huxley, we will see the inscribed body expressed as a captive in a mortal struggle and, ultimately, unable to escape the inevitability of the dance of death.

**Satirical Bodies: World War and the Ballet in Print**

Whether implicitly or explicitly, all of the ballet texts collected in this examination are indelibly marked by their creation just before, between, or just after the two World Wars. Some of the more topically irreverent, even trivial texts (one thinks, for instance, of *Le Boeuf*) seem at first to resist any reference to or imprint of World War One or World War Two. However, the reader must consider these texts' socio-historical situations which have an inevitable association with—if not influence upon—the production of texts. After all, Jay Winter reminds us that even 1917's *Parade*, which bears no overt references to the Great War, was first performed for a benefit in aid of *mutilés de guerre*, and is, therefore, imprinted by war.<sup>147</sup> While wartime provides a framework for this entire dissertation, the ballets in this section, by Vernon Lee and Aldous Huxley, are far more explicitly grounded in their individual polemical and satirical discourses on global relations. The texts were written without physical execution in mind, but still very much with the aim of performance: instead of informing dance, they perform satire and allegory in acts of criticism using inscribed dance.

Chapter Three examines a ballet text with sincere and immediate rhetorical aims. Its author, the feminist pacifist Vernon Lee, wrote her *Ballet of the Nations* in 1915 just after the outbreak of World War One, with which she fervently disagreed. *Ballet of the Nations* constructs an allegorical world-stage upon which Lee's prophecy of war unfolds. Satan presides over the dance which, performed by the world's warring nations, is the very means by which mankind is ruined. Violence and art, death and dance, ignorance and entertainment, are all conflated.

Better known as a novelist and literary critic, in the year before *Ballet of the Nations* Lee was writing her more characteristic supernatural fiction and aesthetics-focused criticism in her novel *Louis Norbert: A Twofold Romance* and a collection of essays on the

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<sup>147</sup> Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 132.



“spirit of places”, *Tower of Mirrors. Ballet of the Nations*, Lee’s only work to take the shape of a dance, does not at first appear to logically follow her other works. Stylistically, however, it galvanises the temporal situation of the end of Lee’s writing career, which from 1880 to 1935 had built a bridge from Victorian literature to modernism. While illustrating the stylistic possibilities of ballet in print, Lee also demonstrates its graphic polemical power as she exploits the mechanisms of the stage to craft her allegory.

We follow with two “ballets in criticism” by Aldous Huxley, written in the 1920s. While both texts borrow the stylistic conventions and vocabularies of dance, the two demonstrate different practices of intertextuality. The first, “Callot”, imagines the dancing context of a 17<sup>th</sup> century etching depicting a scene from the Thirty Years War. In the etching, figures in a rural setting congregate around a public hanging: through Huxley’s activation in his text, they come to life, dancing and skipping through the macabre atmosphere. The effect is unsettling. Huxley’s words treat the grave subject trivially, producing a panorama of humans ignorant to the deadly consequences of their jubilation.

Huxley’s second “ballet in criticism” adopts a similarly satirical tone, but in a way that more overtly parodies the aesthetics of modern ballet as seen in the work of the Ballets Russes. The scene he depicts is gaudily swathed in the ornamental details Diaghilev’s productions were known for. The ballet criticises the opulence and experimentalism of the new ballet, establishing the inscribed stage as the scene of yet more violence. Taking as its peculiar central figure a “voluptuous dentist” with a giant wax face and menacing tools, Huxley pokes fun at ballet’s new fascination with modern subjects. More importantly, he creates a threatening dance of pursuit wherein lust prevails. Whereas Huxley’s first piece is a response to a piece of visual art, his second is inspired by a piece of music, adding to the intermedial richness of the ballet’s possibility as a textual form.

Taken together, Lee’s *Ballet of the Nations* and Huxley’s “ballets in criticism” all reflect new attitudes toward ballet because of what their ballets convey—a mixture of the violent and the absurd. The use of ballet as a vehicle for biting criticism implores us to consider the inherent qualities of ballet and their potential for subversion. Both writers, like

some others in this study, take advantage of the ritualistic, classical characteristics of the traditional ballet. For Lee, the contrast between balletic decorum and global slaughter sculpts her effect. Later, Huxley lampoons the new liberal shape of the modernist ballet and gestures to the lingering effects of human atrocity: as a trio of texts, these ballets show the value of ballet not as a physical mode of expression, but to attach popular cultural connotations to subjects both trivial and very serious.

The theme of the *danse macabre* or “dance of death” has classically provided a unified impetus for artists across media. Both Lee and Huxley dance their inscribed bodies to death. The dance of death is a recurring motif in modernist dance on and off the page because it was just as prevalent a motif in everyday experience.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Illustrating this, Kate Elswit opens her book on Weimar dance with an analysis of a poster tagline in WWI-era Berlin: “BERLIN, STOP AND THINK! YOUR DANCE PARTNER IS DEATH!” *Watching Weimar Dance (Oxford Studies in Dance Theory)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Dancing the Great War: Vernon Lee's *Ballet of the Nations***

This chapter undertakes a reading of Lee's *Ballet of the Nations* as a critical work, but critical in an entirely different manner to the ballets featured in the previous chapter. The foundation upon which this ballet is built is the reality of World War One, which by 1918 had claimed over 37 million military and civilian casualties worldwide.<sup>149</sup> Lee's ballet is an extended allegorical rephrasing of the author's personal vehemence against the approaching war within the structure of an imagined theatrical production. It is the only instance of a dance text in the author's canon, but one frequently referenced in discussions of moral and philosophical writing about the Great War, particularly in regards to female writers. In fact, *Ballet of the Nations* is commonly used to illustrate Lee's flagrant pacifism at the outbreak of the war and to establish the author herself as the female figurehead of British aestheticism in that specific socio-historical moment. In light of its formal and theoretical complexities, this chapter explores the specific role that ballet plays in Lee's construction of a pacifist wartime commentary.

First, it is necessary to situate my reading of the ballet within the larger field of Lee scholarship, some of which has considered *Ballet of the Nations* and its later companion text, *Satan the Waster*, in critical isolation. In general, the field is concerned with reading the ballet as an act of pacifism, for which Lee was known throughout her life.<sup>150</sup> Nicoletta Pirredu reads *Satan the Waster* as illustrative of "the crucial role of art and the artist as symbols of a pacifist ethics founded upon the reconceptualization of expenditure in non-utilitarian terms", considering the potential power of Lee's text that, unfortunately, was left

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<sup>149</sup> Wells, Donald Arthur. *The United Nations: States vs International Laws*. New York: Algora Publishing, 2005, p. 73.

<sup>150</sup> See, for example, Grace Brockington's "Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in The Ballet of the Nations" in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, eds. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

unrealised by most of her contemporaries.<sup>151</sup> Gillian Beer, meanwhile, wonders whether that obscurity is in some part due to Lee's sex.<sup>152</sup> Finally, there exist several studies negotiating Lee's belonging—or lack thereof—to the realm of modernity, a membership which, I hope to show, is supported by her ballet.<sup>153</sup>

Lee's extensive writings on aesthetic theory, specifically psychological aesthetics and aesthetic responsiveness, help to illuminate *Ballet of the Nations* at the same time that the text itself extends Lee's theories. The concept of kinaesthetic sympathy later developed by John Cage is similar, but the sympathy felt is between the body of the spectator and the body of dancer. In reading Lee's ballet, "sympathy" is extrapolated from the exchange between the imagined dancer and the real reader. Lee demonstrates a fixation through her diary entries relating her experience in galleries, which capture the potential strength and complexity of the spectator's visceral response to a work of art.

But more integral to *Ballet of the Nations*, Lee developed the literary term "empathy" to name, in Kirsty Martin's words, the "vital response of the body to the life infused in the body of another".<sup>154</sup> Her landmark writings on empathy consider the response as a wholly corporeal exchange, and "traces the roots of our feelings for each other to the workings of our bodies".<sup>155</sup> Martin's suggestion that empathy is a bodily process encourages an enlightened reflection on Lee's use of dance and the body in *Ballet of the Nations*, both in isolation and as it relates to her other writings. She is using the concept of empathy and showing us its absence. Furthermore, as empathy is corporeal, her use of the body makes the actions that the ballet contains even stranger and more horrific. She conflates dance and war as if to show us how both use the body: the former as a thing of

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<sup>151</sup> Pireddu, Nicoletta. "Satan the Waster: Peace and the Gift. Dalla stanza accanto". *Vernon Lee e Firenze, settant'anni dopo* (University of Florence, British Institute and Regione Toscana, 2006), p. 270.

<sup>152</sup> Beer, Gillian. "The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: Satan the Waster and the Will to Believe" in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Gill Plain's "The Shape of Things to Come: The Remarkable Modernity of Vernon Lee" in *Women, the First World War and the Dramatic Imagination: International Essays (1914-1999)*, Claire Tylee, ed. E. Mellen Press, 2000.

<sup>154</sup> Martin, p. 39.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

beauty and the later as an expense. Both dance and war, however, use the body as its instrument. Martin believes that Lee struggled to conceptualise empathy in the artistic process, but *Ballet of the Nations* seems to demonstrate most vividly the ramifications of human detachment. It is the ballet specifically that allows her to do so.

Most important of all of the ballet's facets is its message. *Ballet of the Nations*, Martin explains, "satirizes not only the disastrous inanity of military strategy, but also the way in which the emotions of those involved—from grieving mothers to patriotic soldiers—have fuelled national fervor and supported the war".<sup>156</sup> As Martin notes, Gill Plain has also observed the text's Brechtian ability to "repulse" readers' sympathies.<sup>157</sup> By literally sending warring Nations into battle via the ballet, Lee activates a kind of microcosmic world theatre. Dramatising the world helps to make it tangible. Inside the virtual theatre's walls, she is able to articulate and explore more abstract notions including empathy, unanimism, or innocence of the masses. These concepts find their theoretical footing in Lee's prose writings (as well as in the work of Lee's contemporaries), but in *Ballet of the Nations* they find a new expression. *Ballet of the Nations* describes corporeal destruction in detached, methodical terms. Consequently, Lee's message of repulsion is intrinsically critical of the reader as it is of all humanity: we are so ignorant that we find entertainment in war.

Critics such as Laurel Harris and Grace Brockington have paid attention to the great political significance of Lee's *Ballet*. Harris, however, provides the most useful link in this context, when she notes Lee's explicit references to cultural opinions familiar to scholars of modernist dance. As Satan reflects during the course of the spectacle, "The music is not always very pretty, at once too archaic and too ultra-modern for philistine taste, and the steps are a trifle monotonous. But it gives immense scope for moral beauty, and revives religious feeling in all its genuine primeval polytheism".<sup>158</sup> Harris rightly suggests that the

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<sup>156</sup> Martin, p. 68.

<sup>157</sup> Gill Plain. "The Shape of Things to Come: The Remarkable Modernity of Vernon Lee's *Satan the Waster*" in *Women, the First World War, and the Dramatic Imagination: International Essays 1914-1999*. Claire M Tylee, ed. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, p. 15.

<sup>158</sup> Vernon Lee. *The Ballet of the Nations*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1915, p. 11. From this point forward, all citations from Lee's *Ballet* are according to the 1915 monograph. I have provided an

same language could have been (and indeed was) applied to some of the revolutionary masterpieces of contemporary ballet by Igor Stravinsky, Vaslav Nijinsky, and so on. Finally, from a formal standpoint, Laurel Harris suggests that *Ballet of the Nations* “enables an inquiry into aesthetic ruptures, exacerbated by the war, between nineteenth and twentieth-century forms of representation”.<sup>159</sup> However, no focused attention has been paid to Lee’s specific utilisation of ballet as vehicle for her vicious “present day morality”, which is my concentration here

Whereas Huxley’s ‘ballets in criticism’ factor into Huxley criticism only as infrequent bibliographical entries, the single ballet experiment of Vernon Lee occupies a significant place within the wider study of the writer’s canon and offers a rare wealth of corresponding critical response in which to contextualise my examination. Lee’s use of ballet to house these sentiments is a choice readers can find justified throughout the text of the ballet, its paratexts, and in the additional prose Lee was compelled to produce years later to defend her poorly-received polemic.<sup>160</sup> Scholarship of *Ballet of the Nations* is bolstered by the author’s own extensive notes. Several formal critiques have considered the ballet’s eventual situation within Lee’s larger work of 1920, *Satan the Waster*, in which the ballet acts as a kind of interlude or centrepiece. The extensive authorial commentary located in that volume seem to apologise for an earlier confused readership. In addition, its dual appearances provide an opportunity to analyse the ballet’s role in society as well as in the arts and its effect on readers in two ways. First, I will outline the structures and systems of the ballet as it first appeared in print.

### **I. A war ballet: framing and rhetoric**

In 1915, Vernon Lee released her polemical *Ballet of the Nations* in an ornately

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annotated transcription in my appendices. The illustrated monograph has been scanned for free online reading here: <https://archive.org/details/balletofnationsp00leev>. Quoted material from Lee’s *Ballet of the Nations* will not be cited further in this chapter; please see appendix for the full text.

<sup>159</sup> Laurel Harris, “Aestheticizing Politics and Politicizing Art: The ‘Magic Apparatus’ of Cinema in Vernon Lee’s *Satan the Waster*” *The Space Between*, 8:1 (2012), p. 1.

<sup>160</sup> See the 1920 *Times Literary Supplement* review cited later in this chapter, for example.

illustrated monograph with London publishers Chatto & Windus.<sup>161</sup> The protagonist in Lee's ballet, Satan, is introduced as the "lessee" and "Immortal Impresario" of the allegorical World Theatre, where an assembly of human vices and virtues have collected to participate in and/or view what Satan promises will be his best production to date, *Ballet of the Nations*. Narrated by frequent dialogue between Satan himself, his assistant Ballet-Master Death, and various incidental participants, the ballet becomes at once an imagined performance *and* a polemical dialogue about the state of humanity. Satan has called together all the Dancing Nations of the world, each portrayed by one inscribed, voiceless human body, to perform his latest masterpiece. Thus, the author of the interior ballet of the text is Satan himself, not Lee, and Satan's supreme authority over the proceedings is essential to its success.

As I will show, the ballet is a painfully accurate microcosm of the global situation at the outbreak of war, with each dancing Nation, portrayed by one feeble human body, personifying blind allegiance to power. Conducted by sinister forces, the bloodbath ensues. Watched by other allegorical figures including the prophetic Ages to Come, establishments such as Science and Organisation, and various human Virtues and Vices such as Fear, Lust, and Heroism, the *Ballet* is a gathering place and focal point for humanity. Over the course of the performance, the Dancing Nations tear each other limb from limb, still dancing, to a range of responses from the audience. They are necessarily complicit in the destruction by watching. The ballet has been choreographed by Death, who bears the title Dance Master: a lank, shadowy skeleton who hovers about the stage, emphasising the tradition of the *danse macabre*, a trope established in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century visual arts (and, as explored in the previous chapter, taken up by Huxley in his own ballet). According to Maxwell Armfield's illustrations, the rest of the metaphorical Nations appear in human form, classically robed and virile.<sup>162</sup> The emphasis on their corporeality is placed in their idealised beauty and strength: they appear to be the opposite of death. It is the dance that shows us otherwise.

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<sup>161</sup> According to Patrick Wright, Lee wrote *Ballet of the Nations* while staying in the home of her suffragist friends Bessie and Isabella Ford in Leeds (*Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>162</sup> <https://archive.org/details/balletofnationsp00leev> [last accessed August 10 2014].

*Ballet of the Nations* explores its sense of embedded performativity in its visual composition. The monograph was illustrated with classical figures within an environment meant to evoke a proscenium stage<sup>163</sup>. Interestingly, Armfield’s architectural illustrations are called a “pictorial commentary” on the frontispiece, suggesting a performative, even synaesthetic quality to the physically static design. This parallels the text’s inherent claim that it *is* a ballet. At the same time, it encourages a range of perspectives from which to read (or view) the Ballet’s action. The framing of the physical page and its inscribed stage situates the reader well outside of the violence within it, but it also puts the reader in league with the evil Impresario and other bystanders who spur it on. The balletic contents of the text are, therefore, subordinate to the raised stage and its decoration, which clearly evoke the classical proscenium theatre:



Figure 12. Example of Maxwell Armfield’s illustrations for Lee’s *Ballet of the Nations*.

<sup>163</sup> Grace Brockington likens the graphic layout of the ballet’s pages to a proscenium, in which “Lee’s narrative literally performs within the theatre it evokes”, p. 144.



In its specific kind of balletic framework, though, Vernon Lee's ballet claims a pedigree in its adoption of the conventions of the classical French court drama, the *ballet des nations*.<sup>164</sup> "For a quarter or so of a century," begins *The Ballet of the Nations*, "Death's celebrated Dances had gone rather out of fashion":

Then, with the end of the proverbially bourgeois Victorian age, there set in a revival of taste, and therefore of this higher form of tragic art, combining, as it does, the truest classical tradition with the romantic attractions of the best Middle Ages. In South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently, the well-known Ballet-Master Death had staged some of his vastest and most successful productions.

Continuing with the same commentary-style of voice, the ballet positions the nations in the virtual court space of the book, arranged to the pleasure of the ballet-master Satan. Lee exploits ballet to provide a vehicle for social commentary: in this case, it is what she demonstrates as the senseless bloodshed of World War One. The text performs on multiple levels to promote the ideas of the ballet, the war, and fundamental human indecency, using the medium of print to illuminate different kinds of performativity.<sup>165</sup>

The story-world author of the *Ballet of the Nations*, the proud and verbose Satan, is provoked by his audience to volunteer a preface to the spectacle:

The scheme of the Ballet is very simple, and its variety arises out of the great number—I hope I may say the constantly increasing number—of Dancing Nations. The main *motif* is, of course—for we are thoroughly up to date, although our dear Impresario does not give us credit for it—the main theme is that each Nation is repelling the aggression of its vis-à-vis, and at the same time defending its partner.

Satan employs terminology familiar to the ballet world: particularly in his use of "Impresario", which conjures up the rhetoric surrounding figureheads of the art such as Diaghilev. This is not intended to villify Diaghilev and his colleagues, but rather to emphasise the hierarchy of this particular production. By being branded "Impresario" and,

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<sup>164</sup> As Marie-Claude Canova-King writes, "The so-called *Ballet des nations*, that is, the ritualized parade of foreigners on the court stage, was a common feature of French royal entertainments in the 1620s and 1630s.' It developed from occasional entries of such exotic characters as Turks, Blackamoors or Indians into comprehensive reviews of diverse peoples and nations from the four corners of the world, come to pay homage to the French king". Marie-Claude Canova-King. "Dance and ritual: the *Ballet des nations* at the court of Louis XIII". *Renaissance Studies* 9:4, 1995.

<sup>165</sup> In addition to referencing the French court tradition, Lee may also be conjuring various 19<sup>th</sup> Century historical war spectacles whose complexity sometimes bordered on reenactment. For examples see Claire M. Tylee's *The Great War and Women's Conscientiousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-64*. London: Macmillan, 1990, p. 26.

later “Creative Connoisseur”, Satan acquires hyperbolic artistic authority and his spectacle consequently receives the rapt attention of the Nations, the Ages, and vices and virtues. His rhetoric in this opening mimics the rules of a game, as though they are clear and finite and destined to be obeyed. The simplicity, even flippancy, with which Satan details the proceedings as a play between “repelling” and “defending” reduces the activity of real war to such basic terms that it shrouds, or at least undermines, the game’s implications. The definition of the slaughter as an “up to date” “motif” further trivialises it.

Satan also demands a certain style of performance from his nation-bodies. While they undertake the business of the ballet, they must retain an appearance of beauty and decorum:

There are two minor themes of outstanding Dancers flying to the rescue of the main groups: the two themes together giving rise to all manner of surprising inventions. It is, I need scarcely say, very conducive to a fine effect that all the Nations should keep a strictly innocent expression of countenance, while endeavouring to tear off as much of the costume and ornaments, and lop off as many as possible of the limbs of their vis-à-vis.

This further emphasises the sardonic double-meaning of this particular ballet. The participants must behave in a refined, composed manner throughout the war. It is an affect that represents the “stiff upper lip” sterility that Lee so deplored in her fellow Britons. The bodies playing the Nations become further dehumanised with their physical expressions of fear, pain, and viciousness stifled:

At the end of the main action the Chief Dancers may be called upon to shift sides or take part in a general breakdown of a highly modern and anarchical style, something like the Paris *impromptu* after the *pas de deux* of 1870, only on a vast scale. And now! [T]he first position, please!<sup>166</sup>

Complementing Lee’s allegorical space and body is a musical troupe embodied by a patriotic collective who crowd the theatre with their classical instruments. They are chided by many of the other spectators but defended by Satan who says that they will not last long; some of the more modern attendees will begin to play their “wonderful mechanical instruments when the rest of [the] classic band have neither breath nor strings left”. As

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<sup>166</sup> Lee may be referencing the famous *pas de deux* in Delibes’s *Coppélia*, arguably the most significant Paris ballet premiere of 1870; the reference to “the Paris *impromptu*” is less clear.

compassion gives way to blind cruelty and lutes give way to gramophones, modernity is replacing tradition on every level of the production and in its very meaning.

## II. Allegorical space, mechanical bodies

According to her biographer Vineta Colby, Lee's "choice of allegory was, for its time, appropriate, since it allowed for freedom of expression without the responsibility of factual documentation".<sup>167</sup> In this section, I will consider how the conventions of the ballet enhance Lee's allegorical mode: she reimagines ritualised performance with utterly dark connotations. The double meaning of the *Ballet* is established immediately by Death's exposition. He defines ballet as a traditional form of art which "had gone rather out of fashion" until a revival in the post-Victorian era. Lee means to say, at the same time, that violence followed the same pattern of lost popularity; both ballet and shameless violence are experiencing resurgence in popularity. The *Ballet of the Nations* depicts a cultural moment in which classical ballet tradition and bloodshed are symbiotically reborn together "in a revival of taste". The conflation of ballet and war into the epitome of high culture provides the paradoxical foundation for Lee's ballet.

The temporal complexity of Lee's allegory consists of a number of devices. The dance (the War) is described in the past tense, but it is also clearly prophetic in tone. Similarly, the urgent current-event context of Lee's polemic is contrasted by the depiction of the Dancing Nations as classical bodies within a classical framework. By constructing her Ballet in this way, Lee appears to take advantage of the connotations of beauty and strength, and indeed permanence, traditionally attached to antiquity. In art, the god-filled classical world conveys a sense of impenetrability. As Gordon Teskey writes, "the revival of the classical gods in [allegory] was a fairly direct consequence of the emergence of the idea of the sovereign state [...] as a cosmos unto itself".<sup>168</sup> Lee identifies the classical standard as the antithesis of her current world view. "That [the classical system] was

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<sup>167</sup> Vineta Colby. *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*. University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 302.

<sup>168</sup> Gordon Teskey. *Allegory and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 81.

sustained by the threat of violence was concealed behind the aesthetic beauty of the allegorized classical gods, who were thus made to appear to be elements of an impregnable structure”.<sup>169</sup> The concept of God or gods is further undermined by the positioning of Satan as the *Ballet*’s protagonist. We read Lee’s allegory today as an historical articulation of wartime anxiety and international crisis. The artist’s agenda at the moment of creation was absolutely concerned with time, in a specific place, but conveyed carefully through a layering of past and present. The classical motifs that illustrate the Ballet’s monograph are reminiscent of contemporaneous dance stylisation. Below is a representative image, showing a pose from Armfield’s 1919 biblical drama, *Miriam Sister of Moses*, choreographed by Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn:



Figure 13. Processional frieze of women from *Miriam Sister of Moses*.

Aldous Huxley, as we will see in the next chapter, also sculpts his inscribed dancers in a frieze. It is a reference both to classical architecture and the characteristic style of Nijinsky’s dance in *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*, thus bridging two temporal references.

The fact that *Ballet of the Nations* happened (and still happens) to challenge formal boundaries is, in a sense, secondary to its polemical message. Set beside Huxley’s ballets, Lee’s *Ballet of the Nations* is more than a “ballet in criticism”—it is a ballet *of* criticism. In

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

her allegory of war, Lee found the activity of the dance useful in evoking both the grand global scale of the war and its underlying triviality. The ballet, for her, added “to Satan’s glorious and terrible public exhibition,” and provided the qualities of “cinematograph and gramophone records of private realities”. She is able, in this work, to evoke the vastness of the global scene through symbolic imagery that lends the work a poetic tone:

[...] whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault lit up by the flare of distant blazing farms, and its blue solemnity rent by the fitful rocket-tracks of shells and the Roman-candles and Catherine-wheels of far-off explosions.

As Patrick Wright has noted, war is often described through theatrical metaphor in the vernacular (the “Western Theatre”, and so forth), a device which Lee’s *Ballet* explores and extends.<sup>170</sup> War is enacted by the *Ballet*, but, just as importantly, it is watched. Watching is as much a dance as warring here; in fact, the two actions become equally significant through the dance’s specific framing devices. “In her prose text for *The Ballet of the Nations* and in the drama of *Satan the Waster*”, observes Laurel Harris, “Lee satirizes both the theatricality of the war and theatrical productions that aestheticize violence such as Diaghilev’s notorious 1913 ballet *Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)*”.<sup>171</sup> Lee’s work appears to mimic possible contemporary critiques of the theatre arts, wherein “living art” turns to dying art. In killing the dance, Lee revives it on the page.

The ballet is a means of artifice by which the Nations perform kindness and brutality in turns. This is manifested particularly in their treatment of the smallest of the Nations (commonly interpreted to signify Belgium):

And as it stood there, in the middle of the Western Stage, two or three of the tallest and finest Dancers danced up in a silent step, smiling, wreathing their arms and blowing kisses, all of which is the ballet-language for "Don't be afraid, we will protect you," and danced away again wagging their finger at a particular one of their vis-a-vis, who was also curtsying and smiling in the most engaging manner on the other side.

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<sup>170</sup> See Patrick Wright’s *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (footnote 1). The dance of death motif is also prevalent in depictions of the Great War; Mark Jones, for example, emphasises the theatrical corporeality of medal design in French and German military art alike in *The Dance of Death: Medallion Art of the First World War*. London: British Museum Publications Limited, 1979.

<sup>171</sup> Harris, pp. 66-67.

This echoes the misleading revelry of the scene in Huxley's 'Callot', where what first appears to be a scene of gaiety and innocuous performance reveals sinister consequences. In both cases, dance is the vehicle for the lie. Here, Lee turns dance into a false promise between the bodies onstage, and makes it a simultaneously comforting and destructive language.

While the bulk of Lee's *Ballet* is dedicated to Satan's exposition, the dance is eventually underway: "dance they did, lopping each others' limbs and blinding one another with spirits of blood and pellets of human flesh." Whereas Huxley's ballets borrow familiar movement vocabularies from the conventional ballet, there is nothing particularly balletic about Lee's inscribed dance: the ballet is used more for a framing mechanism than a movement vocabulary. "[A]s they appeared and disappeared in the moving wreaths of fiery smoke," Lee describes her Nations,

...they lost more and more of their original shape, becoming, in that fitful light, terrible uncertain forms, armless, legless, recognisable for human only by their irreproachable-looking heads which they carried stiff and high even while crawling and staggering along, lying in wait, and leaping and rearing and butting as do fighting animals; until they became, with those decorous well-groomed faces, mere unspeakable hybrids between man and beast, they who had come on to the stage so erect and beautiful. For the *Ballet of the Nations*, when Satan gets it up regardless of expense, is an unsurpassed spectacle of transformations, such as must be witnessed to be believed in.

Within its performative frame, Lee's narrator (an omniscient version of herself) presents the ballet as she remembers it, as though she has seen it performed. When she employs the first-person, as in this opening of a paragraph: "I have just said that the rest of the band were beginning to flag", she situates herself somewhere between the fictive performance and its real reader. As the writer of both the performance and the audience's impressions, she establishes that this ballet did indeed happen. However, since we know that it did not, the narrator acquires a persona every bit as fictional as her story. The text thus maintains a sense of play among its multiple levels of reality, unreality, the performed, and the unperformed.

Another quality of the ballet that suits Lee's pacifist rhetoric is its use of entrapment, which is partially related to the concept of a performance. For Lee, ballet is more a rhetorical vehicle than a prescribed movement vocabulary: this is expressed through a central condition in the *Ballet*. Satan and Death are able to manage the Dancers like automatons. A performance, whether dance or drama, is fundamentally determined in time and in place by concrete boundaries, within which the performance must maintain a level of forward motion until completion. In the sense of a performance, the dancer's body in space is subordinate to the dance, the music, and the stage (whatever it may be). There is a kind of contact between performer and performance that renders the former obedient to the latter. Thus, when Lee personifies the Nations in her *Ballet*, each is committed to his duty: to perform Satan's will without question. In this sense, the agreement which dominates the relationship between director and performer is a perfect analogy for a war-hungry government and its obedient masses.

### III. From Lee to Marinetti?

At the same time that the *Ballet* promotes a sense of a literary stage, it also draws parallels between the page-stage and the real-world stage of the War. Lee's exposition forecasts the opening of F. T. Marinetti's "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance", to come two years later. He too begins in the omniscient style of a lesson, writing:

Once the glorious Italian ballet was dead and buried, there began in Europe stylisations of savage dances, elegant versions of exotic dances, modernizations of ancient dances. Parisian red pepper + panache + shield + lance + ecstasy in front of idols that have lost all meaning + undulations of Montmartre thighs = an erotic passeist anachronism for foreigners.<sup>172</sup>

Both pieces begin with a dogmatic tone that stresses the unique, even revolutionary quality of the dance to follow. Both also stress the uselessness of "out of fashion" modes of dance in the representation (through allegory) of the human body at war. For Marinetti, the manifesto dance is a calculated response to tired European repertoire; however, at the same

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<sup>172</sup> All subsequent quotations from Marinetti's "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance" are uncited; please see the full text in appendix.

time, he credits Nijinsky with an admirable revival of the dance: “With Nijinsky the pure geometry of the dance, free of mimicry and without sexual stimulation, appears for the first time”.

The “Manifesto of the Futurist Dance” comprises three separate dances sharply divided into separate movements. Each instructs a vocabulary of dehumanised movement in which the human body is made to behave like an aircraft (“Dance of the Aviator”), a firearm (“Dance of the Machine Gun”), and other mechanical objects (“Dance of the Shrapnel”). The dancer in each case delivers text either through recitation or hand-held placards. The placards continuously reaffirm that the importance of the dance is its message, not its corporeal artistry. Instead, armed with the placards, the body conveys a restricted vocabulary of mechanical movements that emphasise militaristic procedures and deemphasise natural expression. Still, the dancer is human—the body is not concealed by the sort of abstract masking and costuming seen in works by Cocteau (the skyscraper silhouette of the manager in *Parade* comes to mind). Marinetti, therefore, seems to want to retain the ironic contrast between body and machine without subsuming one into the other. The Marinetti *danseuse* is like a soldier—a body conscripted to perform the movements whether it is willing or not.

The human body in Marinetti’s ballet is not only performing the human, but also the material and metaphysical properties of war. The bodies of the two dancers (one a soldier and the other the danseuse) conjure the sounds of machine guns and flying shrapnel through their movements, which combine with the subtitle effect of the placards:

*Movement 4:* With the whole body vibrating, the hips weaving, and the arms making swimming motions, give the waves and flux and reflux and concentric or eccentric motions of echoes in ravines, in open fields and up the slopes of mountains. The danseuse will hold up a sign printed in black: *Water duty*; another in black: *Mess duty*; still another in black: *The mules, the mail*.

The danseuse, holding her placards and moving through sequences that resemble military drills, is performing a dance of duty and necessity. Marinetti writes as a short preface, “I want to give the fusion of the mountain with the parabola of the shrapnel. The fusion of the



carnal human song with the mechanical noise of shrapnel. To give the ideal synthesis of the war: a mountain soldier who carelessly sings beneath an uninterrupted vault of shrapnel”. Through its mechanisation of the body and the diagnosing of the physical properties of surrounding space, Marinetti’s ballet (if we can call it that) represents a trope that becomes prevalent in modernist ballet throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to which I will return in the following chapters.<sup>173</sup> Here, however, I am specifically concerned with Marinetti’s repurposing of the body on the page to perform *war*, and the ways in which his text subsequently relates to Lee’s.

Whereas Marinetti “extracts” his dances from “the three mechanisms of war: shrapnel, the machine gun, and the airplane”, Lee’s ballet makes her “mechanisms” out of the humans involved. Still, they are subjected to the very machines Marinetti forms from the dancer’s body. In *Ballet of the Nations*, the personified Nations must dodge “the meteor-curve of a shell or the leaping flame of an exploding munition-magazine, while overhead fluttered and whirred great wings which showered down bomb-lightnings”. The meteor-curve of shells in Lee’s ballet turns up again in Marinetti’s, where movement is punctuated by the “whistling parabola of shrapnel”. In both works, there are forces outside the human that are mathematically derived, therefore impersonal, fearsome, and inevitable. Writing his ballet in 1917, Marinetti repeats the tone of fellow futurist Enrico Prampolini two years earlier, who imagined a theatre that could construct “the imminent and inevitable identification of man with motor, facilitating and perfecting an incessant exchange of intuition, rhythm, instinct, and metallic discipline”.<sup>174</sup> The mechanisation of the human is essential to Lee’s ballet, in which the dancing Nations use bodies for expendable, numberless vessels.

Importantly, “the ‘head’ of each nation is also what continues to survive in the ballet, even as the limbs are torn off and the body is disemboweled”. Each body comprises a dual nature: the body below the neck is offered to the bloodbath, whereas the head

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<sup>173</sup> See, for example: Patricia Gaborik and Andrea Harris. “From Italy and Russia to France and the U.S.: ‘Fascist’ Futurism and Balanchine’s ‘American’ Ballet” in *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical*. Mike Sell, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted by Gaborik and Harris, p. 27.

(symbolising heads of state, government, authority) maintains its clarity and structure. The body is, in a sense, a war zone in and of itself. “Far from being an inert, passive, non-cultural and ahistorical term,” observes Elizabeth Grosz, “the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles”.<sup>175</sup> While the dancing body is subjected to the mechanical whims of curves and parabolas, both ballets employ systems of physical and rhetorical structures to comment on war. One such structure is Satan’s matter-of-fact announcement that “this first figure of our Ballet is called The Defence of the Weak....

It will continue unremittingly at the Western End of the Stage, while the Eastern End is occupied by a not entirely symmetrical (for symmetry is apt to be *fade*<sup>176</sup>) choreographic invention called the *Steam-Roller Movement* which will end up in the Triumph of such small Nationalities (and I sincerely hope many will join!) as may have any limbs left to dance with.

With this pronouncement, Lee’s ballet is suddenly a map, defined by Western and Eastern ends. Similarly, Marinetti’s danseuse “will dance on top of a large, violently coloured geographical map (four meters square) on which will be drawn in large, highly visible characters the mountains, woods, rivers, geometries of the countryside, the great traffic centres of the cities, the sea”. The dance space is at once natural and political. The same can be said for the power which ballet itself wields in this new age: refashioned as war-dance, the previously tired form has sprung up in “South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently”. If ballet is now the means by which nations kill one another, then by Lee’s postulation it is a global danger.

Dance space, as an extension of theatrical space, helps Lee to articulate the abstract senselessness of war, a structure imposed by many. In the words of literary critic Paul Fussell, “Most people were terrified, and for everyone the dramaturgic provided a dimension within which the unspeakable could to a degree be familiarized and interpreted. After all, just as a play must have an ending, so might the war; just as an actor gets up

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<sup>175</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 19.

<sup>176</sup> meaning tasteless, dull

unhurt after the curtain falls [...], so might the soldier”.<sup>177</sup> Imagining the aftermath of war, the English writer and diarist Lady Cynthia Asquith mused that “one will have to look at long vistas again, instead of short ones, and one will at last fully recognise that the dead are not only dead for the duration”.<sup>178</sup> The safety of theatricality is an illusion, in other words. There is a similar sense in Lee’s *Ballet*, that corporealising the warring nations provides a tangible vocabulary with which to articulate war-time sentiment and experience.

Additionally, by framing the global situation as a work of art, Lee lampoons human ignorance. The war becomes a spectator sport in which none of its participants seem concerned by the action or its consequences. Ballet dress, too, allows the bloodthirsty Nations to conceal their economic distress and consequently, part of their true identity: “The Nations had meanwhile assembled, each brilliant and tidy in its ballet dress, which was far better cut, and of handsomer stuff, of course, than its everyday broad-cloth or rags”. The ballet elevates its participants’ aesthetic standards so that the slaughter seems ironically placid and beautiful at the surface. By imbuing the scene with the elegance normally attached to the ballet, Lee highlights the vanity and oblivion of the figures within it.

#### **IV. Ballet as interlude in *Satan the Waster***

We will now turn our attention back to the rhetorical system of Lee’s text. Lee’s introduction to the 1920 trilogy *Satan the Waster* gives the writer space, in retrospect, to justify the Ballet’s first incarnation as a monograph. Lee’s agenda in the *Ballet* and in *Satan the Waster* changed as the war progressed, complicated, and killed. The kind of performance that *The Ballet of the Nations* performs changes in its move from its setting as a monograph to its setting within *Satan the Waster*. The ballet in 1920 feels like a climactic sequence inside growing, materialising views of such travesties as the sinking of the

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<sup>177</sup> Paul Fussell. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 199.

<sup>178</sup> Quoted in *My country is the whole world: an anthology of women's work on peace and war*. Cambridge Women's Peace Collective London: Pandora Press, 1984, p. 110.

*Lusitania*. The ballet is still in focus, but its definition as such becomes more and more self-aware in context.

The ballet's new context also extends the exposition and the aftermath of the *Ballet*, promoting a more severe sense of the Ballet's never-ending, cyclical nature. In the new prologue to the *Ballet*, Satan assumes a religious grandeur, shouting from his pulpit: "Dearly beloved Nations, called heretofore Brethren in Christ, and henceforth to become true Brethren in Satan [...], [Y]e are going forth [...] to join Death's Dance even as candid high-hearted virgins who have been decoyed by fair show into the house of prostitution...."<sup>179</sup> After his protracted dialogue with Clio, Muse of History, Satan's ballet becomes ever more deeply buried within the tangle of rhetoric. Perhaps even more than in Huxley's case, the role of ballet as a formal enterprise is more rhetorically loaded in *Ballet of the Nations*.

When the ballet was again published in 1920 as the centrepiece of a polemical trilogy in *Satan the Waster*, Lee provided her reflective opinions of the original, confessing in her Introduction that the ballet's "crude emblematic improvisation at first satisfied my need for expression".<sup>180</sup> Referring to the ballet as a "nucleus", Lee explains that "a European war was going on which, from my point of view, was all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly 'Grand Guignol' performance".<sup>181</sup> She goes on to justify its new home inside the larger work, while at the same time seeming satisfied with—though only obliquely referring to—the balletic notion.

In *Satan the Waster*, the ballet interlude is prefaced by Satan himself, speaking to the Muse of History: "I need scarcely remind you that the real preparation for this new ballet of mine began long ages back; one might say with the first wars which, making men

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<sup>179</sup> Vernon Lee. *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy With Notes & Introduction*. New York: John Lane Company, 1920, p. 45.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* "Grand Guignol" refers to Paris's Théâtre du Grand-Guignol (1897-1962), which "achieved a legendary reputation as the 'Theatre of Horror,' a venue displaying such explicit violence and blood-curdling terror that a resident doctor was employed to treat the numerous spectators who fainted each night." Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson. *Grand-Guignol: the French theatre of horror*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002, (abstract).

afraid, taught them to bring on aggression by their precautions for self-defence”.<sup>182</sup> In that statement, Lee establishes a sense of inevitability for the *Ballet* as an outcome of past wars and an expression for those yet to unfold. For the fictive creator of the production, as for Lee herself, the ballet is a natural vessel for the portrayal of wartime violence. There is little else explicitly said to justify the choice of medium: instead, it is expressed as an artistic given. “[T]he necessary pretexts and arguments for hatred”, continues Satan, “have, like the painted scenery of an earthly playhouse, accumulated on my hands from age to age, ready to shift from side to side”. The ballet is a collection of Satan’s observations of men under his control: he has seen (again, as Lee herself has seen) a continual “dance” of disaster that unifies the human race through the ages. As he concludes: “Thus in the coming ballet you will recognize, not without amusement, the selfsame insults against Britain’s whilom<sup>183</sup> comrades in arms which Burke and Pitt had used against Britain’s present-day allies, the once frog-eating, systematic murderers called French”.<sup>184</sup> This parallel is offered, perhaps, as a tongue-in-cheek apology for the ensuing behaviour of the dancing Nations: there is an historical precedent, after all.

Lee was acutely aware of pro-war (or at least hesitantly supportive) readers of her ballet who objected to her portrait. She writes to herself on their behalf: “...And you, in this shallow satire of yours, represent [...] this trial of strength between Justice and Injustice, as a mere collective world-cataclysm [...] you dare to represent it as a mere involuntary, aimless, senseless dance of Death...”<sup>185</sup> When Lee impersonates her critics, she summons up some of the negativity directed in part, perhaps, to readers’ inability to understand the form of the ballet and its relationship to its volatile subject. Lee’s friend Helen Swanwick wrote to her: “Some weeks ago your publisher was so good as to send me *Satan the Waster* and I read it slowly and meditatively and recalled how you used to read the Ballet during those awful years and how few people understood the bitter and tragic meaning of your

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<sup>182</sup> *Satan the Waster*, p. 7. Further citations from this book are marked with *STW* and page number. The text can be accessed at [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22938518M/Satan\\_the\\_waster](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22938518M/Satan_the_waster).

<sup>183</sup> An obsolete or dated form of “once upon a time”.

<sup>184</sup> Probably the Irish statesman Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), Britain’s youngest Prime Minister who ruled during the French Revolution. *STW*, p. 7.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

satire”.<sup>186</sup> Lee never provided rules for reading her Ballet, but both she and her critics call it a satire.<sup>187</sup>

At the end of the ballet section, Lee inserts an *Author’s Note for Stage Managers (other than Satan)*:

In the event of this play being performed, it is the author’s imperative wish that no attempt be made at showing the Dancing of the Nations. The stage upon the stage must be turned in such a manner that nothing beyond the footlights, the Orchestra and the auditorium shall be visible to the real spectators, only the changing illumination which accompanies the Ballet making its performance apparent.<sup>188</sup>

If the work only hypothetically leads to actualised dance, the role of dance in this work is consequently symbolic. If the Nations were to actually dance, or if there were audible music, Lee urges that the result “would necessarily be hideous, besides drowning or interrupting the dialogue”.<sup>189</sup> That is the extent of Lee’s practical instruction: among the seventy pages of “Notes to the Ballet” that close the volume, only rhetoric of moral philosophies for the characters and their situation is offered. In fact, *The Ballet of the Nations* was performed only vocally, and only once: Vernon Lee recited the *Ballet* herself for an audience of the Union of Democratic Control and at the Margaret Morris theatre in London.<sup>190</sup> It remains a self-sufficient performance, with its own built-in systems of impresarios, lessees, participants, and spectators. Lee herself, in her extensive paratexts, even becomes her own critic.

In *Satan the Waster’s* lengthy dialogue between Satan and the Muse, Clio, Lee sets up the reasoning behind the ballet and implements a sense of a countdown to the curtain (“half an hour to go”, etc.). Describing the *Ballet* to Clio, Satan explains,

...one of its main themes, its *Leit-motivs*, as Wagnerians say, is my dealing with [virtue]: the sweet and ardent loyalty of noble lads, ready to die themselves and kill other noble lads, lest dear comrades should have died in vain...<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Helen Swanwick to Lee (quoted in Beer p. 122).

<sup>187</sup> In addition to ‘ballet’, Lee calls it an “allegorical mise-en-scene” and a “War-Play”.

<sup>188</sup> *STW*, p. 57.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> According to Grace Brockington in the notes to her article, p. 158.

<sup>191</sup> *STW*, p. 12.

By branding murder as virtuous, Lee reinforces the logic of its ironical new forum in the *Ballet*. Embedded as an interlude and the object of focus, Lee's *Ballet* in the larger book acquires yet another distinction. In 1920, it is a ballet in retrospect, written not to articulate the author's pacifism, but reappearing in order to *uphold* it. Lee refers to *Satan the Waster* as one of her "philosophical books".<sup>192</sup> At the time of its publication, Lee found herself reconciling the ballet's original independence with its new location, embedded in the drama. She reflects on the *Ballet*: "It was in its origin merely such an extemporized shadow-play as a throng of passionate thoughts may cast up into the lucid spaces of one's mind". In retrospect, Lee recognises her ballet's 'passionate' nature, suggesting a kind of cathartic purpose.

#### V. "and the Nations are still a-dancing"

With all of this in mind, we might ask more broadly: why ballet? The answer lies in the impresario Satan's own defence of the form. As he explains:

I prefer the Ballet of the Nations to any of the other mystery-plays, like Earthquake and Pestilence, which Death puts on our stage from time to time. The music is not always very pretty, at once too archaic and too ultra-modern for philistine taste, and the steps are a trifle monotonous. But it gives immense scope for moral beauty, and revives religious feeling in all its genuine primeval polytheism.

Granted, these remarks evoke Satan's appreciation of the *ballet des nations* as a specific form, but we can treat it as an extension of the ballet in general, for the sake of this ongoing examination. Lee capitalises on the savage capacities of the *ballet des nations*, which by definition constructs a microcosmic meeting-place for the world's powers. Its ceremonial connotations, as well as its artistic ones, allow Lee to exaggerate violence to such an extent that ceremony and art are subverted over the course of the work. The expectations of decorum, civility, and safety normally attached to ceremonies are thwarted by the Ballet's participants. The subversion of this expectation works as an echo of the world stage, upon

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<sup>192</sup> Colby, p. 300.

which Lee perceived the sick irony in governmental failure to protect and represent citizens.

Using ballet also furthers Lee's pacifism because of the jarring effect between what it is meant to be like and what it is doing on the page, perhaps made most explicit by beautiful bodies performing the grotesque. By constructing pacifist allegory through the ballet, Lee mocks and destabilises political truth and accepted notions about war at the same time that she acknowledges ballet's susceptibility to mockery. Satan proclaims,

[T]his Ballet of the Nations (for that's its title) will be an unending source of rhetoric, mistaken lessons, and of such voluptuous horror as thrilled the Vestal Virgins in their cushioned seats high above the arena. And I doubt whether your elevated taste (but, I forgot, you do condescend to anecdote) will quite appreciate the preposterousness which underlies it all.

Satan is willing to cheapen the production for the viewer's sake and continues: "I will precipitate the action, omit details, isolate essentials, typify the gestures, and parody the words. I will, to please you, transform Reality, which seems to have no point, into bare Caricature, which has". This re-emphasises the ballet's self-awareness—both as a kind of medium and as allegory—at the same time that it reiterates the ignorance of human spectatorship that makes gruesome performance attractive.

Lee's project, as a physically and aesthetically autonomous ballet, performs a more insular textuality, but one which necessarily relies on historical context. Beer observes that the affective purpose of *Ballet of the Nations* "is to jar on the reader with its apparent insouciance".<sup>193</sup> Beer locates the reader outside of the text, where he or she is confronted by the ballet's relentless carnage. Inside the text, though, the audience is comprised of a series of Virtues, who alternately engage with and sleep through the performance: "But among the Virtues two were not asleep, and sat motionless under the spell of hideous fascination; their eyes fixed, their hearing intent, with horror so great it turned to pleasure". These figures, like the Dancing Nations, are automatons. Like Marinetti's danseuse, they too are the slowly moving gears of atrocity. They become, through such treatment, just as much performers as the ballet's resident dancers, and the result offers a portrait of the ballet not

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<sup>193</sup> Beer, p. 108.



just as an artistic form but, like the war being depicted, as a specific dynamic cultural exchange.

The complicit bystander and the automaton-like dancing body are both necessary components to the ballet: they are equals in the demonstration of human willingness to follow commands and to turn a blind eye to the repercussions. Lee herself is of course aware of the trend. In her preface to *Satan the Waster*, she writes that the Dancing Nations provide “human personages to gape at on a puppet show or ferret out in the places where we keep rags and dirty linen”.<sup>194</sup> In the form of Clio by Satan’s side, writes Lee:

[...] The Muse caters for our various imaginative needs, noble or base, giving us the heroes and martyrs and villains for whom our sentimentality, megalomania, and morbid passions clamour; personages great enough, abominable enough, pure enough, unhappy enough to be the cherished companions, the hugged dolls, of our presumptuous day-dreams; also mean enough, dirty enough in all their splendour of royalty or genius, to comfort our own meanness with the thought: ‘Well! they also were human (which often means brutish), just like ourselves.’

Satan’s Muse, Clio, is the custodian of human history; she has an endless arsenal of tragic and terrible figures to volunteer to the ballet. Their worst exploits are entertaining, but Lee suggests that they serve another, more psychological, purpose. The spectator (whether inscribed beside an allegorical stage or seated before a real one) can justify his or her own acts of ignorance and violence.

Lurking in the same portrait is the author: the impresario appears in *The Ballet of the Nations* as he did in Huxley’s “Callot”, referencing yet again the persona of the art as it was seen at the time. As Lee paints him, “‘That shall be my business,’ said Satan, the World’s immortal Impresario; ‘let us lose no time’”. Authoritative, influential, and here not without a degree of evil, the impresario is a symbol of both the ballet-master and the author at once. As in Huxley’s two ballets, the dance of Lee’s impresario functions as the mechanism of destruction by which the dance entraps its dancers. Or, in Brockington’s words, “the dancer becomes a travesty of the human form, in which the head punishes its own frame”.<sup>195</sup> The Ballet begins and ends on a prophetic note, first by naming the “Ages to

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<sup>194</sup> “Notes to the Prologue” in *Satan the Waster*, pp. 219-228.

<sup>195</sup> Grace Brockington, “Performing Pacifism: The Battle between Artist and Author in The Ballet of the Nations”. In C Maxwell & P Pulham (eds), *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. London:

Come” as members of the chorus, pulled from Satan’s chasm in the stage-floor. Even the future is among the dancers of the war, sealing all its fellow participants into a limitless contract. Satan is pleased with the Ballet’s momentum:

"Now nothing can stop the dancing," he cried; "and this shall yet be the greatest triumph of Ballet-Master Death!" and, rapping on his desk, spoke as follows: "Ladies and Gentlemen, dear valiant Nations of my Corps-de-Ballet! we will now proceed to the third and last figure; the last because, as you know, it is made never to end! For it is called *Revenge*".

Then, as the ‘curtain’ falls, Lee seals a prophecy for the real world: “the Nations are still a-dancing”, and there is no indication that it can ever end.

At the heart of the textual experiment is, of course, the author’s stoic disapproval of the War, in which Lee was by default a conscientious objector. The text’s performative structures reiterate Lee’s position as an outsider, both as a pacifist and as a woman. Both identities forbade Lee from involvement in the War, the latter by definition and the former by choice. At any rate, the notion of performance and the voyeurism attached to it echoes Lee’s own position as a person situation just outside, but very near, the evil she condemns. Of course, in addition to the obvious participation of males,

All other civilians became exposed to the human, economic, and psychological cost of total war. The war invaded the most remote corners of the land, and the huge conscript armies at the front contained members of every social stratum and region of the country. This was truly a war of nations, and for this reason none of the major participants was spared its consequences.<sup>196</sup>

Indeed, the pacifist female writer was grievously injured by her world not by any immediate threat to her own body, but to the bodies of the world which she prophetically puts “a-dancing” in *Ballet of the Nations*. Important to the interior action of the *Ballet* is its total reliance on corporeality at the expense of dialogue. The medium, in other words, fittingly offers the body as language and displaces reason. Lee sees the Great War as a result of miscommunication and misjudgment, and so the *Ballet*’s participants, the dancing Nations, are relieved of their capacity to work out differences in any way other than bodily

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Palgrave Macmillan, p. 148.

<sup>196</sup> Omer Bartov. *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200, p. 11.

violence. This is Lee's formal correlative to the real world's identical inability to reason and function in the prevention of war.

Other writers in Lee's time were similarly using dance to express the physical and emotional movements of war. Edith Sitwell's 1916 poem "The Dancers", written at the time of the Battle of the Somme, depicts a "gyrating world" with "floors slippery from blood".<sup>197</sup> Sitwell's civilian bodies pay homage to the martyred soldiers' bodies by dancing:

Though God die  
Mad from the horror of the light –  
The light is mad, too, flecked with blood, –  
We dance, we dance, each night.<sup>198</sup>

Hers is a dance of war that is reactive and culturally self-soothing: a celebration of whatever small life is left. In context, Lee's dance, crude and honest, seems insensitive. An interesting concern is voiced in a contemporaneous review of Lee's polemic from June 1920, upon the publication of *Satan the Waster*. The reviewer disagrees with Lee's satirical tone for the chosen subject-matter, writing: "about the war, about most things, we are not in the mood for satire".<sup>199</sup> To the critic, Lee's "Philosophic War Trilogy" fails, at least to one critic, because it is careless in its particular time, just two years after the War's end.<sup>200</sup>

Using the devices of the *ballets des nations* and its classical context gave Lee the tools she needed to shape the allegory to suit her emotional needs at the onslaught of war: as Clio announces, "No moment could be better suited for a Dance of Death such as the poor unsophisticated Middle Ages never imagined in their most celebrated nightmares".<sup>201</sup> In that statement, Clio not only justifies the vehicle for Lee's allegory, but also, by extension, for Huxley's "Callot" later. Lee's adoption of ballet both as a cultural concept and as a textual frame capitalise on popular metaphors for the Theatre of War that

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<sup>197</sup> As it appears in Richard Green's *Edith Sitwell: Avant garde poet, English genius*. London: Hachette UK, 2011, p. 108.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> "The Decay of Satire: Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy by Vernon Lee [review]" Clutton-Brock, Arthur. *The Times Literary Supplement* (London, England), Thursday, June 24, 1920; Issue 962, p. 389.

<sup>200</sup> Interestingly, Cocteau decided to omit from *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* a section of the General's funeral eulogy because it was "too biting a satire only three years after the end of World War One" (Erik Aschengreen. *Jean Cocteau and the Dance*. København: Gyldendal, 1986, p. 100).

<sup>201</sup> *STW*, p. 19.

simultaneously soothe and shock the population. At the conclusion of a work like *Ballet of the Nations*, the reader/spectator recognises his or herself as a survivor of war, but gravely understands that no safety is ensured.

As we turn our attention Huxley's foray into ballet writing, we will see that both writers establish 'dance' and 'death' as synonyms (indeed, both predict the theme taken up later in 1933 by W. H. Auden in his play *The Dance of Death*). Although their ballets use similar mechanisms to effectively kill their dancers, thereby killing the text, Huxley and Lee employ very different framing techniques and rhetorical devices to lend their ballets different types of performativity.

For Lee, writing the dance of death is not an artistic experiment: it is a polemical duty and a matter of great urgency. Lee's ballet thus completes one of its modernist 'tasks'—the simultaneous reconfiguration of the body and the text. As Tim Armstrong puts it, "[m]odernist writing does not simply incorporate bodily metaphors, it operates on them". This idea of writing as killing or, at the very least, operation, is taken up by Aldous Huxley again in the years following the Great War's end. Vernon Lee writes her ballet *in the moment of crisis*, and form is the product of subject. Situated outside the page-stage (which is, in 1915, both fictional and real), she is not merely an inventor of this dance, but a terrified witness to it.

When Huxley puts war "a-dancing" seven years later, he does so with the advantage of retrospect, performing the satire that Lee's critics thought to be inappropriate in 1915. Although his first ballet in criticism reimagines 17<sup>th</sup> century atrocity, Huxley sees a modern correlation in the inter-war period and decides to test formal boundaries within a far-reaching historical framework.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Aldous Huxley: history, modernity, and the ‘ballet in criticism’**

In March of 1920, Aldous Huxley wrote to Edward Sackville-West to confide that he had recently “refrained from going to the ballet in Paris: somehow I have got extremely bored with it and am taking a holiday from it”.<sup>202</sup> And yet, in the very same letter, he urges Sackville-West to do the opposite: “If Jean Cocteau’s play, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, is on at the Femina Theatre do go and tell me what it’s like. He wrote *Parade*: and this [should] be something in the same style”.<sup>203</sup> Although Huxley claims to be disenchanted with the more mainstream modernist ballets of the Diaghilev sort, he does not attempt to hide his curiosity about other, more experimental works of new theatre that incorporated dance. Huxley was rubbing elbows with ballet socially, too: Jones notes that in 1918 Huxley was present at a London party also attended by Diaghilev.<sup>204</sup> We know, furthermore, that Huxley was interested in Cocteau’s dance theatre as well as in the *poemes élastiques* of Blaise Cendrars, as evidenced by Huxley’s letters and his critical writing for *Vanity Fair*. We do not have access to Sackville-West’s response to Huxley’s letter, but Huxley’s appeal for him to see and report back about Cocteau’s new work is one of many moments that designate him a balletomane on the brink of participating in the form, somehow, himself.

Huxley eventually managed to find a novel manner of adopting ballet, even among the rampant experimentation by his fellow writers and artists. Huxley’s two ballets, both written in the 1920s, are called ballets “in criticism”, a branding which calls attention to a specific rhetorical purpose. Among Huxley’s compiled critical writings, the ballets’ presence is negligible. To this day, they are readable only in original issues of *Vanity Fair* where they appeared individually, later reappearing together in Huxley’s 1925 volume

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<sup>202</sup> Aldous Huxley. “Letter to the Hon. Edward Sackville-West (4 March, 1920)”. *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. Grover Smith, ed. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969, p. 182.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Susan Jones. ‘Diaghilev and British Writing’. *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 27:1(Summer, 2009), p. 65.

*Essays New and Old*. There, curiously tucked among travel essays and pieces of commentary on canonical artists and writers like Goya and Chaucer, the ballets seem to get lost. A critic remarked in *The Nation and the Athenaeum* after the volume's publication that:

Only the essay on Chaucer and perhaps that on Wren help to soften the sharpness of the last figure. For the rest, it is merely a polished, witty, curious photographer-journalist at work—work beyond reproach for neatness and clearness—but nevertheless often insufferably monotonous in its serene immaculateness.<sup>205</sup>

For this critic, at least, it is as though Huxley's two ballets are invisible.

Although Huxley's ballets have hitherto been spared the attention of his critics, I argue that Huxley's ballets participated actively in the realm of contemporary trends in modernist dance culture and, accordingly, deserve attention. At the same time, they promote a series of contradictions that help to identify them with other modernist ballet texts. Indeed, Huxley's two ballets both echo and foreground the aesthetic stance used by Loy and Cummings by adopting some of the same stylistic tropes established by Cocteau and the Parisian companies. However, Huxley's two 'ballets in criticism', merely by being classified as such, implore the reader to approach these two pieces with a critical eye. Rather than reading merely for movement, setting, and sound, we are meant to also read for criticism's sake. This is not a familiar task, even in the exceptional territory of the modernist ballet text.

Laura Frost suggests that Huxley evades classification as a modernist because his work is generally not "formally innovative enough".<sup>206</sup> While that may be so, the effort to which Huxley tested the possibilities of textual intermediality is perhaps most apparent in his "ballets in criticism". If his experiments in them had been allowed to find firmer territory in his more commercially successful works, Frost's suggestion would be harder to accept. In the space of his short works for *Vanity Fair*, and indeed in his restructuring of

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<sup>205</sup> Anonymous, *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, 40 (Feb. 12 1927) p. 672.

<sup>206</sup> Laura Frost. "Huxley's Feelies: The Cinema of Sensation in *Brave New World*". *Twentieth Century Literature* 52:4 (Winter 2006), p. 448.

*Brave New World* for the stage, Huxley certainly demonstrates his versatility in formal innovation through his adoption of ballet.

Huxley's canon of work has garnered much attention for its use of satire and parody. Similarly, the satirical potential of the ballet is realised in Huxley's two sketches both in its handling of formal opportunities and its cultural and aesthetic connotations.<sup>207</sup> This is aptly demonstrated in his ballets' use of dance vocabularies, stock characters, and other devices familiar to performance traditions, one of which is the ballet. Huxley displaced the ballet from its normative location on stage to offer new purposes for its specific conventions. Like other writers covered in this dissertation, Huxley challenged readers to read a ballet, fostering one of the many new kinds of spectators spawned by literary modernism.

In order to understand Huxley's ballet and its function in his writing, we might begin with one overarching thesis. Huxley used the *idea of* ballet to synthesise his views across the arts as he saw them changing: thus, the Huxley ballets work as barometers for a particular cultural moment. Importantly, too, the first of his ballets practices intertextuality in its dependence upon another work of art in an entirely other artistic medium. Like Lee, Huxley uses ballet to present war and violence under the pretense of beauty, creating another jarring effect.

We must consider why Huxley chose ballet to communicate cruelty in the years following the Great War. Huxley's pacifism is well-chronicled. His writings often reiterate the cyclical nature of blind violence, which indicates the possible significance of his recycling of the Thirty Years War.

A violent revolution does not result in any fundamental change in human relations; it results merely in a confirmation of the old, bad relations of oppressor and oppressed, of irresponsible tyranny and irresponsible passive obedience. [...] Such is the lesson, unmistakably clear to anyone who considers the evidence without prejudice, of all the violent revolutions of the past. Ignoring this lesson, violent revolutionaries persist in asking us to make use, yet once more, of methods of change which have led, on every previous occasion, to manifestly unsatisfactory results...<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> For more on Huxley's satirical, parodic, and critical writings (especially on art), see Jerome Meckier's *Aldous Huxley: Satire and Structure*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.

<sup>208</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Introduction' to *The Conquest of Violence: An Essay on War and Revolution* by Bart de Ligt. London: Pluto Press, 1989, p. xxix.

Huxley was also highly sceptical of governments' abilities to protect and conduct civilians in effective and peaceful ways; the thoughtless, mechanical manner in which his dancing bodies move toward death performs, in unfamiliar terms, an altogether familiar sense of corruption and the perpetual, inevitable resurfacing of violence.

### I. "Ballet in Criticism, Jacques Callot"

*Why can I not see enough of your strange and fantastic pages, most daring of artists!  
Why can I not get your figures, often suggested merely by a few bold strokes,  
out of my mind? When I look at your compositions, which overflow with the most  
heterogeneous elements, then the thousands of figures come to life, and—  
often from the furthest background, where at first they are hard even to descry—  
each of them strides powerfully forth in the most natural colours.*<sup>209</sup>

In order to understand the subject matter of Huxley's first ballet, it is necessary to step backwards both in time and into another writer's oeuvre. The passage above captures the writer E. T. A. Hoffmann's emotional response to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century etchings of Jacques Callot<sup>210</sup>. The writer senses a kind of kinetic energy in the two-dimensional work, implying that the figures might "come to life", and "[stride] powerfully forth". Hoffmann's rewriting of Callot's work in his 1820 novella *Prinzessin Brambilla* attempts to capture the writer's response to the etchings, presenting "the extraordinary tale of Princess Brambilla just as he found it suggested by the bold strokes of Master Callot's pen"<sup>211</sup>. We will come to dissect how the etchings manifest themselves in Hoffmann's prose work and how they came to form the groundwork for Aldous Huxley's contribution to ballet.

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<sup>209</sup> "Hoffmann's prefatory lines to the Fantasy-pictures in the Style of Callot" as printed in *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>210</sup> Jacques Callot (1592–1635) is one of the most prolific etchers in the early modern period. Born into a noble family in Nancy, France, Callot trained primarily in Rome and later in Florence, where he served as court artist to Cosimo II, Grand Duke of Tuscany until 1621. Throughout his career, Callot represented a diverse range of human subjects: beggars, nobles, royalty, farmers, religious figures, and, most relevant for the present inquiry, soldiers. Huxley and Hoffmann are just two of the many writers and artists who found inspiration in Callot's work.

<sup>211</sup> As translated in Till Dembeck's "(Paratextual) Framing and the Work of Art: E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Prinzessin Brambilla*". *Studies in Intermediality I: Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, p. 275 (footnotes).



Callot's etchings, and in particular his 40-part series of dancing figures, *Balli di Sfessania*, form the basis of Huxley's first ballet in 1923.<sup>212</sup> For the illustrations to be included in a forthcoming publication in 1941, Huxley suggests the inclusion of "two of Callot's prints [...] I would suggest the print of the man being broken on the wheel and another, near the end of the series, showing a band of soldiers waylaid by infuriated peasantry and done to death".<sup>213</sup> Huxley's interpretation that the figures are "done to death" readily translates into the ballet, where they are *danced* to death. As a viewer of Callot's work, Huxley was a spectator of the potential action it contained and, in turn, its potential effect. To Huxley one of the prominent figures in the aforementioned work represented "the impotent revels of the suffering masses against the interminable military oppression".<sup>214</sup> It is as though Huxley senses, like Hoffmann had a century earlier, the frozen energies as produced by Callot, and subsequently searches for ways in which to loosen their trappings. Both Hoffmann and Huxley were viscerally inspired by the vibrant graphics of Callot's work, making it fitting material for the latter's first ballet.



Figures 14 and 15. Two etchings from the *Balli di Sfessania* series by Jacques Callot, 1621-22.

For Huxley, the 'ballet in criticism' is a way to adopt the living properties of dance and to suggest its phenomenological potential on the page. Huxley's interpretation of

<sup>212</sup> Callot's full series of 24 etchings for *Balli di Sfessania* are accessible on-line; see, for example [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/search.aspx?searchText=balli di sfessania](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=balli%20di%20sfessania).

<sup>213</sup> Aldous Huxley. "Letter to Harold Raymond (27 May, 1941)". *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. Grover Smith, ed. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969, p. 466.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

Callot's work, "Ballet in Criticism, Jacques Callot"<sup>215</sup> appears first in the literary journal *The Nation and the Athenaeum* in 1923. It bears no preface or apology, and is arranged in two columns like most conventional prose. The ballet's presence there serves better to justify Huxley's foray into ballet because of the fact that *Vanity Fair's* issues in the early 1920s often featured Huxley-penned articles which exhibit a fascination with various modernist metamorphoses of the form. For example, his articles include several on Jean Cocteau's work for the Ballets Russes and the innovative ballet music of Les Six, who Huxley admired. As it appears in the magazine for the second time (1924), the Callot ballet is now prefaced with an 'Editor's Note' which attempts to justify the piece's peculiar aesthetic:

In this burlesque ballet, Mr. Huxley follows, with a gesture of absurdity, the familiar method created by the choreographers of the Russian Ballet, as in "Coq d'Or", by providing a narrative setting for some specific musical composition. Jean Cocteau's "Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel", which was first published in *Vanity Fair* a year ago was conceived in something the same way. Mr. Huxley here follows the same technique but, of course, enlarges his effects out of their normal proportion and reduces the whole to the level of satire.<sup>216</sup>

The claim that Huxley's text is so different to Cocteau's *Les Mariés* is a curious one: the editor (possibly Huxley himself) claims that, unlike Cocteau, the author here "enlarges his effects out of their normal proportions". Additionally, the editor's preface ignores the extensive artistic and literary legacy upon which Huxley has based his first piece. However, when we look at a figure from Cocteau's work, we see the plastic manifestation of the artist's sense of absurd exaggeration. We must remember that Cocteau's production achieved satirical disproportionality much more palpably and effectively in its set and costumes that grossly manipulated the human form and its surroundings through plastic means. Interestingly, we will see that Huxley's second 'ballet in criticism' more closely resembles in its imagery Cocteau's approach to disproportionality. This is due in part to its comparative levity and farcical attitude. Regardless, the *Vanity Fair* editor appears to ignore

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<sup>215</sup> The same text appears the next year in *Vanity Fair* with the title 'A Ballet in the Modernist Manner' 'Callot' is also included, as one of two 'ballets in criticism', in the 1926 volume *Essays Old and New*.

<sup>216</sup> Anonymous. Preface to 'A Ballet in the Modernist Manner'. *Vanity Fair* 22 (Aug. 1924), p. 48.

the fundamental difference between the two Huxley ballets. The first, “Callot”, is relegated to print because it is bound to another two-dimensional art work, while the second is more free to suggest three-dimensional evocations of proportion and movement. Additionally, the editor’s preface ignores the extensive artistic and literary legacy upon which Huxley has based his first piece.

This section considers the ballet’s entrance into a lineage of adaptations of the *commedia dell’arte* by the unexpected way of 17<sup>th</sup> century etching. Huxley’s inspiration for ‘Callot’ partly comes from an etching by Callot [see Figure 16] from the suite *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War* (*Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre*), a 1633 series of etchings depicting the Thirty Years War. While it may seem a random connection, Huxley’s allusion is typical.<sup>217</sup> For instance, in “Variations on Goya” from Huxley’s 1958 *Collected Essays*, the author considers the symbolic possibilities of painted trees and references Callot’s work again: “...At other times the tree is used as a gallows—a less efficient gallows, indeed, than that majestic oak which, in Callot’s *Misères de la Guerre*, is fruited with more than a score of swinging corpses...”<sup>218</sup> This suggests that Huxley was considering the potential of this visual scheme over the course of many years of writing.



Figure 16. *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre* by Jacques Callot, 1633.

<sup>217</sup> The writer’s preoccupation with Callot’s works is evidenced by frequent mention in essays, as in the long essay on Pascal from *Do What You Will* (1929). Here, Huxley invokes Callot’s etching as he describes the historical scene of the Thirty Years War (incidentally the same era depicted by Callot: “along [the] roads marched companies of hungry and marauding pikemen; its crows were busy on the carcasses that dangled from the branches of every well-grown oak”. Huxley wrote that essay five years after his ballet was published, and it is still an object of fixation.

<sup>218</sup> Aldous Huxley. “Variations on Goya” in *Collected Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p.163.

Huxley's reading of the two-dimensional tree and its role in various artworks foregrounded his use of the same trope as a structural device for his ballet. The scene of the etching is populated by a "vagabond troupe" of figures lifted from the *Balli di Sfessania*: "Guarsetto and Mestolino in their linen coats and baggy trousers, their shovel hats stuck with parrots' feathers, their goat's beards and paper noses", and Curcurucu, Fracischina, etcetera. These are our players, and on the outskirts a host of rural spectators are gathered. The ballet opens with a description of atmosphere, with no emphasis placed yet on moving bodies: "There is no orchestra; but two-and-thirty players perform in unison upon as many harpsichords the most brilliant compositions of Domenico Scarlatti. The dry glitter of the instruments fills and exhilarates the air". While Huxley's first two sections serve as exposition (in the manner of stage directions), the dance soon takes over.

The exploration of a 17<sup>th</sup> century etching brings to mind the modernist adoption of ekphrasis, or the creative description of another work of art in another medium.<sup>219</sup> William Carlos Williams's poem "The Dance" attempts a kind of animation similar to Huxley's ballet:

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess,  
the dancers go round, they go round and  
around, the squeal and the blare and the  
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles  
tipping their bellies (round as the thick-  
sided glasses whose wash they impound)  
their hips and their bellies off balance  
to turn them. Kicking and rolling  
about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those  
shanks must be sound to bear up under such  
rollicking measures, prance as they dance  
in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.<sup>220</sup>

Williams's poem extends the reality of Brueghel's static painting, developing and exploring the context of the image. Importantly, Williams writes the dance that appears to be frozen in the original, unpacking and animating the embedded figures and articulating their physical

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<sup>219</sup> For more see James A. W. Heffernan. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>220</sup> "The Dance" first appeared in *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962.

interaction. Huxley's interpretation of Callot's etching predates the above poem, but exercises a very similar approach.

Dance pervades the piece; however, the setting of the dance seems to be just as important, fully detailed in exposition which illustrates a landscape "flat and almost limitless," "quite bare except for a few small Italian houses, miles away on the horizon, and a vast oak tree which rises a little to the right of centre and within a few feet of the back of the stage".<sup>221</sup> Although the scene references no performative framing otherwise, Huxley's mention of a stage requires the reader to think in those terms. He writes, "There are no leaves on the tree [...] It is winter, and the grey, intense light of a northern day illumines the scene". The setting of the scene corresponds directly to Callot's etching, but we can sense already a kind of narrative detachment: Huxley is not present in the scene. Nor are we; rather, we are viewing a performance framed by the etching. In writing and framing the ballet, Huxley asks his spectator to appreciate the etchings; it is as though he needs us to see what he sees, and only then to allow the action to unfold. In the ballet, Huxley attempts to bring Callot's 1633 etching to life, wedding a moment of critical writing with an artistic experiment.

The ballet follows the troupe of archetypal vagabond actors as they step into a clearing to dance, surrounded and watched by "ladies and gentlemen, gipsies, beggars, idiots". Holding the crowd's attention, they "dance, alone, in pairs and trios, in every variety of combination". Huxley names many of the dances, which comprise an array of recognisable "combinations": a jig, a pavane, a hornpipe, and a maypole dance. Most important among the ballet's structures is the pervasive analogue of dance and death, as it becomes gradually apparent that the assembly is about to witness the execution of a condemned "idiot":

While, in the foreground, the descriptive pantomime of the idiot's examination, trial and condemnation is being danced through, behind and above the heads of the spectators, the acrobats are hauling the prisoner up the ladder; they have slipped the noose over his head, they have turned him off. His feet dance a double-shuffle on the wind, then gradually are still.

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<sup>221</sup> Unless otherwise attributed, this chapter's quoted material comes from my annotated transcription of the two ballets and is therefore uncited; please see the appendix for the texts.

Dance functions here as a means to an end, the result of which is death. In fact, time seems to be conflated, sped up in order to get to the inevitable: “[w]hile, in the foreground, the descriptive pantomime of the idiot’s examination, trial and condemnation is being danced through, behind and above the heads of the spectators, the acrobats are hauling the prisoner up the ladder”. The momentum of the entire dance has brought the reader suddenly to a climax in which the executioners “have slipped the noose over [the prisoner’s] head, they have turned him off. His feet dance a double-shuffle on the wind, then gradually are still”. Huxley’s figures ‘dance as they hang’, imbuing the act of dancing with human cruelty and mortality: it the same time, the dance imbues death with a humorous, sadistic quality which promotes the text’s satirical attitude.

In the hands of several other writers and artists, Callot’s etchings and their evocations of *commedia dell’arte* have crossed the borderline between satire and polemic. The Moscow Kamerny Theatre’s 1920 production of *Princess Brambilla, A Capriccio of the Kamerny Theatre, after Hoffmann* under the supervision of Alexander Tairov, took E. T. A. Hoffmann’s response to Callot’s etchings as material for full-scale production.<sup>222</sup> As Dassia Possner writes, the production of *Brambilla* marked a critical turning-point in the negotiation of “theatrical agenda in the context of the uncertainty over the future of Soviet theatre”.<sup>223</sup> Hoffman’s work fittingly echoed Tairov’s fundamental division of theatre into two aesthetic camps: the harlequinade and the mystery.<sup>224</sup>

For Tairov, the artistic value of the harlequinade in the context of a new theatre lay in its anachronism as he sought to adopt “a familiar source to assert the independence of his

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<sup>222</sup> Hoffmann’s novella *Prinzessin Brambilla, Ein Capriccio nach Jakob Callot* was published in 1820. Inspired by Callot’s *Balli di Sfessania*, the novella in turn inspired an opera in 1908 and the works discussed here. For a brief summary of Hoffmann’s story, see for example Alexander Schlutz’s article “The Mirror of Laughter: Mediation, Self-Reflection, and Healing in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Princess Brambilla*” in *European Romantic Review*, 22:3, 415-422. For more on Hoffmann’s formal interpretation of Callot’s etchings, see Till Dembeck. “(Paratextual) Framing and the Work of Art: E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Prinzessin Brambilla*”. In *Studies in Intermediality I: Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.

<sup>223</sup> Posner, Dassia N. “Performance as Polemic: Tairov’s 1920 *Princess Brambilla* at the Moscow Kamerny Theatre”. *Theatre Survey* 51:1 (May 2010), p. 35.

<sup>224</sup> Posner, p. 36.

vision from that of other innovators”.<sup>225</sup> The effect of Huxley’s use of the etchings is similar to Tairov’s achievement in that the juxtaposition of the harlequinade and the static image promotes an unsettling experience. In other words, the transposition of the etching (which is real and tangible) into an imagined performance (which is not) requires the reader to balance his or her understanding of a cultural tradition (*commedia dell’arte*) with his or her unfolding grasp of an unfamiliar narrative (Huxley’s ballet). As Posner observes, Callot’s etchings of the *commedia dell’arte* afforded Hoffmann a similar “temporal reflection” that exposed the artistic limitations of contemporary theatre and extended its possibilities and energies.<sup>226</sup> If Callot’s *Balli di Sfessania* clearly held such useful potential for so many, how (or what) did it allow Huxley to do in the performative space of the ballet text? In the same way that Hoffmann’s novella returns its protagonists into the realm of the *commedia dell’arte* by transporting them from real life into the carnival, Huxley’s ballet reactivates Callot’s static figures to the moving, performing space in which they were first conceived. In other words, Callot managed to freeze or trap figures in time and space; by writing the dance, Huxley returns them to life. That life, however, is still text-bound and conceptually static. But it is the play with stasis and movement that makes Huxley’s text interesting, unsettling, and most importantly, new.

Huxley’s dance in “Callot” weaves a pastiche of the familiar and the unfamiliar in order to destabilise the reader’s expectations of a country scene and its inhabitants. The sequence through which Huxley’s narrative moves reads on one level like a pageant, incorporating all manner of folk and court dances; Signora Lucia “steps nobly and gracefully through a pavane” and others jig and perform a hornpipe. A second kind of invocation of dance, however, disrupts the culturally identifiable nature of the previous sort. Huxley inserts less pertinent asides about dance’s symbolic import when he writes during the soldiers’ display, “[i]t is a grave Pythagorean dance of pure Number”. They make with their long pikes “arithmetical patterns against the sky”. References to mathematics and other symbols of 17<sup>th</sup> Century reason satirise the base human activity festering *beneath* the

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

sky. Later, indented and relegated to its own paragraph, the momentum of the dances has given way to a concrete diagnosis: “[i]t is a little matter of hanging”. This acts as a moment of confirmation for the reader. The portentous building of the scene is explained, but, at the same time, it is belittled in sparse matter-of-fact terms.

The text also features statements that are less concerned with describing physical movement than with characterising the psychological truths of various figures. Perhaps the best example of this characterisation is located in Huxley’s pantaloons, who “know that the world is what it is and are intoxicated with a truth that is 43 percent above proof” as they leap across the scene. The aim is humour: the pantaloons are merely drunk, but Huxley expresses it with the kind of hyperbolic romantic language we might associate with a bucolic scene of dance. Huxley’s sarcasm also contributes to a pervasive sense of absurdity which more sincerely parallels the execution underfoot. We return to the pikemen who “break apart, asserting unanswerably that two and two make four and that five over blue beans is the number of blue beans that make five”. If the dance and its rhetoric make little sense, so does the violence it cloaks.

The ballet is cluttered with the jargon of the harlequinade, but the action itself, moving steadily toward denouement, is simple. Huxley says it himself amid the chaos: “[i]t is a little matter of hanging”. For all its grave simplicity, however, the characters’ centrifugal movement toward the execution directly references the tradition of the *danse macabre*.<sup>227</sup> The very origin of the ‘dance of death’ foregrounds the way in which Huxley appropriates it in ‘Callot’. Huxley’s dance, therefore is simultaneously both a realisation of the *danse macabre* and another, now modern, static incarnation. The reader senses that Huxley recognised the descriptive possibilities of the ballet text and its innate irony as appropriate to the reinterpretation of both Callot’s etchings and the dance of death motif.

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<sup>227</sup> The motif of the *danse macabre*, which depicts Death personified as a skeleton as he ceremonially leads archetypal humans to the grave, first appears in church frescoes in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The motif has been taken up across the arts: by composers including Camille Saint-Saëns and Franz Liszt, artists Hans Holbein and Pieter Brueghel the Elder, filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman, and even appears in the Walt Disney short “Silly Symphonies” in 1929.



The mechanism of the ballet's dance of death is embedded within a pastiche of various folk dances that activate the etching's static scene. Additionally, the dance is undercut by passages of morbid ceremony to which Huxley refers as "pantomime". But the nature of the dance is more demonstrative than active; Huxley's 'Callot' illustrates perhaps better than any other writer's ballet the tendency for the written dancer to *perform* dancing rather than simply to dance. "They dance *as though*" is so frequent a phrase that dance is yet again undermined. Huxley is doing the opposite of Cummings, in whose ballet work movement is articulated through every letter to the extent that the text itself virtually dances. Here, dance is alluded to, never given aesthetic treatment or sincere detail:

They dance as though intoxicated; not with wine or any of the grosser joys, but with some more rarefied poison. They dance as though they were philosophers who had succeeded at last in picking the lock of the Absolute's back door. They dance as though they had discovered in a sudden flash that life is what it is.

Huxley implements phrases like "behind the dancing philosophers" that deemphasise the characters' roles as dancers *per se*, instead classifying them as figures adopting various attitudes and implications. Similarly, the world of the dance is mimetic somehow; the scene *is not* a place; instead, it *represents* a place. To the modern reader, the parallels between "Callot" and British post-War plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are unavoidable, and they contribute to the ballet's sense of generic and temporal ambiguity.

Huxley's dancing characters perform various folk-dances that transcend the evident time-frame of the story. We will see a similar motif employed in Mina Loy's 'Crystal Pantomime', set in a fantasy world in which:

The mermaids can stand on the tip of the one tail and twirl the other tail round it in pirouette. They will dance the Russian dance, their arms folded with one tail curved under them and the other tail flung violently out. The composition of the row of mermaids dancing in different attitudes on their double tails in their amusing curves will be most original.<sup>228</sup>

Loy's dry humour and incessant validation of the ballet's worth serves to re-define exactly what the ballet is for her and her writing moment. In the turbulent scene of mass execution

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<sup>228</sup> Mina Loy. "Crystal Pantomime". *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*. ed. Sarah Crangle. Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.

(and dance) Huxley writes that, ‘one of the village idiots... lacks the wit to appreciate the charms of the spectacle...’ Is it a game? A joke? Or is the pastiche gesturing to some more delicately calculated: is the cultural symbol of the classical dance meant to lend texture to a text whose era of production is one marked everywhere by the collision of the classical and the modern? The text ultimately does not settle into its normative role as a ballet scenario; instead, Huxley offers a novelistic turn at the end:

The Puss-in-Boots Captains and their gentlemen, the actors, the beggars, the gipsies and the idiots stare after the retreating procession in an open-mouthed astonishment. And well they may, for the impresario has made an absurd mistake. This music belongs to an entirely different ballet.

Huxley’s reversal at the ballet’s conclusion suggests a level of narrative omniscience that upsets the otherwise purely descriptive material. And even that omniscience is troubled, as the text suggests that Huxley is somehow involved in a grave error. At the moment of this revelation, all the participants—the figures in the etching, the writer, and the reader-spectator—learn at the same time that the text has made an errant move. Importantly, the mistake suggests that the text (the dance and its violent analogue), although the creation of the writer, has a will and the ability to act it out *independently* of the writer.

Huxley also referenced the etching in his biographical work *Grey Eminence*, saluting Jacob Callot’s evocation “of the most atrocious activity, but always (thanks to [Callot]’s supremely expressionistic manner) with the air of dancers holding a pose in a ballet”.<sup>229</sup> If Huxley felt something inherently balletic in Callot’s etching, and if his impulse was to transform the etching into something other than print, the ballet invites us to consider the manner in which it compensates for its printedness by using subtle layers of performance within those very confines. In order to do so, the text establishes itself as simultaneous multiple structures: first, as a printed article, then an historical event, then a reinterpretation of another art work, as a ballet, and finally as a mistake. As for that “absurd mistake”, there is a suggestion throughout the ballet that its grave action is spurred on not only by human cruelty, but by the mechanical beat of music.

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<sup>229</sup> Aldous Huxley. *Grey Eminence*. New York: Random House, 2010, pp. 211-217.

The bulk of ‘Callot’ is punctuated by military drum roll which contributes to the piece’s building tension. However, it begins and ends with a specific soundtrack. The opening sentences construct a peculiar sonic atmosphere. Again: “There is no orchestra; but two-and-thirty players perform in unison upon as many harpsichords the most brilliant compositions of Domenico Scarlatti. The dry glitter of the instruments fills and exhilarates the air. It is a music that might cure phthisis”.<sup>230</sup> The contradiction with which Huxley opens the ballet in criticism is concerned wholly with sound: there is no orchestra, and yet the diegetic figures of the ballet play Scarlatti’s music upon harpsichords. The music is not additional to the ballet: it is a critical (perhaps superior) facet. That the reader is told that ‘there is no orchestra’ and then is made to “hear” rich diegetic sound establishes the sort of textual playfulness that marks the ballet’s other facets.

Interestingly, Huxley’s description of phenomenal sound as “dry glitter” reattaches it to its material origins on paper. The return to materiality emerges again at the ballet’s end, but this time it has far greater import:

Suddenly there is silence; drums and harpsichords are still. From far off there comes a sound of singing; it swells, it increases, piercingly beautiful. A procession of monks and choristers passes slowly across the stage. They are singing the Tenebrae of Victoria. *Dum crucifixissent Jesum*.... The voices rise and fall, cross and interpenetrate—five solitary agonies that have come together to make a final sixth and more appalling, a sixth and more piercing, more beautiful agony. Slowly the priests and choristers cross the stage; the music swells and then once more decreases, fading, fainting along the air.

As in Huxley’s second ballet, to which I now turn, music in ‘Callot’ provides a sculpting echo to the dance and the violence it ‘narrates’. However, whereas in ‘Callot’ the music feels sincere—it is a grave counter-response to the irresponsible gaiety of the dance—music in ‘Scriabine, or the Voluptuous Dentist’ seems to coerce the ballet’s figures into committing the violence it contains.

Just as Huxley’s text joins a lineage of homage to Jacques Callot, it extends the experimental space of the literary category of Hoffmann’s work (the original title of Hoffmann’s 1820 novella is *Prinzessin Brambilla. Ein Capriccio nach Jakob Callot*). The

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<sup>230</sup> “A wasting disease, *esp.* one involving the lungs; *spec.* tuberculosis. Now chiefly *hist.*” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Kamerny Theater's adaptation one hundred years later reincorporates the defining word: *Princess Brambilla, A Capriccio of the Kamerny Theatre, after Hoffmann*. Although 'capriccio' is displaced in Huxley's case by the new tag 'ballet in criticism', his text nonetheless engages in the form, which essentially connotes a playful deviation from the expected norms of an artistic genre.<sup>231</sup> Callot himself used the term for his 1617 work *Capricci di varie figure*: the 'ballet in criticism' reappears in Huxley's work long after its first iteration as a two-dimensional enterprise with a new, uniquely modernist sense of purpose.

## II. 'Ballet in Criticism: Scriabine, or the Voluptuous Dentist'

Huxley's second 'ballet in criticism' more clearly performs the implications of its title. In October of 1922, Huxley wrote in *The Weekly Westminster Gazette* of a "truly and fundamentally silly piece of music" he had heard for the first time in a long while: Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin's *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire, Op. 60* (1910). "It is not silly for lack of meaning or genuine emotional inspiration", Huxley reflects, "not silly because of undue insistence upon form. It is silly because it tries to express too much in too violent a fashion, because it uses as its substance a form of material which is really no good for art".<sup>232</sup> Scriabin's over-emotional, indulgent work seemed to Huxley to awaken nervous pain: "It is better to go to the dentist", he concluded. Sure enough, by 1926 Huxley had conflated his thoughts into a second ballet in criticism: "Scriabine, or the Voluptuous Dentist. Ballet to the Music of Scriabine's 'Prometheus'".

Without its cultural context, the violence of 'The Voluptuous Dentist' makes little sense. For this particular exercise, Huxley's publication venue is essential to understanding his aim: in the pages of *Vanity Fair*, readers recognised 'The Voluptuous Dentist' as a participant in an on-going artistic dialogue about the changing nature of the ballet. As

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<sup>231</sup> Reinhold Grimm. "From Callot to Butor. E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Tradition of the Capriccio". *MLN*, Vol. 93, No. 3, German Issue (Apr. 1978), pp. 399-415.

<sup>232</sup> Aldous Huxley. "Reflections in the Concert Room" in *The Weekly Westminster Gazette* (Oct. 14 1922) reprinted in *Complete Essays: Vol. 1*, p. 290-292.

previously mentioned, in numerous other *Vanity Fair* articles throughout the 1920s, Huxley reviewed and reflected upon the work of the Ballets Russes and Jean Cocteau, and wrote prodigiously about contemporary music. In context, ‘The Voluptuous Dentist’ is not as incidental as it first appears—this brief piece is a gathering ground for all of Huxley’s materialising opinions of dance and theatre. To read closely is to pick up the fragments of the most canonical modernist ballets: Eastern costume, disproportionate masks and accessories, discordant music, and classical and non-classical movement vocabularies sharing space.

Setting aside the motif of dentistry for another moment, we should first consider Huxley’s artistic mission behind the piece. In Scriabin’s “silly” music Huxley had found a correlative for ballet *à la mode*. ‘The Voluptuous Dentist’ organises its action around an act of violence with the same sense of simultaneous terror and disinterestedness that defines ‘Callot’. Here, however, instead of continuing to develop the narrative of an etching, Huxley is imagining the context of Scriabin’s score—and its possible effect. The ballet describes the imagined events leading up to and following the climactic chord in Scriabin’s score, known as the ‘mystic chord,’ which provides a sonic equivalent to the ballet’s central action—the treatment (rape) of a dental patient by the dentist and his drill. The ballet begins innocuously enough:

A dentist’s operating chamber. The chair is placed in the centre of the stage, on a high dais approached by steps from all four sides. A carpet of rich magenta plush covers the dais, and the black chair is upholstered in the same material. The back-cloth is of watered orange silk. A row of nautch girls forms a dado to the sumptuous wall. They remain at their post throughout the whole scene, swaying a little from side to side and making with their arms the movement of seaweed stirring languidly in a subaqueous wind. Their torsos, meanwhile, are in a state of unremitting tremolo: it is the well-known Dance of the Seven Stomachs. They wear bejewelled reggipetti of pure gold, and over their bent knees their skirts are Javanese in contour.

To create the fundamental backdrop of the ballet’s action, Huxley sculpts a palpitating frieze of women and describes a Pan-like figure darting about the scene, conjuring Nijinsky’s lusty faun among the nymphs in *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*. He depicts seaweed-like movements in “willowy bendings” against the more regimental movements of a tango

—echoing a theatre marked by contrasts between the organic and experimental set against the remnants of a strict classical vocabulary. Having (perhaps) read ‘Callot’, the reader must become accustomed to an atmosphere that is not historical or referential, but more abstract. Once the exposition has been covered and the reader-spectator has secured a mental image of the peculiar scene, Huxley interjects, “and now the real action of the ballet begins”. This announcement contributes to the instability of the ballet’s definition as such: all of a sudden, we are told that what we have just read was not yet the art work, and yet there is no tangible physical or rhetorical difference between what precedes and what follows the remark.

As the dance builds momentum, Huxley continues to link the ballet’s violent interior world to the outside by referencing canonical artists and cultural symbols. In doing so, Huxley promotes a sarcastic statement about cultural value through the establishment of intertextuality. The liberal references to ancient architecture, Renaissance painting, Greek mythology, and the far East, etc., feel arbitrarily planted, but they each parody popular tropes in modernist dance.<sup>233</sup> At the same time, they lend a framework of imagery to the ballet which, by virtue of its publication, must rely on a visual reading. The action of the ballet itself does something similar in its portrayal of the dentist as rapist and forceps as phallus. The description of the dance and the dance itself is punctuated by pending danger: “He pirouettes a little with the Trained Nurse against the slow seaweed and the seismic tremolo of the nautch girls—but always with a movement of expectancy, with reiterated turnings and yearnings towards the wings. And at last she comes, radiating ecstasy—the *premiere danseuse*”.

We know that the newcomer, the patient, is about to lose her scarf (so to speak). But here, the borrowed scenario acquires its satirical colour as Huxley tempers sincerity with the absurd: “Tooth-white, gum-pink, with golden tresses semi-permanently undulating over

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<sup>233</sup> In fact, they answer a particular call voiced by Jean Cocteau through his work and through his commentary that the new ballet must acknowledge traditions in the pursuit of novelty. “To the power of the performances of the Middle Ages, of antiquity, of China, of American vaudeville sketches, or juggling and eccentric ‘turns’”, Cocteau wrote in *Vanity Fair*, “will be added the knowledge and will to see in them not the inadequacies which make us smile, but the true spectacle [...] which the world demands with its dole of bread.” *Vanity Fair* (19), 1922, p. 100.

the spherical false head, whose one feature, the smile, is like a swag of pearls looped up between a pair of dimples—in she floats on toes that barely touch the floor”. The premiere danseuse is anything but elegant—she is an artificial pastiche of her real self. In fact, the figures do not seem human at all.<sup>234</sup> The dentist himself has “a great false head of wax”. Such mask-like descriptions seem to recall Cocteau’s overblown visual effects in works such as *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* [see Figures 17, 18 and 19 below] and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, which we know Huxley saw, read, and loved (and analysed, alongside his own ballets, in such publications as *Vanity Fair*).



Figures 17, 18 and 19. Cocteau’s costumes for *Le barman*, *La dame décolletée*, and *Le monsieur en habit* from *Le Boeuf sur le toit*.

Huxley’s description of the patient’s plight evokes the tense atmosphere of the story world, but it also betrays a degree of narrative omniscience. This unsettles the work’s otherwise merely descriptive language. Consider, for example, the following passage:

A loophole of escape seems to present itself. She breaks from between her pursuers, gains in three bounds the summit of the dais and, one hand on the arm of the chair, the other to her heart, stands looking down, momentarily safe. But the safety is only illusory; her position is more than ever hopeless. The Dentist and his Nurses execute a cake-walk in Indian file round the base of the stele on which she has marooned herself. She is trapped beyond the possibility of redemption.

The incorporation of information from outside the story world highlights the ballet’s own textual performativity. It is evident that Huxley wrote the piece for publication in passages

<sup>234</sup> Near the ballet’s end, Huxley even ironically describes the human voice as “supernatural”.

like this one, where the ballet seems to be compensating for its limited medium. The expressiveness with which Huxley establishes and maintains the ballet's momentum and its self-pronounced gravity promote a vague identity that is, like in many other ballet texts, both complete and incomplete as it appears on the page.

As Huxley brings the ballet to its denouement, he brings a greater measure of the dramatic. Here the heavenly glory of the final scene is reminiscent of *Tom: A Ballet* in its ornate and hyperbolic language. “[As] the brazen cone of sound expands and appallingly expands within our grasp”, it reads, “—slowly the whole heavenly host, the wriggling canopy of putti, the enthroned godhead, the ecstatic mortals float upwards out of sight towards some Higher Sphere”. In a move that foreshadows Cummings's later use of heavenly imagery and upward motion, Huxley provides an exit for his dancers. Here, however, the symbols of glory, sanctity, and immortality are sharply undermined by their context in a scene of dental savagery. It both is a ballet and contains a ballet, and relies on popular and classical tropes to the combined effect of satire—that, in and of itself, is its own brand of performance.

The ballet's language gives sound a specifically material nature. Huxley references “a long introverted cone of sound”, “a brazen cone of sound”, and the F “sharp” major chord, which is “piercingly loud”. Such phrases reinforce the active role of the ballet's music; it embodies the same plastic properties as other elements of the scene. Importantly, the material nature of Scriabin's sound is relentlessly harmful, depicted in images of pointed cones and needles which echo the dentist's drill, the tormenting phallus, and the conductor's baton. Like the drum cadence and choral climax in “Callot”, the music here is influential, but it is even more physically present, even visible, among the other layers of the text.

Huxley's hyperbolic treatment of the ballet reaches ultimate absurdity at the same point at which Scriabin's score, in Huxley's opinion, does the same. The triumphant Dentist has successfully ensnared his prey, and in their embrace he experiences “Ecstasy—the final enormous chord of F sharp major. Shatteringly loud, it bursts upon the ears. Choir,



orchestra, steam organ, Parsifal bell instrument, gongs, musical glasses—all sound the chord, keep it held, slowly swelling, minute after minute”. The brutality of the physical situation is masked with decoration as much as the Dentist’s own face. Although what has just transpired is fundamentally a scene of rape, it is celebratory—even holy: “And with the flowering of that ecstatic chord the heavens open and God the Father slowly descends over the dais”. The lingering impression on the reader is a mixture of disgust and amusement—a critical impression, perhaps, reflecting Huxley’s own.

The crucial difference between Huxley’s two ‘ballets in criticism’ has to do with rhetorical attitude. It is true that they are both “critical” gestures. However, within the critical framework they are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, “The Voluptuous Dentist” overtly mocks contemporary ballet by referencing its material opulence and sonic discordance. The writer of “The Voluptuous Dentist” is one who has been to the ballet and has something derisive to say about it; he is also clearly interested in the zeitgeist. On the other hand, the writer of “Callot” demonstrates the usefulness of historical dance conventions in sculpting prose writing into a dance of death. We have to look beyond the “ballets in criticism” to synthesise them, and to understand more broadly what ballet meant to the author as a rhetorical and stylistic tool.

### **III. *Brave New.... Ballet?***

In a scene of Huxley’s most famous novel *Brave New World*, Lenina Crowne and John attend a viewing of a critically-applauded new “feely”, *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*. Before the film begins, in lieu of coming attractions or the typical newsreel fare, the theatre’s “scent organ” supplies the audience with:

[...] a delightfully refreshing Herbal Capriccio—rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon; a series of daring modulations through the spice keys into ambergris; and a slow return through sandalwood, camphor, cedar and new-mown hay (with occasional subtle touches of discord—a whiff of kidney pudding, the faintest suspicion

of pig's dung)...Sunk in their pneumatic stalls, Lenina and the Savage sniffed and listened.<sup>235</sup>

The synaesthesia of the modern artistic experience, in which what is normally only sonic and visual now stimulates all the senses, relates to the spectatorship the reader acquires in reading a Huxley ballet. In the above passage, Huxley returns to the word “capriccio”, so integral to “Callot”, to name the “sudden flight of fantasy” that the new cinema enables. But he also returns to ballet in the same unlikely setting: Huxley’s 1959 (unproduced) musical comedy version of *Brave New World* features episodes of ballet. Its appearance in the musical furthers the concept of staging the novel as a satire of itself. The episodes also help to demonstrate Huxley’s impulse toward ballet in his prose writings and their various adaptations. The reappearance of different kinds of dance (but most regularly ballet) throughout the musical indicates its importance.

In a manner similar to Vernon Lee, Huxley is just as careful (perhaps even more so) in the exposition of his ballet than in explaining or describing the dance itself. He writes, “Twelve men with painted faces and torsos, and wearing feather head-dresses, are now entering the plaza. Other men, carrying drums, follow them. Old men, squaws and children come in from all sides and take up their places, some at ground level, some on the terraces of the houses, to watch the dance”.<sup>236</sup> Like the ballets in criticism, the language is more about the surroundings of the dance than the dance itself.

Although it is not a stand-alone ballet, Huxley’s description of music is also similar here to that in “Callot”:

The music strikes up the introduction to the ballet. It is a primitive music of drums and shrill wind instruments, entirely different in style from the music heard in the first scene. The painted Indians take up their positions and start the dance. This dance should bear some resemblance to the traditional Hopi snake dance; but there must be no slavish imitation, and the choreographer should feel free to do whatever he likes within the general framework of the style”.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper, 1998, pp. 166-67.

<sup>236</sup> Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World: A Musical Comedy*. In *Aldous Huxley Annual 2003*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2003, p. 59.

<sup>237</sup> D. H. Lawrence also references the Hopi Snake Dance in a 1924 essay, Jones notes, in which Lawrence writes that that dance may be viewed “from the angle of culture, as one looks on while Anna Pavlova dances with the Russian Ballet”. Susan Jones. ‘Diaghilev and British Writing’. *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 27:1(Summer, 2009), pp. 77-78.

Here is Huxley in his most practical or instructive voice: not only does he reference the necessity of a choreographer, which designates the eventual realisation of the dance off the page, but he also firmly establishes that his text is not meant to fully articulate movement, but to inspire it. Thus, when he says “this dance should bear some resemblance to the traditional Hopi snake dance”, he is merely suggesting colouration for the movement, rather than strictly prescribing it. Furthermore, Huxley connects the dance in the fictional, futuristic realm of this novel to true, historic dance with a tangible aesthetic. The dance becomes intertextual, depending on pre-established artistic conventions and vocabularies.

As Huxley continues: “The climax of the dance comes when a woman enters the ranks of the dancers with a large round basket. From this basket the dancers draw large snakes, with which they play and over which they perform various rituals”.<sup>238</sup> The exact shape of these “various rituals” is less important than the necessity that they impart the effect of ritual. Ritual allows the dance to hold attention of the unnamed spectators within the story-world, who are captivated and made to move in their own way: “Finally the dancers, each with a snake in his hand, rush out of the plaza, followed by all the spectators”. Shortly thereafter, an old squaw enters the scene drunkenly, performing pirouettes. Within moments, the scene pulls together two distinct cultural allusions, both made of dance. The native dance, as a meeting of spectator and performer, emphasises the objectification of native bodies through ritual performance. The second uses an archetypal ballet move to communicate drunkenness and free spirit. That the two dances are layered together in such quick succession suggests that dance is not incidental to Huxley’s musical, but ideologically essential to its formal and aesthetic framework.

Additionally, Huxley’s dance provides an extension of space in which to illustrate socio-political difference. Consider, for example, this ballet passage:

Joined by the Deltas and Gammas, who appeared in the first scene, the Epsilons start to dance. The Alpha and Beta Students take their place in the ballet, which illustrates the hierarchical structure of the new society. The members of the higher castes dance as individuals, the Gammas, Deltas and

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<sup>238</sup> Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World: A Musical Comedy*, p. 48.

Epsilons perform their menial tasks and even make love in unison, like the parts of a well-regulated machine.<sup>239</sup>

This section illustrates two messages inherent in Huxley's use of ballet. The first is that dance reveals a cross-section of society which, in the context of Huxley's novel, finds a new kind of expression through dance. The dancers' corporeality works as an extension of their theoretical value, but within a framework of artistic expression. Secondly, this dance embodies the entire matrix of society and lives it contains. Not only does the dance emphasise partitions between castes, but between the sexes as well. What it does not emphasise is any distinction between kinds of physical activities, instead encompassing through the simultaneous expression of "menial tasks" and sex a more total picture of life. It seems as though the individualistic dances of the higher castes are less concerned with base activity and more with the simple experience of expression. At the same time, by conflating all the lower castes' activities into the rote movements of a "well-regulated machine", Huxley's dance frames itself to evoke class distinctions that exist outside the dance as well. The dance serves as a visual/aural illustration to the logical framework of Huxley's text.

Dance also functions as a companion to music in order to sculpt moments of chaos on Huxley's stage. In the following scene, frenzied physical movement (called ballet) couples with a cacophonous crescendo rising to the fall of the curtain:

(The REPORTERS go into their dance, the flash bulbs go off in rapid succession.)

JOHN: My noble Father. Give me your blessing.

(The crowd starts to laugh. The music takes up the derisive theme and goes into a wild cackinnation. The reporters dance more and more frantically. The laughter grows in intensity...)<sup>240</sup>

*Brave New World's* ballet sequences are located in its stage directions, relegated to the space of all other production details. It consequently serves as an accessory or accent: one of many alienating factors that contribute to the world of the story. Embedded among other devices including song, the ballet punctuates the otherwise dialogue-heavy work. It is incidental, and is therefore used "critically", but in a new way. Ballet, in this case, is a

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

*necessary* alternative mode of communication for inhabitants of a society that demands ritualised togetherness in order to enforce lines of division.

#### **IV. Reading in Criticism?**

In his musical rewriting of *Brave New World*, Huxley deploys ballet as part of a matrix of “unrealistic” formal details, having been told “that science fiction can never succeed on the stage as a straight play, but that it will be accepted when the medium ceases to be realistic”.<sup>241</sup> Perhaps the inclusion of ballet in unlikely textual spaces is a talisman against realism. What results is a motley collection: for the 17<sup>th</sup> century carnival performers, the lusty dentist and his prey, and the troupe of news reporters, their only commonality is a newfound purpose and inscribed physicality in Huxley’s hands. Huxley’s first piece demonstrates the ballet’s faculty for retelling—his second, its further capacity for originality. What binds them is a pervasive sense of the macabre and, of course, their mutual definition as ‘ballets in criticism’. Still, the clearest bridge between ‘Callot’ and ‘The Voluptuous Dentist’ is that they both allude to, and are dramatically structured by, music. In both, Huxley demands that the reader activates his or her “mind’s eye” in order to experience certain narrative layers. For all their mutual emphasis on the sculptural properties of music, Huxley’s ballets in criticism demand a more comprehensive readerly attention to rhetorical detail.

One such detail lies in the titles. What exactly *is* a ‘ballet in criticism’? To call a writing project a ‘ballet in criticism’ is to mark it with a specific rhetorical purpose: one that promotes an attitude of challenge both in writing and in reading. The constant references to other works in various media reinforce the literary form of this ballet by demanding an inter-textual reading. We must also remember the marketing of the ballet in its ultimate publication, embedded among essays and fiction pieces such as ‘In a Tunisian Oasis’, non-fiction entries mainly on travel, tributes to the work of Edward Lear, Chaucer, and Sir

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<sup>241</sup> *Letters*, p. 808.

Christopher Wren, as well as time-sensitive opinion pieces such as “Where are the Movies Moving?” and “Beauty in 1920”. The gravity of “Callot” and “The Voluptuous Dentist”, regardless of their obvious absurdism, is made trivial in the company of Huxley’s essays; it would take isolated publication to invite the kind of reading that Huxley perhaps intended.

Returning to the editor’s note in *Vanity Fair* introducing “Callot”, we remember that in it Huxley is performing “a gesture of absurdity, the familiar method created by the choreographers of the Russian Ballet”.<sup>242</sup> Both ballets can and should be read against the familiar scope of modernist ballet. The editor references Cocteau’s *Les Mariés* specifically, stating that Huxley “follows the same technique but, of course, enlarges his effects out of their normal proportion and reduces the whole to the level of satire”. When Huxley published the two ballets in popular periodicals, he was offering an artist’s response to the building richness of the form; at the same time, he found in the absurdity of the modernist ballet a chance to lampoon its unapologetic excess. Scriabin’s “Prometheus” no doubt influenced Huxley’s critical writing about the arts as much as Callot’s etchings did. In his letters and essays Huxley returns to Callot’s works as the epitome of socio-historical portraiture, especially for the periods of visual art in which Huxley focuses his attentions. Similarly, Scriabin is invoked incessantly because of his outlandish modernism which provides Huxley with a correlative to the popular discordance across the arts.

Elsewhere in Huxley’s critical writings, he demonstrates a combination of respect and derision for the modern ballet. While he frequently applauds the ballet work of Jean Cocteau in *Vanity Fair*, in a representative opinion piece Huxley complains of dangerous tendencies he sees disabling and discrediting ballet and its music. After attending “piously and dutifully” one of Stravinsky’s lesser-known productions in Paris, Huxley warned: “dancing that is a mere display of agility adds nothing to the music, and quickly grows tedious”.<sup>243</sup> Importantly, the dancing described in ‘Callot’ and ‘Scriabin’ is heavily characterised by assertions of power that make dance less about dancing than about

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<sup>242</sup> Anonymous. Preface to ‘A Ballet in the Modernist Manner’. *Vanity Fair* 22 (Aug. 1924), p. 48.

<sup>243</sup> Aldous Huxley. ‘A Few Complaints’ in *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*, June 24, 1922. *Complete Essays Vol. I*, p. 257.

masking a steady pathway toward violence. When the figures in ‘Callot’ dance their jigs and pavaues, what Huxley highlights is not their physical grace but rather their ignorant blindness to the scene’s reality.

The fact that Huxley makes Callot’s etchings and Scriabin’s music fodder for ballet texts serves as demonstration that Huxley saw movement, even *imagined* movement, as a method that could transform and extend familiar works of art. He never explains this; rather, it is left to the reader to move from Huxley’s essays to his ballets with the same critical eye, but also with a new sense of experience in reading such texts. In spite of their difficulty upon first reading, Huxley’s two ‘ballets in criticism’ fit snugly into his canon of other works which frequently practice but always consider the malleable and layer-able satirical functions of artistic media and genres. Torn from ballet’s normative locations (the living body and stage), their definitions as ballets come from their titles, which in both cases equate the work of the ballet with the work of the critic. Moreover, by framing their readers as critics, the two pieces both perform a dance that is simultaneously embodied by inscribed human figures, the author, and the texts themselves. Later, in adapting *Brave New World* for the stage, Huxley uses passages of ballet to emphasise the strange, artificial quality of that world.

Going back to the ballets in criticism, the fact that Huxley’s and Lee’s three ballet texts take up as their subject-matter violence, death, and war implores us to interrogate the way in which ballet serves such themes. Although the expressive power of dance is suited perfectly to grave subjects, these are merely printed works. The ekphrastic properties of each of the three create a map of the two authors’ interests: for Lee, the purpose is to evoke the atrocities of a war-hungry world through an imagined or notional ballet. Huxley’s two pieces work differently in this respect: one establishes itself in relation to a previous art work while the other is an original creation without allegiance or context. Huxley’s reconfiguration of Callot’s etching into ballet multiplies that work’s boundaries without necessarily tampering with the original. In other words, the two-dimensional portrait is converted into another kind of two-dimensional plane, but it is one that implores the reader

to consider more than the static arrangement of Callot's figures. It paints instead the atmosphere among the figures as they suddenly move through space. It lends, in its own way, a sense of sound and light that the etching does not intimate. If Callot's rendering of the execution is a snapshot, Huxley's is the film.

In Huxley's hands, the subversion of ballet accomplishes two goals: the first, to carve out new kinds of textual spaces and, secondly, to parody tradition. As different as these two goals are manifested in his two 'ballets in criticism', their uniting feature is the written adoption of the ballet's ritualised character. As we have seen in 'Callot', ballet provides a tool with which to dimensionalise static images and to imagine their lived contexts. Huxley's particular narrative of public execution works in tandem with ballet because the vocabulary of classical dance evokes movements that are simultaneously rigid, rehearsed, and escapist. For the figures in Callot's etchings, the ballet obscures concentration on reality. In a similar sense, Lee and Huxley harness the ballet's ability to divert attention from brutality and, in turn, to falsely ceremonialise and beautify it. In Vernon Lee's ballet, the form is adapted to voice an utterly immediate and critical warning. In Huxley's case, on the other hand, the resulting message (being retrospective) acquires a nostalgic tone very much identified with the 17<sup>th</sup> century artwork to which it responds. Most importantly, its theme—war—remains a sombre fixation for the artist, even in the experimental territory of the ballet text.



—PART THREE—

**The Dancing Text**

So far we have seen texts that prescribe physical dance and texts that are uninterested in physicalisation off the page. In Part Three, I present two texts that complicate what has previously been a comparatively clear distinction between the performed and the unperformed. Although both were created with different agendas, they show the displacement and replacement of the dancing body in favour of a dancing text. In addition, the writers in consideration, Mina Loy and E. E. Cummings, are figureheads of modernist poetry. I am therefore able to use the rich critical scholarship on their poetry to rationalise their move to the ballet text.

Chapter Five presents an example of this type of text, Loy's undated ballet "Crystal Pantomime", which constructs and performs a dance through language alone. With no apparent view to production, the text instead borrows the kinetic energies of ballet to animate a fragile, colourful, shape-shifting world. In this ballet, dance is not restricted to human bodies, but is used to bring every fibre of the scene to life. Reading Loy's "Crystal Pantomime" one imagines a complete ballet: conducted by the writer, the reader "sees" the dancing world and its inscribed figures, and thus assumes a role of spectatorship through visualisation.

Finally, in Chapter Six, we reach the end of the spectrum of performativity that these texts construct. In 1935, the celebrated American poet E. E. Cummings published a ballet called *Tom: A Ballet*, a verse adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery epic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As an adaptation, the innovative formal aspects of *Tom: A Ballet* are paralleled by an established text and its cultural symbols familiar to readers at the time. In one way, familiarity can be seen as an anchor, as a reference to aide in the interpretation of an otherwise unfamiliar reading experience.

For the ballet, Cummings adapted the unorthodox language systems typical of his poetry to achieve a poeticised form of directorial text; the figures in his ballet "whirlleap"

and “boundtwist” in a vocabulary of compound neologisms that make Cummings’s ballet text undeniably his own. His vocabulary, phrasing, and typography, while making for pleasurable and dynamic reading, seem almost to inhibit interpretation and performance. Unable to secure enough interest in the arts community or enough financial backing, the ballet remains unperformed and has largely escaped critical attention as part of Cummings’s canon.

Like several other writers in this study, both Loy and Cummings wrote plays, and I take the opportunity in Part Three to draw links between their plays and ballets. Both exhibit impulses toward dance in their dramatic works, the possibilities of which are reshaped and extended in the ballet text. The conflation of performative and descriptive language eternally situates both *Tom: A Ballet* and “Crystal Pantomime” in a space somewhere between book and dance, demonstrating by their very nature the shared territories of literary modernism. Having followed the path of ballet texts through the era, on stages both real and inscribed, my study concludes with ballets that dance on the page.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Mina Loy's "Crystal Pantomime": Futurism's Other Ballet

Transcribed from its original typescript and published in 2011 for the first time, the ballet "Crystal Pantomime" performs a solo dance in the company of Mina Loy's other prose writings, drama fragments, and essays. Foregrounding her experimentation with ballet, Mina Loy opens her 1925 essay "Modern Poetry" with the exclamation that "Poetry is prose bewitched, a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea".<sup>244</sup> Her undated ballet is perhaps the best demonstration of this sentiment taken one step further. Although it occupies a marginal space among the poet's most marginal works, the ballet actively extends Loy's concepts of experiential writing and reading and, of course, her writing of the body. In the same essay another often-cited viewpoint appears: "more than to read poetry we must listen to poetry [...] [O]ur attitude in reading a poem must be rather that of listening to and looking at a pictured song".<sup>245</sup> What better material in which to investigate sensory and/or experiential readings of Loy than in her ballet, with its intrinsic emphasis on movement?

Scholarly attention has already been paid to Loy's thoughts on and uses of music in poetry.<sup>246</sup> I will apply a similar attention to her use of movement on the page. Incidentally, Loy is just one of many poet-critics to describe the experience of reading poetry and the process of connecting its images as a kind of dance. For example, Loy's associate Ezra Pound wrote that the energy contained in a poem necessitates that the reading mind "must move and leap with the energising, sentient, musical faculties".<sup>247</sup> Loy's writings also demonstrate the author's impulse toward dance. As Jones observes, "Mina Loy peppers her 'Feminist Manifesto' with bold face type, varying fonts, and frequent underlining, so that

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<sup>244</sup> Mina Loy. "Modern Poetry" as printed in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*, ed. Roger Conover. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux/Manchester: Carcanet, 1997, p. 157. For subsequent citations in this chapter, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* will be abbreviated *LLB*.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> See for example Debora Van Durme's "Conjuring Melodies from Arid Air: Mina Loy and Pound's Melopoeia" *Cambridge Quarterly* (2008) 37:3, pp. 324-348.

<sup>247</sup> Ezra Pound. "How to Read". *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. T. S. Eliot, ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1960, p. 25.

the text appears to dance before our eyes”.<sup>248</sup> However, critics have generally avoided linking Loy’s views and poetic practice to her dramatic works or to her ballet. In this section I will use “Crystal Pantomime” to extend recent Loy criticism by focusing in on her ballet which, in turn, extends the trajectory of this thesis.

Importantly, Loy’s dancing human body coexists among a multitude of other non-human dancing bodies which move in tandem in a universe that is *made* of dance. It is constantly shifting and highly tactile. In accordance with the author’s own guidance, reading Loy’s prose involves seeing, feeling, and importantly, hearing it. She claimed to have written poetry “for the sake of the sounds of the words. It was like making jewellery or something”.<sup>249</sup> Her comment contains a series of transformations that redefine normative concepts of poetry in creation and in experience.

Loy’s ballet also provides an opportunity to read ballet in the context of the author’s other dramatic writing, a consideration I will later take up in my examination of Cummings’s *Tom: A Ballet*.<sup>250</sup> By contextualising the project, we can see how ballet works as an extension of the formal and expressive possibilities of play writing. The comparison also highlights the ways in which Loy negotiated her shifting attitudes toward Futurism, in which she was not always a willing participant. There has been some scholarly consideration of Loy’s dramatic works that positions her within futurism, yet as a maverick within it (and certainly a critic of it). Italian Futurism, after all, was and is regarded as a fundamentally sexist and fascist school. Indeed, the movement’s foundation in written manifestos communicated a clear disgust for women, particularly their “weakness”. In the adoption of ballet as a literary form, both Loy and her one-time Futurist colleague F. T.

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<sup>248</sup> Jones, Susan: "Knowing the Dancer: Modernism, Choreography, and the Question of Authority" in *Authority Matters: Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Authorship*. Stephen Donovan, Danuta Fjellestad, Rolf Lundén, eds. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, pp. 200-201.

<sup>249</sup> “Mina Loy Interview with Paul Blackburn and Robert Vas Dias”, in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*. Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma, eds. Orono: 1998, p. 214, quoted by Van Durme in “Conjuring Melodies from Arid Air: Mina Loy and Pound’s Melopoeia” *Cambridge Quarterly* (2008) 37:3, p. 325.

<sup>250</sup> Mina Loy wrote five blank verse plays in the Italian futurist tradition: “Collision” and “Cittàbapini” (1915), “The Sacred Prostitute” (1914), “Rosa” (undated), and “The Pamperers” (1916). As Sara Crangle points out, however, Loy uses the pen name “Bjuna Darnes” for “Rosa”. Loy met and befriended Djuna Barnes in 1920 or 1921. Crangle suggests that the piece was written in retaliation of Barnes’s amicable parody of Loy, so we can provisionally date “Rosa” around or after the beginning of their acquaintance.

Marinetti, with whom Loy had a volatile relationship, differed significantly.<sup>251</sup> Whereas Marinetti's manifesto ballet exemplifies the male futurist fixation on technology, Loy's contains no trace of it. In fact, her ballet feels altogether softer, less menacing, than her futurist colleagues. Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson note her poetry's propensity to "create an abstract and fragmented collage of obscene imagery, scientific terminology, discursive satire and psychological insight".<sup>252</sup> Such an aesthetic agenda distances Loy's writings from the male futurists, because they "are too introspective to sit happily in the absurdly inhuman and combative texts of Marinetti".<sup>253</sup>

Their differing attitudes toward (and uses of) the ballet underline the political rupture between Marinetti and Loy. She directly references ballet in her scathing portrait of Marinetti himself in "Sketch of a Man on a Platform": "Your movements/ Unassailable/ Savor of the airy-fairy of the ballet/ The essence of a Mademoiselle Genée/ Winks in the to-and-fro of your cuff-links".<sup>254</sup> While Marinetti's automaton-like danseuse gestures to landscapes and performs symbolic movements, she does not fully inhabit them. In Loy's ballet, the dance is an all-consuming experience for both the written body and the reader-spectator. In that respect, the ballets of Loy and Marinetti demonstrate a characteristic difference in nuance. While Marinetti's promotes a machinistic view of the human in a landscape subsumed by the threat of war, Loy rejects both tropes to build a fragile, beautiful human in a setting far removed from reality and its harshness.

For the first and only time in this dissertation, I am able to compare my mental experience of a ballet text, as reader-spectator, with my visual and aural experience of it as a spectator. By comparing both readings, I hope to show how performance alters the text in a manner specific to poets' ballets. Compared with her five plays, Loy's ballet is textually

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<sup>251</sup> Loy's work betrays a gradual rejection of Marinetti's Futurism, from her early pledge of indebtedness in "Aphorisms on Futurism" (1914) to her scathing parody of the movement's tenets in later work. Details of the eventual falling out between Loy and Marinetti, and consequently her rejection of the politic of Italian Futurism and alignment with modernism, can be found in Sandeep Parmar's *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies: Myth of the Modern Woman*, London: A&C Black, 2013, and *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, Rachel C. Potter and Suzanne Hobson, eds. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2010.

<sup>252</sup> *Salt Companion*, p. 2.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> *LLB*, p. 19

the richest, but also the least theatrical, due to its insistence and reliance on the reader-spectator's experience. Interestingly, excluding the work of poets in the commercially successful canon of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois, no other ballet in my study has been performed—only Mina Loy's. The Poetry Project debuted “‘Crystal Pantomime’: An unpublished play by Mina Loy” on January 29, 2010 in St. Mark's Church in New York City. I will reference the video footage of that production as I begin to interrogate the performative limitations and freedoms afforded by Loy's text and formulate its consequent anatomy.

Finally, I will offer my analysis of “Crystal Pantomime” as an alternative view of Loy's feminist philosophies as seen particularly in her “Feminist Manifesto”. Viewed alongside the manifesto, the journey the maiden undertakes in Loy's ballet is particularly unsettling. Loy's protagonist is oppressed by patriarchal structures at the same time that the text is punctuated by standardised ballet vocabulary: it is a parallel entrapment that invites reflection. Elisabeth Frost observes that:

Loy's poetic practice reveals attitudes toward language that, compared to Marinetti's, are considerably more attuned to the intransigence of social custom and the elusiveness of revolution. Loy urges change not by unleashing “words in liberty,” but by using a satiric voice to parody existing literary genres.<sup>255</sup>

In “Crystal Pantomime”, Loy uses the devices of ballet with a sense of satire while at the same time showing her reader how dance opens up new possibilities for her particular kind of poetic prose.

### **I. A ballet among plays**

Before turning to “Crystal Pantomime”, a brief survey of the style and themes of Loy's plays is essential. The prevailing theme among them is split into two assertions: that the woman occupies a tenuous position in a patriarchal art world, and that the human (regardless of sex) occupies an equally tenuous position in an increasingly industrialised,

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<sup>255</sup> Elisabeth A. Frost. *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005, p. 30.

metropolitan world. Both assertions factor into the ballet, but their combination there makes “Crystal Pantomime” very unlike Loy’s dramas, even from a thematic standpoint. Loy’s troubled opinions of Futurism, the metropolis, and womanhood all come to fruition in the ballet’s negotiation of organic and mechanised bodies, male, female, and asexual. The ballet gives her an opportunity to make them move in a way that is impossible in a play. Loy’s plays also contain philosophies about art and modernity that filter into the space of her imagined dance.

Perhaps Loy’s best-known play, “The Pamperers” contains her most blatant attack on Futurism. It opens on a group of (largely laughable) people “melted by a distinguished method among the upholstery”.<sup>256</sup> In ‘The Pamperers’, Loy rather constructs a portrait of character-types in people that are familiar to their author. She positions her central character Diana as the axis of a social circle comprised of various “loonies” and “somebodies.” Diana wields words in a profound, clear way that baffles and infuriates her companions, yet Loy continues to phrase the play itself with her typical disjointed stylisation. Of course, this is accomplished with a characteristic touch of cheekiness:

DIANA. There are only two kinds of people in society...geniuses and women.

LOONY. I hang out with God and the Devil

DIANA. (continuing impressively) I am Woman.<sup>257</sup>

What surfaces from the odd, disjointed conversation is the palpable strangeness of Woman in a mangled atmosphere—a message of superiority and transcendence that reads like a depiction of Loy herself, planted among her fellow Futurists. In another of her plays, “The Sacred Prostitute”, Loy’s protagonist “Futurism” embodies the misogynistic attitudes that eventually caused the artist to distance herself from the movement.<sup>258</sup> Futurism is personified largely through pedantic speech in dialogue with characters including “Love” and “Nature”, but also through a series of clearly signposted and prescribed gestures and

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<sup>256</sup> *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*. Sara Crangle, ed. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011, p. 162. For subsequent citations in this chapter, *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy* will be abbreviated *SEML*.

<sup>257</sup> *SEML*, p. 253.

<sup>258</sup> The full text of “The Sacred Prostitute”, taken from the Dalkey anthology and with new illustrations can be read online [[http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the\\_sacred\\_prostitute](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the_sacred_prostitute)].

movements that, together, compose a kind of character dance serving to physicalise static notions.

As we will see, “Crystal Pantomime” builds its narrative around a love story between man and woman, a relationship overtly critiqued in another of Loy’s plays. The scene of “Rosa” opens on the eponymous woman “*juggling with three huge swords, a couple of pistols, and a slim knife for carving canvas-backed ducks. She has just left off kissing JERABOAM’S foot*”:

JERABOAM. Rosa you are cruel.  
ROSA. I am cruel but self-forgiving - - it is  
not every woman that can (*catching a  
revolver in her teeth*) ... do, this!<sup>259</sup>

Loy paints her heroine Rosa as a woman so forthright and domineering that she constantly displays her strength through various incongruous physical feats (this emphasis on physicality is explored and extended in Loy’s ballet pantomime). Rosa’s behaviour yields absurdity, but the impulse behind it is sincere. Her physical manner *is* her voice. Here, Loy emphasises the subordination of individuals (specifically females) to their cultural scene; however, in her other plays, Loy is more interested in the tension between the human and the inhuman—more specifically, the sprawling, mechanised metropolis. Whereas the power struggle in “The Pamperers” is philosophical and figurative, and in “Rosa” the world of the stage is domestic, in others it is objective and more sincerely menacing in expression.

Dance-like in its expression and in its emphasis on corporeality, Loy’s 1915 play “Cittabàpini” illustrates the antagonism felt by Man in a hyper-industrialized environment. The play’s puppet-like inhabitant is described as a “greenish man,” who engages in a series of duels with the surrounding metropolis, anthropomorphised in its vicious determination to destroy the man. It begins:

NOON  
A greenish man stares blankly at the city—the city stares back at him—  
EVENING  
He smiles at the city—the city roars with—laughter—<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> *SEML*, p. 184.

<sup>260</sup> Mina Loy. “Two Plays”. *Performing Arts Journal*. 18:1 (1996), p. 9.



Loy uses blank verse to set up a relentless, cyclical relationship between man and city, and the reader-spectator follows along, as in a song, hoping for someone or something to win. In keeping with Futurist tradition, of course, both parties are ruined—the sun prevails and the play closes with the discouraging epithet, “the curtain does not fall.”

In “Collision”, a similar dynamic between Man and his surroundings relies more on spoken text and a bombardment of physical cues:

The vibrations accelerate to super-velocity—reach the static—the light is uniform—the planes uniplane—motion repose—din silence—  
The man rigid—his mind concentrated—

Out of the attained unison—a new tremor produces itself—as it graduates to the primary celerity—in a secondary Inception—  
the curtain falls—  
the curtain falls—<sup>261</sup>

In this play, the human body is subjected to the looming city, and it is in its contrast to the industrialised world that the body becomes a symbol of timeless human life. There, the body “issue” at hand is one of power, defeat, and inevitability.

Although it remains a largely undiscussed feature, it is apparent that Loy’s plays readily invite a study of the physical. Her one-page play “Collision” perhaps most overtly tackles the issue of writing the moving body into verse. This text forms a bridge between the static Loy body and its dancing counterpart invoked in “Crystal Pantomime”. In construction, the play typifies the standard Futurist stage project: the scene is set with the description,

Huge hall—disparate planes, angles—whiteness—central arc-light—blaze  
Emptiness—  
But for one man—  
A dependent has shut the door—<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

Here, movement is split between stage directions and the voice of the play's lone character, MAN. The stage directions describe what the man does with his body. The man, on the other hand, says what he does, without necessarily doing it.

The interplay between Loy's rhapsodic prose and the harsh metallic bodies it articulates foregrounds her ballet, especially in relation to Marinetti's "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance". Although Loy's eventual politic would resist the parallel, her balletic style indirectly echoes Marinetti's own ballet manifesto. In fact, the population of Loy's ballet pantomime (and the aforementioned 'Rosa') is introduced in Marinetti's "Variety Theatre Manifesto" (1913), which extols the Variety theatre's use of "simultaneous movement of jugglers, ballerinas, gymnasts, colourful riding masters, spiral cyclones of dancers spinning on the points of their feet".<sup>263</sup> In Marinetti's praise, ballet is not the framework for idealised performance, but rather a component of a whole. As part of the pastiche, the ballet treated as such is both itself and a symbol of itself: and the symbol of the ballet can be manipulated as the author desires, especially (for Loy) as a means of extending the boundaries of dramatic text.

## **II. Reading the pantomime: a ballet "of ethereal beauty that cannot be equalled"<sup>264</sup>**

It is in her ballet that Loy seems to merge her artistic politics with the possibility of a new expression. As Julie Schmid claims in her article on Loy's dramatic work, "Loy's plays are noteworthy in that they constitute one of the only feminist responses to and reworkings of the futurist dramatic aesthetic".<sup>265</sup> Sara Crangle observes that the ballet "Crystal Pantomime" promotes a portrait of heterosexual love "potentially disconcerting in its allegiance to stereotypical gender roles".<sup>266</sup> I bring up Loy's political voice because it transfers into her ballet, not only in its construction but in its existence. If Loy makes any

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<sup>263</sup> F. T. Marinetti. "The Variety Theatre" as printed in *Futurism: An Anthology*. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman, eds. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 175.

<sup>264</sup> *SEML*, p. 152.

<sup>265</sup> Julie Schmid. "Mina Loy's Futurist Theatre" *Performing Arts Journal* 18:1 (Jan 1996), p. 1.

<sup>266</sup> Sara Crangle, "Introduction" to *SEML*, p. xiv.

allusions to traditional forms in her *plays*, she does so by conjuring the essence of her fellow Futurists, who eschewed traditionalism.

After all, Futurism was meant from its outset as an anti-tradition revolution, created by Marinetti to abolish everything “past”. Accordingly, allusion was out of the question. Working within the conventions of *parole in libertà*, Loy established a new personal expression in drama that referred in some ways to her own poetic work yet introduced new methodologies. Particularly interesting is the decidedly feminist tone that Loy injected into a famously patriarchal community of theatre artists. Loy found a way to subvert futurism in such a way that it brought to attention the movement’s inherent misogyny, and the resulting plays illustrate a harsh contrast of clashing values and forces between woman and man, man and city, and woman and chaos. The ballet introduces yet another pair: body and text.

“Crystal Pantomime”, like the play “Rosa”, is undated and until recently had evaded publication.<sup>267</sup> It shares similar sensibilities of atmosphere with “Collision” and “Cittàbapini”: dialogue is unimportant (in fact, there is none) and the focus is on the evocation of an imagined world. The playfulness of Loy’s dialogue-focused plays exercises her ability to create absurd inter-personal exchanges that comment on her artistic community.

Because of her associations with so many different artistic media, Loy’s ballet (like Cocteau’s) presents an opportunity to revisit the relationship between modernism and intermediality. Loy wrote in the era of long-exposure photographs of Loie Fuller’s dance and later chromophotography by Man Ray and others that captured movement through the camera. Operating with a similar principle on canvas were the “simultaneous” dance paintings by (among others) Sonia Delaunay and Gino Severini (we can also thing back to Duchamp’s *Nude*).

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<sup>267</sup> We do however know that Loy wrote “Collision”, “Cittàbapini”, “The Sacred Prostitute”, and “The Pamperers” between 1914 and 1916, when she was most actively connected to the futurist movement. Although it is impossible to verify, we might naturally date “Crystal Pantomime” between those years and the probable date of “Rosa”, in the early 1920s.



Figure 20. Gino Severini's *Blue Dancer* (*Ballerina blu*), 1912 (detail).

Directly conjuring the ballet, Severini's *Blue Dancer*, for example, emphasises fragmentation and fluidity in a single image. Loy's text attempts to perform the same experiment on the page, through her prose.

Beneath its veil of formal experimentation, Loy's ballet is fundamentally a love story. Although it echoes Loy's plays when it comes to male-female relationships and attitudes toward Futurism, "Crystal Pantomime" differs from "Collision" and "Cittabàpini", in the kind of physical setting it constructs, which is as timeless as it is placeless. The figures who occupy this ballet are familiar to folktales and seem to diverge from her other, specifically modernist figures who battle cities and one another's sharp tongues. Here, we have a witch, a maiden, cupids, a dragon, and the like. In theme, "Crystal Pantomime" represents a departure from modernity, while in style it represents an allegiance to it. Part of Loy's allegiance is demonstrated in the way that the text implicates both human bodies and metaphysical elements, both equally active in the text's dance.

The ballet is a prose fantasy whose central character—an unnamed maiden—is lured to a vision of her future inside a giant morphing crystal. It begins with a foundation of imagery, in exactly the same manner as Cummings's; namely, she declares the makeup of the stage/scene/world in which the dance is set: "Everything is a black background. In

front, a beautiful slim maiden dances. All very white”.<sup>268</sup> Loy begins to intersperse production directives without breaking the prose:

...a creature, a homunculus, with propeller like wings, as much like a blue bottle or striped wasp as possible, comes toward and away from the spot of light. This homunculus must be artificial. His wings whirring just like flies.<sup>269</sup>

The dancing maiden becomes mesmerised by a crystal held in the palm of a witch, and when she finally nears the crystal, the maiden’s dance ends. Here, the ambiguous “dance” of the maiden is subordinated by the surrounding action, so that it acts merely as the space before the story begins. At that moment, the whole stage space transforms into the interior of the crystal, and the maiden is shown her future in ballet form within its sphere.

The text propels forth from its brief establishment of space, and is presented in block paragraphs for the duration of its ten pages. Loy establishes a motif later taken up by Cummings by not partitioning her text into formal sections. The text is sectioned not by its printed arrangement but by denotations of scene changes embedded in the prose. Whereas a conventional (classical) dramatic text maintains a clear division from one scene to the next, prescribing corresponding technical changes, Loy merely mentions that the scene has changed whenever the stream-of-consciousness-like plot warrants a change. A classical drama, in print, is headlined by a character list, a description of the setting and time frame, forming a kind of guiding bridge between the reader’s world and the world of the play. Consider the first spoken lines of “The Pamperers”:

The social fabric is a curtain... and that warm garnet fold-shadow there, for souls to hide and seek... Decency shudders in the bare moment, taut between vestibule and auto... my crystalline lorgnette... trees... at this season are all undressed...<sup>270</sup>

By banishing the boundaries between text and paratext Loy, like Cummings, invests in what is normally mere technical detail the same aesthetic attention as the body text.

“Crystal Pantomime” contains two categories of language that comprise any performance text: the instructive and the descriptive. The first of these is its inclusion of

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<sup>268</sup> *SEML*, p. 151.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *SEML*, pp. 162-163.

personal messages that act as author soliloquies, providing detail while breaking the mental fourth wall put in place during the act of reading: “and on a calm summer ocean appears the cortege of Venus in a shell drawn by horses like the white china figures I collect.” Whereas in *Tom* the body “whirleaps” and “boundtwists” without narrative interruption, Loy explains the movement of her ballet in detached outsider’s terms, constantly referencing the dances within the ballet and the greater production.

By doing so, she reiterates the fictive setting in a way that Cummings does not. This is further stressed by Loy’s frequent bits of commentary itself, including facetious statements about the aesthetic value of her text. Prescriptive statements about the dances are woven throughout the “action,” as in “This dance will be enchanting.” Such interjections fundamentally disrupt the movement of the ballet. Loy’s prose establishes momentum in her account of the scene and the dance, which are characterised by a flowing, morphing energy. When she stops to tell us that something is breathtaking, or that two characters remind her of women she had once seen “outside a shady hotel in Paris”, we are suddenly taken back into the confidence of the author, not the story-world. Thus, the focus of the ballet returns uncomfortably to its creation and context. Loy wants us to remember that she is writing this dance.

Another of the common rhetorical motifs of “Crystal Pantomime” is its constant reliance on symbolism. For instance, Loy writes that the blue ribbon symbolises the conscience of the maiden’s young suitor, and that the motion he performs with it symbolises the “ebullition of youth”.<sup>271</sup> These prescriptions of meaning mingle with frequent statements about the ballet’s aesthetic value: “This gives an impression of ethereal beauty that cannot be equalled—and the ballet takes the spectators into an evanescent dream world so unreal and tenuous that it will take their breath away”.<sup>272</sup> Scattered throughout passages of more objective description, such statements remind the reader of the author’s presence, reinforcing the illusory nature of the art work.

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<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Such self-conscious claims also reiterate the parallel relationship between an imagined text and the one that is read: in performance, the audience would have to sense beauty and feel emotion without the author's prompting. The reader is exposed both to the story-world of the ballet and to Loy's asides. Thus, the reader of the printed ballet is positioned between the would-be spectator and the author. There are two types of games that Loy plays in the ballet that are most valuable for this cross-comparison—first, the prescriptive attitude that causes the ballet to remain fixated on its own charms. Here is where dance is undermined, as in this representative passage: “The subject of the ballet will appeal to everyone because, being so simple, the high-brows will enjoy it with that humorous compassion they afford for the souvenir sentiments and the general public will “get” it without effort. It is rich in possibilities as all simple eternal subjects are”. This is a text that seems to be obsessed with its identity as a ballet—and it is perhaps that obsession that prevents it from being one.

The extent to which Loy's ballet writes itself obsessively takes focus away from the fundamental building block of the art form: the body. Even so, it is in the ballet's construction of moving bodies that its aesthetic power lies. “Crystal Pantomime” writes the movements of three different kinds of bodies—human, phenomenal, and anthropomorphic—in the evocation of a moving world. At the text's start, the movement of the maiden is described as tentative, teetering, and doubtful as she moves toward and away from the witch. These three words characterise the maiden and her movement as inseparable—the maiden's movement is herself, and she is negotiating safety in the gravitational pull of the witch's prophecy. Alongside the two dancing female bodies, a number of inanimate entities, optical phenomena like flickering lights and shadows, conduct their own dance, as when “a tiny beam of light” “plays fitfully on the black background” as though refracted through a window-pane. The third type of dancer comes in the shape of a homunculus, which “must be artificial”, and performs a motion that approximates “the to-and-fro darting of a summer morning housefly”.<sup>273</sup> In the text's opening moments, Loy stresses the ubiquity of dance in

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<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

the framed world of the text: humans, phenomena of shapes, darkness, and lightness and anthropomorphic figures all populate the same scene. This is not a static world merely holding dancing humans, but one that is completely shifting, morphing and buzzing on every plane. It is, in other words, a world *made of* dance.

Loy's ballet is bound up in what Armstrong calls a "vibrating world" which is put to movement in 'Crystal Pantomime'. As Armstrong explains, "[a] world-view in which mechanical, relativistic, perspectival and paradoxical models compete is part of the crisis of modernism".<sup>274</sup> "Crystal Pantomime" uses textual space to perform a vision of kinetic energies; the depicted world is a matrix of buzzing bodies both artificial and organic. The written world undergoes constant transformation in Loy's hands as she describes them from a distance so as to encompass the entire scene. A spotlight replaces the witch's crystal and widens its range to create another, newer stage space. But this space, too, is unstable—as soon as it is established the scene acquires new meaning as numerous little boys and girls appear within its light, playing games and dancing. As Loy describes, "the whole of the ballet takes place in a transparent crystal world—and the personages partake of this crystalline appearance".<sup>275</sup> The maiden, now a spectator of the scene, watches the events of the crystalline world while we read her watching it. In addition to sensing the ballet ourselves, when Loy states that "the ballet takes the spectators into an evanescent dream world", she names the maiden and (by proxy) us.<sup>276</sup> What we read/see in the ballet that follows is the crystalline world as perceived by the maiden. The dance has transported inwardly.

Loy breaks the page with a line of asterisks to designate this new framing. After the break, any appearance of the maiden is a *vision* of her, and not really her. The bulk of "Crystal Pantomime", although it is the maiden's story, is different from the original established story world as framed in the beginning, and it is this inner world that Loy refers to as the ballet. She conflates the meanings of dance and world in separating her narrative

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.



frames in that way. The ballet is embedded and activated within another different dancing world. Such a separation implores the reader-spectator to think of the dance of the maiden and the witch as separate from the inner ballet, consequently calling attention to a difference between dance and general and ballet as an aesthetic category within it. Ballet's aesthetic purpose, for Loy, is to lend a different nuance to the inner dance world.

As she describes the "color motion" of the children's shuttlecocks and the "curves of the glittering skipping ropes", Loy continues to pay equal attention to the movement of objects.<sup>277</sup> The atmosphere is filled with these objects and their motions, giving a constant kinetic energy and sense of plasticity to the dance world. Loy is attempting to evoke the spirit of childhood in the ballet's first scene, in which clarity is less important than the romantic recollection of past times and experiences. The crystal becomes cloudy as the scene prepares to shift yet again, introducing the mechanism of the magic lantern. The scenery includes a projection image of other scenery in the distance. Is that place real? At the end of the scene, Loy writes that "the magic lantern scenery enhances the ethereal effect of unreal beauty".<sup>278</sup> The ballet builds itself around the concept of unreality by embodying a constant metamorphosis. What further promotes the concept is that the ballet is described in words on the page. When we are told that the ballet's figures are ethereally unreal, obscured, or far away in time and distance, the act of reading complements the absence of tangible, human bodies.

At the same time, the text periodically references the artifice it relays: in the exposition to the second scene (which is a scene of adolescent courtship) Loy describes the stagecraft of the ballet's new country fair setting. The play with color and shape is so pronounced that Loy calls the effect, "a little of the ridiculous that lends so much charm to the ancient art and the sufficiency of a symbol to express a more complex actuality".<sup>279</sup> If Loy's stagecraft is distorted and exaggerated in order to elicit a response of charm and entertainment, then perhaps the dance of the ballet has a similar pursuit. But Loy's

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., pp. 152-153.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

reference to “ancient” art stands out here—is she referring to ballet? Assuming she is, Loy is using the symbolic value of classical ballet to create a notion of ceremony, suggesting that symbols are sufficient in conveying “a more complex actuality”.<sup>280</sup> Here the actuality is that the adolescents at the fair are meeting and interacting, drinking “enormous glasses of vivid colored syrup”. The ballet turns the concept of youth and the first tremors of love into a less realistic portrait, treating her subject more in the manner of a painting than a dance.

From the moment of the maiden’s entrance into the fair, objectification becomes characterisation when the maiden’s maternal family escort her to the fair; her grandmother “wears a dolman cloak and ballet dancer’s legs”.<sup>281</sup> That the grandmother *wears* ballet-dancer’s legs as though they are a removable article extends Loy’s blending of organic and inorganic materials in the dance, the real and the unreal. Loy paints the mother and grandmother in the style of caricature: not just a caricature of elderly chaperones, but of ballet bodies in space and their typical movements. The grandmother’s legs, for example, “give the poker-swan-like effect of the period”.<sup>282</sup> Loy also references Nijinsky’s virtuosic leaps. Referencing “the period” alongside names like Nijinsky’s anchor the text, however momentarily, to a concrete reality. Combined with Loy’s emphasis on the properties of inorganic dancing bodies, the connection to the modern day upsets the scheme of what is otherwise romantic, even retrograde, fantasy. It is in the ballet’s play between both worlds that Loy the poet feels most familiar to her reader.

As the mother and grandmother adhere to the conventional, stylised decorum of the ballet, the maiden succumbs to the freer, more organic movement of the firefly:

the maiden steals out into the dusk and dances to the hollow tree on the village green—a dance of fireflies induced by moving lights—always with that together and apart dancing of insects in the air which gives the leit-motif to most of the rhythm of this ballet.<sup>283</sup>

And yet, although the female body of the maiden is painted so insect-like, she is beckoned to contemplate another object, a marble which performs a transformation into its own spirit,

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

and subsequently a new iteration of the setting. That which is real and that which is not— all bodies are in flux.

The ballet's motif of transformation and state of flux continues into the next part of the scene, in which the maiden watches the "acrobat contortionist" who evolves out of the marble. "[T]his dance, for the maiden's eyes," writes Loy, "expresses the personification of objects through sentiment".<sup>284</sup> It is as though the maiden's fancy is actually the ballet's conductor: all these apparitions cause the stage space and its contents to morph in and out of concreteness and practical believability as in a dream. The page behaves like a dream because it so easily facilitates any and all changes of the maiden's whim. And yet, Loy stresses the scene's universal beauty, which approximates "that stirring of the imagination at dusk, that apprehends some living entity in the phenomena of nature that please or arouse the dream-sense".<sup>285</sup> The next section of text is so frequently punctuated by dashes that it encourages momentum in reading and a free association between images and sentiments; it is a typographical technique that enhances the on-going barrage of elements that are discordant in reality but harmonious and essential within the ballet. It recalls a familiar sensation in Loy's poetry, and it allows the swift rhapsodic progress of the ballet to be sensed even in reading.<sup>286</sup>

In what Loy names the 'wild oats' episodes, the maiden's presence is unimportant; instead, we see the youth's attempts to woo a married woman "in a quaint glass house". Loy's language continues to play with sense of reality and objects in space, making certain things specific while others are left open to readerly interpretation: "from one doorway appears towards [the youth] a ravishing lady in a (blue or pink) paper crinoline".<sup>287</sup> The paper crinoline reasserts the ballet's theatricality: Loy wants to remind her reader-spectator that this world and its contents are artificial. And in the same way that the maiden earlier

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> In "Crystal Pantomime" children play shuttlecock and battledore, a phrase directly lifted from (or perhaps to) Loy's poem sequence "Love Songs" (1915-1917): "shuttle-cock and battle-door/ little pink-love/ And feathers are strewn" (*LLB*, p. 226). Although this echo does not necessarily provide a clue to the ballet's year of creation, it does illustrate one of many visual and linguistic bridges among Loy's works across genres.

<sup>287</sup> *SEML*, p. 157.

becomes insect-like and her mother and grandmother ‘wear’ their stick-like legs, two new characters also represent another hybrid of human and non-human: “the youth has come upon the old-fashioned barometer couple who predict the weather”.<sup>288</sup> They invoke alternating periods of rain and sunshine until a rainbow appears above the stage as the “barometer house fades away”.<sup>289</sup> The rainbow is now a solid surface that can support the couple’s dance.

The scenery below sublimates into a sea shore into which the youth suddenly drops. Here, Loy supplies a potential dancer with a clue to achieving her desired effect that the youth “is all dripping wet”, an “effect he can attain by having long strings of transparent sequins hidden in pockets of his clothes”.<sup>290</sup> Using the strings, he can “dance the short staccato dance of shaking himself dry”. Again, Loy wants her dancers’ movements to replicate those of insects, fragile and vulnerable, to make them a kind of human equivalent of the glass, crystalline, and china materials that build the dance-world. The next phase of the seaside episode is populated by mermaids exercising their mythological purpose by performing seductive dances on the rocks. Echoing the “acrobat contortionist” in an earlier scene, the mermaids perform the impossible: they “dance the trick dances that human beings dance with their legs”.<sup>291</sup> Because this is a ballet in which things can appear and disappear instantaneously, the mermaids have become (or have been replaced by) jellyfish in the sand who dance “with their crystalline domes and long floating colored streamers”.<sup>292</sup>

Loy’s obsessive return to fragile materials including china, glass, crystal, and shell make them the materials out of which this “Crystal Pantomime” is fabricated. Because these materials are so fragile, temperamental, precious, they normally dictate a certain kind of decorum in handling them. Ironically, however, the ballet seems to make them strong to the extent that they are even malleable and transformative. Their shapes and sizes are not fixed. Loy seems to want to challenge the idea of the delicate in crafting this work.

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

Furthermore, when Loy writes that “On a calm summer ocean there appears the cortege of Venus in a shell drawn by horses like the white china figures I collect”, she links the metaphysical, abstract properties of the dance world to everyday, pedestrian life.<sup>293</sup> This is yet another sign of the tension her ballet builds between the real and the unreal.

Another motif is composed of figures attached to the scenery by wire, communicating the ideas of puppetry, tension, and fixity. Throughout the ballet, figures are attached to wires that provide a sense of contrast to an ever-moving environment. The figures are tethered to objects that are transitory, furthering Loy’s play between opposites. The pursuit of fixedness reads like a game within the contexts of a morphing, organic world. Loy even writes of a fairy queen who appears “riding a fairy tiger [reined] with a daisy chain”.<sup>294</sup> A chain of daisies undermines the threatening connotation of chain, making it rather an image of charm and beauty. Figures wired in such a way are never truly held captive.

The ballet concludes with a final montage of images—the honeymooning maiden and youth ride a galloping china horse that (although it gallops) does not move, while behind them, “every imaginable scenery passes in a brief space (cast by a magic lantern).” The couple’s ‘crystalline’ baby, ‘tumbling over and over itself swiftly out of the sky’ is greeted by a ribbon banner reading the words “THE END”. However, one version of the text reveals an important complication. In the anthologised *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, Crangle includes a concluding fragment that appears at the end of the manuscript of “Crystal Pantomime” but is otherwise omitted:

On a wire stiff figure, like the ones in ‘cartesian’ bottles, only carrying a bunch of colored air balloons—symbolising desire—whirls round and round in the crystal ball with a small child after him—only for a brief moment—then the first scene evolves.<sup>295</sup>

The fragment, although ultimately edited out of the “final” ballet, contributes a sense of the cyclical, suggesting that the ballet begins where it ends, and vice versa. Such a structure reinforces the text’s reliance on unreality, as its very framing is destabilised at the least

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> *SEML*, p. 359.

likely moment: its conclusion. Alternatively, however, Loy may have been deliberating various ways to begin the ballet; in other words, this could be a discarded prologue. And yet the fragment is topped by a row of familiar asterisks, which technically asserts a sense of temporal removal, but also one of linearity in context. Perhaps this ballet plays on a continuous loop, enabled by the fact that in a single occurrence it contains the entire narrative of life.

Another feature of the ballet is Loy's construction of impossibilities. Ida Rubinstein, who played the role of the nymph in *L'après-midi d'un faune*, recalled that "Nijinsky wanted the impossible. If I had submitted to his direction I would have dislocated every joint in my body and would have been transformed into a maimed marionette!"<sup>296</sup> High physical expectations appear in "Crystal Pantomime", too, as when Loy writes, "this dance must be danced by a very fine acrobat contortionist who can curve and squirm round the orb, push it with his pectoral muscles and when it rolls, remain with it by throwing his body and legs over his head"<sup>297</sup>. No doubt any real dancer would encounter impossible physical tasks in these texts, but the imagined dancer can do anything.

It must be said that the limits of the body (or its limitlessness) corresponds to the limits (or limitlessness) of the page. This is a correlation that appears to some extent in each of the ballets in this study. Writing about the German dance theatre in the same era, Kate Elswit observes that, "impossible events demanded to be perceived as authentic by displaying the performers' bodies in ways that would be legible as accessing an experience somehow at the dancers' physical limits; but approaching those limits simultaneously reinforced and challenged the rules of the stage under which they operated".<sup>298</sup> In the case of the ballet text and the particular bodies and movement vocabularies it can contain, this is still true. Loy's inscribed dancers revel in their superhuman ability to transform and to execute tricks in their imagined dance, but they are still bound to the page. Likewise, the

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<sup>296</sup> Quoted by Bronislava Nijinska in *Bronislava Nijinska: Early Memoirs* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992, p. 406.

<sup>297</sup> *SEML*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>298</sup> *Watching Weimar Dance*, p. 7.

ballet text extends the possibilities of corporeal ballet, but is still governed and restricted by its two-dimensional medium and the edges of the page.

If Loy's dancing body transcends corporeal possibilities, what does reading Mina Loy's ballet make us *do*? What is the role of her reader-spectator? Consider again her thoughts on the importance of sound in poetry:

It is because the sound of music capturing our involuntary attention is so easy to get in touch with, while the silent sound of poetry requires our voluntary attention to obliterate the cold barrier of print with the whole 'intelligence of our sense.' And many of us who have no habit of reading not alone with the eye but also with the ear, have—especially at a superficial first reading—overlooked the beauty of it.<sup>299</sup>

If we read "Crystal Pantomime" in the manner we are intended to, then we are reading with our eyes and ears. As is the case with reading ballet, the mind's eye conjures a moving image by following the cadence of the prose, conducted by the author. If a poem can possess and evoke sound, then a ballet—in print—can possess and evoke movement. The corporeal art of the ballet, for Loy, is another way to "obliterate the cold barrier of print". And yet both Marinetti's and Loy's ballets resist catering to interpretation and performance: they seem complete as printed texts. Perhaps this is in line with the futurist agenda; as Patrizia Veroli suggests, "The artists actively involved in [Futurist dance] abhorred cultural sedimentation and were therefore never interested in establishing a repertoire of dance works".<sup>300</sup>

Throughout Loy's poetic corpus, Pavlina Ferfeli notes that:

[...] the human mind or spirit is incarnated, enjoying a dialectical relationship with body and flesh. However, in this poetic world, also being one of discontinuity and paradox, there are conflicting moments where the desire to transcend flesh and the body appear all-consuming. The poet's desire is never directed toward a transcendence that would render the body invisible or inoperable, but towards a sublimation and an idealization of the symbolic meaning of flesh and embodiment.<sup>301</sup>

This is an observation about Loy's poetry which is perhaps best supported by "Crystal Pantomime". There is in Loy's dancing maiden the same "desire to transcend flesh" as she

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<sup>299</sup> Mina Loy. 'Modern Poetry'. *LLB*, p. 217.

<sup>300</sup> Patrizia Veroli. 'The Futurist Aesthetic and Dance' in *International Futurism in Arts and Literature*. Günter Berghaus, ed. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, p. 423.

<sup>301</sup> Pavlina Ferfeli. *Poetics of Identity: Mina Loy Voicing the Fluid Female Body*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 87.

moves through various stages of feminine expectation and exploitation. The sublimation that she eventually achieves, morphing between one world and another and from land to sky, mirrors the sublimation the text performs as it moves between classifications as poem, prose, text and dance.

### **III. From reading to watching**

When Loy writes that “all reading is the evocation of speech”, she implies that when a reader is confronted with a printed ballet, reading becomes the evocation of movement. The other senses are not dismissed: piecing together the kinetic energy of prose also involves all of the other embedded cues of sound and light, images, and place, etc. What happens when we *actually* see and hear this ballet? The opening image of Loy’s text features the movement of a homunculus, which in the Poetry Project’s production is represented on film by a flapping paper apparatus. Seeing the object on film establishes a precedent important to unravelling the reading of the two versions: the Poetry Project’s work will inevitably transpose Loy’s abstract narrative into concrete—however still abstract—means and materials.<sup>302</sup> The sound of the film projector infiltrates the textual silence, as it projects images of lace ribbon, still-life scenes of rocks, candles, and machine parts, et cetera, even before the text begins. When the text begins and the homunculus is referenced with “this homunculus must be artificial”, the filmic presentation combined with the homunculus’s paper body works well to communicate Loy’s instructions.

The use of film continues throughout the production, providing lengthy rests in Loy’s “script”. Apart from the entrance and exit of a pair of women who are identifiable as the maiden’s mother and grandmother, however, the Poetry Project does not attempt to couple Loy’s text with movement, or to express the text through movement. Instead, dance is superimposed in elected spaces, or presented as a parallel but independent “track”. For example, at one point a nude woman walks through the audience to the stage brandishing

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<sup>302</sup> Production footage can be viewed online at <http://vimeo.com/18852108> [last accessed 5 May 2013].



large feathered fans to conceal her body. She proceeds to perform a burlesque routine to contemporary music. There is no invitation to such a dance in the text. Similarly, a female on rollerblades wielding Loïe Fuller-esque sleeves performs a solo. The Poetry Project even adds a portion of spoken text absent from the authorial manuscript.<sup>303</sup> The production on the whole feels as though it is trying to supplement Loy's text with a variety of media suggesting that it cannot stand alone. Without an emphasis on the text's dance, the company uses harmonised voices to sculpt the narrative; again, this is not directed. Should the text be spoken at all?

Watching the Poetry Project's production after reading the text reveals the series of rhetorical motifs I have outlined in this chapter in a new way, while highlighting some others. One that the staging reveals is the awkwardness of stagecraft off the page: for example, when the Poetry project speakers announce, "the scenes change", they do not. Their performative language renders the stage itself unnecessary. This tension is manifested throughout the production, perhaps most starkly in the final scene, where:

The maiden and the youth are seated on a white china horse which gallops but never moves—[...] The crystal becomes clouded, only to light up again partially for a moment, to reveal a crystalline baby tumbling over and over itself swiftly out of the sky, while the blue ribbon, in momentous curves, with, as in the old story books, "The End" written upon it, rises up to receive the baby as it falls.<sup>304</sup>

In this moment, where Loy's text inserts physical text in the form of the ribbon, the narrators' delivery does not change. The purpose of the performance is galvanised here: the audience is meant to hear and appreciate Loy's prose while they watch a series of multimedia accents. The text and its physical interpretation are not integrated, but rather complementary in service of the company's vision.

Although Loy's inscribed stage and its flexibility constitutes the essential world of the ballet, for the production a stage exists nonetheless: the company incorporate materials

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<sup>303</sup> The passage appears to have been added by the company: "Wait! Text. I accept your invitation to read me. The mermaid appears throughout in many forms. That one time she cut off her tail to walk amongst men. Wait! That one time—the knife—a wound—opening. I just (?) read in The New York Post—image spilling pouring on the text fresh ink smudged on the bowery—cut so that the mermaid could walk amongst men. Wait!" The passage is inserted between Loy's lines "The wooing of the beautiful mermaid is getting on finely" and "She coquettishly takes out her comb...."

<sup>304</sup> *SEML*, pp. 160-161.

that echo the two-dimensional figures in the film, although they too are not native to the text. The set is minimal, comprised of angular, modular pieces that are moved to accommodate solo dances and otherwise vaguely suggest the setting of a carnival. A female uses a length of fabric of colourfully painted fabric to move through a series of simple poses and movements to accompany the speakers. Throughout the performance, it is clear that the stagecraft and movement are meant to simply illustrate Loy's text, but it all feels superfluous.

As previously discussed, part of the magic of Loy's ballet lies in its physical impossibility, which the Poetry Project's interpretation seems not to attempt, but rather to evade. Is this due to the limits imposed by the performance's reliance upon two-dimensional representation (i.e. the diegetic screens *and* its being filmed)? In her essay "The Metaphysical Pattern in Aesthetics" Loy names as "the essential factor in a work of art" a "pattern" that she likens to a "screen". The screen is a record of original artistic vision, "interposed between the artist's creation and the observer".<sup>305</sup> In the event of performance, the interpreter adds a series of new screens that further obscure authorial vision.

When dancing happens—and in this case, I mean in an imagined sense and in a mental sense—attention turns away from text and any goals of documentation, and towards movement itself. The text is consumed through movement, but it does not call attention to itself. The body takes over; otherwise, the dance remains in its printed state and text reigns supreme. The modernist ballet text has shown us already that the division between text and performance is not clear-cut. In "Crystal Pantomime" (and, as we will next see, in *Tom: A Ballet*) there are two opposing possibilities: one in which the ballet remains mere print on paper and one in which the ballet is physically executed. In either scenario, the text necessarily sheds either its performative potential or its textual being. What Loy's text demonstrates is the range of possibilities between these ends of the spectrum.

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<sup>305</sup> *SEML*, p. 263.

#### IV. Back to the page: a feminist reappraisal

Returning to its printed text, we see that the ballet contains some of Loy's typical verbal artistry, but it concentrates on maintaining a purely descriptive language. The lexicon of the ballet does indeed mimic Loy's poetic vocabulary. In addition to its characters (the homunculus and the maiden, for example), the text also constructs its own universe: the universe is in motion as much as any of the bodies within it. Loy's emphasis on the movement of the scene itself, which is "circular instead of square....with its curved planes and depths" works as an extension of the ballet's symbolic centre: the crystal globe. The resulting ambiguity between the physical boundaries of the globe and those of its location contributes to the portrayal of an environment not known or static, but forever in flux. In its flexible environment, the dance itself is ever-changing, unstable, and limitless in its possibilities. In this sense, Loy's choice of prose paragraphs as the ballet text's formal medium strikes a discordant note: this content seems more appropriately suited to poetic verse with its associated structural liberties.

In relation to her plays and her politic, I want to consider how "Crystal Pantomime" extends Loy's feminist Futurism/anti-Futurism. Thinking back to Marinetti's manifesto ballet, we remember that he calls the dancing body the "danseuse". Referring to the dancer as "danseuse" patronisingly objectifies the dancer. Marinetti uses the dancer as a puppet/automaton of militaristic values and commands, but not without colouring that dancer's gender—female—and re-establishing her as rhetorically as one of the objects of Marinetti's pervasive misogyny. In addition, the term "danseuse" implies the classism inherent in the traditional practice and appreciation of classical ballet. We must remember Loy's appeal in her "Feminist Manifesto" for women to "realize themselves", and her proclamation that "there is no half measure—NO scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition, will bring about Reform, the only method is Absolute Demolition".<sup>306</sup> Our heroine in "Crystal Pantomime", however, ultimately succumbs to the rubbish heap.

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<sup>306</sup> *LLB*, p. 153 (emphasis Loy's).

Loy's positioning of the maiden at the crux of her ballet invites necessary connotations of virginity and its exploitation. At the ballet's beginning, we are told

The maiden is now to see her life in the crystal and it is the story of the maiden's future which is to be portrayed by the ballet. Only, as this maiden lived in the times when maidens waited at home while the youths went out into the world, it is rather the adventures of the young man that she will eventually marry—<sup>307</sup>

Loy's maiden is captive to patriarchal boundaries enforced by the ballet: accordingly, the ballet can be seen in Loy's hands to represent artistic boundaries that are also traditionally patriarchal. It is in this moment that "Crystal Pantomime" becomes political, polemical, feminist. Loy sees the natural correlation between social confines and the confines of conventional art. While the ballet shape-shifts and morphs in its flexible world, it still references its traditional past, as if to call the maiden back to reality. Whereas her world contains magical phenomena that successfully lure her away to an emotional reality, maternal figures keep the maiden grounded to the responsibilities of womanhood: "the youth invites the maiden and her maternal ascendants to partake of monstrous syrups in the bower" in and among the "ceremonies of meeting and introduction" that structure courtship. They conspicuously wear "ballet skirts" and "ballet legs" and carry "lorgnettes".

Loy's "crystal concubine" navigates through a series of encounters with images of her future before uniting with her partner and miraculously giving birth in the sky.<sup>308</sup> It is a fate discordant with her obvious impulse, seen earlier in the ballet, toward the quiet appreciation of natural beauty. The maiden's private, interior experience of her world is much different to maternal (and ironically patriarchal) vision. It is a paradox referenced elsewhere in Loy's work. "These are suspect places", she writes in the poem "Love Songs",

I must live in my lantern  
Trimming subliminal flicker  
Virginal to the bellows  
Of experience  
Colored glass.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> *SEML*, p. 154.

<sup>308</sup> The phrase "crystal concubine" appears in Loy's "Love Songs" cycle in the poem beginning "A silver Lucifer/ Serves/ Cocaine in cornucopia"; *LLB*, p. 81.

<sup>309</sup> "Love Songs I" *LLB*, p. 53.

The “suspect places” of the exterior world are threatening, and the female retreats into the safety of her “lantern”. As a result, hers is a detached experience of life. The specific framing of “Crystal Pantomime”, especially with the cyclical suggestion at its end (“then the first scene evolves”), means that the maiden is both inside her life and outside it, a reader-spectator like us.

Nature and magic are continuously reined in by balletic convention as in the “firefly quadrille”. At its very base, however, the action of the ballet is a means to an end. Although the maiden’s path through life contains fascinations and fleeting preoccupations with beauty, she is inevitably trapped by patriarchal expectation. As I have mentioned, Crangle suggests that “Crystal Pantomime” “foregrounds a heterosexual relationship potentially disconcerting in its allegiance to stereotypical gender roles”.<sup>310</sup> Indeed, I would argue that the ballet seems to use genre stereotypes to highlight gender stereotypes. In Loy’s ethereal, romantic dancing world, concrete references to dance tradition call the maiden back to what is known and accepted both in physical expression (ballet) and in love (marriage). At the ballet’s end, she has been vanquished by both.

As we leave Loy and her ballet behind, it seems remiss not to mention her critique of Cummings’s poetic work in her 1925 essay “Modern Poetry”. The essay is an appraisal of modern verse through the writer’s reading of a few “perfect” poems by modernists including William Carlos Williams, H. D., and Marianne Moore. Loy’s vision of the epicentre of modernity is firmly American, epitomised best by none other than Cummings who has “united free verse and rhyme which so urgently needed to be married [...] [F]undamentally he is a great poet because his verse wells up abundantly from the foundations of his soul”.<sup>311</sup> Loy calls Cummings a “sonorous dynamo” who is “very often sublime”.<sup>312</sup> Admiration aside, their shared impulse to write dance makes Loy and Cummings special colleagues in literary modernism.

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<sup>310</sup> *SEML*, p. xiv.

<sup>311</sup> *LLB*, p. 160.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

Chapter Six presents my reading of one final text: E. E. Cummings's *Tom: A Ballet* (1935). In order to appreciate its position in this dissertation, it is vital to think back to the practical nature of the scenarios of the Parisian companies, like Cocteau's sketch for *Parade*, as outlined in Chapter One. They are comparatively practical documents, used like blueprints for performance; they are not meant to be works of art in their own right. Cummings, however, pushes the artistic boundaries of the ballet text by making the language itself highly performative. *Tom: A Ballet* has never been performed, primarily because no one would agree to collaborate with the author in production. It is my suggestion that *Tom: A Ballet* cannot be performed because it already is performing on the printed page, where bodies have been replaced by words.

*Tom* represents the end of the spectrum of performativity: like Loy's ballet, Cummings's text carefully sculpts its own interior environment. As we will see, although Loy builds her dance inside a sphere and Cummings's builds his inside a cube, both structures provide a new placeless and timeless setting for the ballets they contain. Of course, *Tom: A Ballet* is highly intertextual and fundamentally bound to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the culturally familiar history of human slavery. Therefore, that ballet's apparent aesthetic freedom is somehow still bound by the reader-spectator's knowledge of a specific canonical work and historical era.

Mina Loy's ballet, on the other hand, has only her own canon of poems and plays to serve as context and intertext. As we have seen in this chapter, many impulses run through her poems and into the space of the dance, suggesting that, in a similar way to other writers in this study, the ballet is a natural extension of textual possibility. Differently, however, Loy's ballet lacks the overt critical tone we have seen in Huxley's work, instead embedding artistic judgement in new ways. There is no evidence that Loy wrote this work with eventual performance in mind; rather, she seems to have been testing yet another rhetorical vehicle for imagery and word-play. Chapter Six will tell quite another story, as Cummings *did* intend for his ballet to be danced.

## CHAPTER SIX

### E. E. Cummings and *Tom*: a “somewhat apparently very untouchable ballet”

“On the assumption that my technique is either complicated or original or both, the publishers have politely requested me to write an introduction to this book” wrote E. E. Cummings in the foreword to a collection of his poetry in 1926. He concludes with a fateful claim: “I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement”.<sup>313</sup> Cummings is referring to the impetus behind his individual technique, which yielded an oeuvre of poems marked by irreverent structures and their unique balance of romanticism and modernism. Movement, motion, energy (whatever we name it) gives Cummings’s poetry its liveliness and is structurally complemented by his free sense of typography and syntax. But although it may be accepted that, as Milton Cohen notes, “of all the sensuous qualities that inform Cummings’s poetry and painting, motion is probably the most prominent”, very little has been said about the poet’s kinetic expressiveness in regard to his 1935 ballet, *Tom: A Ballet*.<sup>314</sup> If we, like Cohen, accept the pursuit of motion and its articulation as central to Cummings’s aesthetic, then we have to consider the ballet as the theoretical culmination of his ideological career.

This chapter forms the end of my study of the adaptation of ballet as a literary form between the World Wars. In the same that its focus, Cummings’s 1935 *Tom: A Ballet*, represents the realisation of Cummings’s artistic aims, it is also the end point of the spectrum of textual performativity that forms the spine of this study. In order to appreciate Cummings’s entry into this archive, it is vital to think back to the practical nature of the scenarios of the Parisian companies, like Cocteau’s sketch for *Parade*, as outlined in Chapter One. They are classifiably practical documents, or blueprints for performance. They are not meant to be perceived and appreciated as works of art in their own right. In

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<sup>313</sup> E. E. Cummings. “Foreword” to *is 5*, New York: Liveright, 1926.

<sup>314</sup> Milton A. Cohen. *Poet and Painter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings’s Early Work*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987, p. 239.

stark contrast, Cummings pushes the artistic boundaries of the ballet text by making language supremely performative. *Tom: A Ballet* has never been performed, primarily because no choreographer or composer would agree to collaborate with the author in its commercial production. It is my suggestion that *Tom: A Ballet* cannot be performed because it already is performing on the page, where words have become the expression of the body in motion. Although Cummings's ballet text performs a unique dance, we will still find the continuation of certain common threads between it and other ballet texts in this study.

Like Loy's ballet, *Tom* takes advantage of its freedom as a printed work by writing hyperbolic, even physically impossible dance. The effect is emotional, impractical. Furthermore, Cummings's text carefully sculpts its own interior environment. Although Loy builds her dance inside a sphere and Cummings builds his inside a cube, both structures provide new placeless and timeless settings for the ballets they contain. In *Tom: A Ballet*, "the stage is a soft grey cube" without initial context. Of course, the narrative is deeply intertextual and fundamentally bound both to its inspiration, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and to the familiar history of human slavery. Therefore, that ballet's apparent aesthetic freedom is somehow still bound by the reader-spectator's knowledge of a specific canonical work and period in American history. It has been suggested that the ballet's intertextuality may be partly to blame for its failure to reach production. As Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno explains, "It is as if [Cummings's] tremendously bold poetic imagination was held hostage to Stowe's text, impairing his ability to transform the source material into exhilarating twentieth-century fare".<sup>315</sup> The work's critical and practical "failure" has been the focus of commentary on *Tom: A Ballet*, which has ignored the very important textual dance it yields.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno. *E. E. Cummings: A Biography*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004, p. 376.

<sup>316</sup> See, for example, Milton A. Cohen's *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams in the 1930s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010). Biographies (including those already cited) about the men involved in the hypothetical ballet paint an overall portrait of chilliness among the group once the project lost steam. A representative passage appears in Martin Duberman's *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008, pp. 273-274).



*Tom: A Ballet* sits quietly at the back of the 1968 anthology of E. E. Cummings's dramatic works, *Three Plays and a Ballet*, at once at home among the poet's comparatively unpopular stage works and awkwardly beyond the book's general categorisation. Editors like Richard Kostelanetz have reappraised the value of Cummings's most unorthodox, marginal writings (among which *Tom: A Ballet* certainly resides), even proposing that they provide a better overall portrait of the writer.<sup>317</sup> Even so, the ballet is an outsider trapped forever in print with its more approachable sister texts and without any production history to its credit. But although the work has never been staged, this chapter examines the default ballet that its *text* "performs." This performance perhaps best illuminates a conspicuously ignored but essential participant in literary modernism: the reader-spectator. *Tom* offers a perfect opportunity to examine this manner of participant, because the only way to *see* this particular ballet is to read it.

As we have seen, ballet itself was changing drastically in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks primarily to the work of two famed companies, the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois, which nurtured an increasingly established role for writers like Jean Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, and Paul Claudel. Sharing in the rising prominence of the writers was a new range of composers and visual artists. But while a poet like Jean Cocteau was not only commissioned to write ballet but supported by colleagues in other facets of production, Cummings's ballet represents a more troubled collective endeavour that eventually rendered the ballet a solitary work. Cummings's impulse to engage with the literary possibilities of the ballet was, as we have seen, typical of his contemporary writers. A poet who often transformed nouns into verbs (and vice versa), in writing *Tom: A Ballet*, Cummings found himself able to exercise and concentrate on the *verbal* sense of language in an extended, always-moving text. But it is important to consider the writer's lifelong fascination with physical performance and his verse's tendency toward movement in order to understand how *Tom* was crafted.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> *An Other E. E. Cummings*. Selected and introduced by Richard Kostelanetz and John Rocco. New York: Liveright, 1998.

<sup>318</sup> Cummings's *A Miscellany* contains several interesting clues to the artist's knowledge of dance. There is a heavy fixation on the burlesque and the night-club scene in general. Cummings includes

The text exemplifies Cummings's sense of need for a different mode of expression. The way his text seems to move, even on the page, is characteristic of Cummings's artistry. In fact, Cummings's impulse to write dance is, in part, related to his lifelong adoration for the circus. He "characterizes the circus," writes Allison Carruth, "as 'comprising certain untranslatable idioms' that upend conventional modes of discourse and everyday praxis".<sup>319</sup> Some of that territory is inhabited by the body, which in ballet as in the circus is made to perform unnatural feats. Later, in a prose work, Cummings writes, "The whole thing marvelously whirls and this total supreme whirl is made of subsidiary, differently timed yet perfectly intermeshing, whirlings".<sup>320</sup> He perceived dance-like pushes and pulls everywhere in human life, and had already tried capturing them in his paintings. Cummings's natural perceptions armed him with a primal vocabulary for dance notation. His use of ballet to reincarnate a beloved American novel reinforces his trust in the form to enable metaphysical experience. His verse, as his usual mode of expression, provided a transitional bridge between a familiar narrative and its unfamiliar physical expression.

"When taken in context with Cummings's *Him* (1927), a play that mixed drama with circus and vaudeville," writes James Cherry, "*Tom* underscores Cummings's dramaturgical flexibility, effacing as it does the canonical borders between high and low culture and between unfashionable literature and modern dance".<sup>321</sup> Echoing one of Huxley's interests, Cummings even considered Scriabin's composition *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* in his survey of modernism, "The New Art" (1915), reviewing the composer's incorporation of coloured light in concert and his own synaesthetic experience of it.

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drawings of dancers performing such feats at the "shimmy-dance," and the "dance-du-ventre." In addition to dance, Cummings's love of the circus and other physical cultures had a considerable impact on his prose, painting, and verse (see Carruth's article cited below). For other considerations of Cummings's adoration of the circus and the performing arts and their influence on his writing, see the chapter "E. E. Cummings" in *Poets at Play*, Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole, eds. (Susquehanna University Press, 2010) and Michael Webster's "E. E. Cummings and the Reader" in *Interart Poetics* (cited in this chapter). Importantly, Bay-Cheng and Cole suggest that Cummings had indeed seen Cocteau's *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*.

<sup>319</sup> Allison Carruth. "The Space Stage and the Circus: E. E. Cummings's *Him* and Frederick Kiesler's *Raumbühne*" *Modern Drama* Volume 51, Number 4, Winter 2008, p. 459.

<sup>320</sup> Marianne Moore. "A Penguin in Moscow: *Eimi*, by E. E. Cummings." *Poetry Magazine*. August, 1933.

<sup>321</sup> James M. Cherry "Parody, E. E. Cummings, and Uncle Tom's Cabin" *Modern Drama*, Volume 57, Number 2 (Summer 2014), p. 188.

Cummings also references Cocteau's ballet work in a 1949 letter to Ezra Pound in which he likens himself to the *chasseur* (the ostrich hunter) in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*; he was at the time attempting to be paid for a new book of poems.<sup>322</sup>

The presence of a ballet within the Cummings canon begs the question: how does Cummings write physical movement in other genres and formats? Furthermore, how does any typical quality of movement inscribed in his paintings and poems find similarity and difference in his dance? As a foundation to these questions, we can consider the poet's observations about movement itself. As Cohen observes, Cummings expresses the primal importance of movement in his work in his play, *Him*, writing, "I have seen an instant of consciousness as a heap of jackstraws. This heap is not inert; it is a kinesis".<sup>323</sup> Likening "consciousness" to the straws in the game, Cummings shows that each moment of his life (and each moment of his artistic creation) is an interconnected bundle of potential moves. "[A] painting, a poem should be like a pile of jackstraws: a heap of strains, of stresses, enormous and minute, each necessarily and incredibly through its neighbor related to and responsible for an [...] entirety".<sup>324</sup> Cummings's vision of interconnected and mutually dependent "moves" lends itself easily to the notion of a ballet, which is fundamentally an ensemble act.

In fact, it is from the stagecraft perspective that *Tom* fits most comfortably into the scheme of modernist drama. In addition to *Tom*, Cummings wrote three plays between 1927 and 1946: *Him*, *Anthropos, or the Future of Art*, and *Santa Claus*. The first of the three works, *Him*, is the longest and most technically promising, and most overtly challenges accepted notions of staging. The play's boundaries and angles shift drastically from scene to scene in order to challenge the spectator's perspective. After a full 360 degree revolution is completed at the play's end, a mirror is lowered over the stage, forcing the audience to look at itself, obliterating the fourth wall of the play-world which has already been utterly

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<sup>322</sup> Letter to Ezra Pound. *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings* edited by Barry Ahearn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 243.

<sup>323</sup> Cohen, p. 153.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

challenged. In its continuous playing with space, the self-aware play refers to its techniques at every turn.

The performativity of *Tom's* language is foreshadowed in another Cummings play, "Anthropos, or the Future of Art" (1930), which begins:

SCENE: one-half of the dim interior of a hemispherical cave. In the foreground—to the audience's left, three uncouth infrahuman creatures smothered in filthy skins squat, warming their gnarled paws at what was once a fire—to the audience's right, a naked man....<sup>325</sup>

Although Cummings allows humour to infiltrate the practical text, it is far more straightforward than the typographical and verbal acrobatics we see in *Tom*. Of course, 'Anthropos' is not supposed to "dance", and thus is suited to a more static expression. By 1935, Cummings's dramatic writing had taken a sharply kinetic turn that reflected a lifetime impulse, but this was technically encouraged by his exposure to the Parisian ballet.

Cummings was well aware of the new shape of ballet performance in its cultural epicentre. While dodging military service in Paris at the outbreak of World War One, Cummings visited the Ballets Russes several times with his friend the novelist William Slater Brown. Together they "saw Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* more than once [...] [and] saw the premiere of Erik Satie's *Parade* with Cubist sets by Picasso. When the audience booed Satie's ballet, Cummings got angry and shouted abuse at the crowd".<sup>326</sup> Even though the ballet was and is still a traditional medium loaded with cultural stigma and specific conventions, Cummings had seen in Paris what a subversive treatment of classical aesthetics could accomplish. He was also keenly aware of the other kinds of spectacle available in the field, and in the vogue of the day began to couple discordant elements. Willing to dismiss linearity and other comforts, Cummings realized that he could more appropriately showcase a most sensitive, politically charged, and personal subject: race. Equally important to the ballet's potential in his own hands is the fact that Cummings simply admired ballet. As he writes in *The Enormous Room*, Cummings was thinking about

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<sup>325</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 117.

<sup>326</sup> Kennedy, Richard. *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*, New York: Norton & Company, 1980, p. 140.

the Paris ballets even while imprisoned for anti-war behaviour: “My whistling of Petroushka brought no response this evening”.<sup>327</sup>

*Tom: A Ballet* began as a commission from Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder of the New York City Ballet, in 1934. The surge in popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel as the material for modern adaptation has been sufficiently discussed. When approached by Kirstein with Cummings’s text, Aaron Copeland refused to compose a score: so did Stravinsky. Kirstein’s choreographer George Balanchine, who had risen to prominence in Diaghilev’s revolutionary Ballets Russes, was baffled by the plan’s prioritization of language over movement. Kirstein later commented that Cummings’s scenario was “not about dancing.” And so, instead of premiering as a ballet, *Tom* was published as a monograph in limited number in 1935. The ballet’s failure to secure production or to please a critical readership bitterly angered the poet. Seething, Cummings wrote to Ezra Pound in June 1936 to express the challenges meeting a hypothetical trans-Atlantic production of the text, later calling it “a somewhat apparently very untouchable ballet”.<sup>328</sup>

Nevertheless, a musical score did reach production, indicating that some interest existed. A young composer who admired Cummings’s poetry, David Diamond, offered to compose the score. Cummings wrote afterward,

David Diamond not only did the job, but created—strictly on his own initiative—a musical original which is also a musical equivalent. If you don’t consider that an achievement beyond any mere ‘abilities,’ read *Tom*; then get Diamond to play you a piano version of *Tom*, stand at the piano, and follow my script which he has copied over his score.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Cummings served a four-month sentence La Ferté-Macé, an overcrowded prison camp in northern France, after censors detected anti-war sentiment in the letters he was writing home. E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room*. <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/eecummings/Enormous-Room6x9.pdf> (Electronic version— Pennsylvania State University), p. 31.

<sup>328</sup> “If a chap named David Diamond from Rochester New York who took the trouble to write a score(musical)for my ballet under that score(literal)by myself,with arrows pointing down from latter to former lest Choreographer Myaseen might take it into his Russian [head] to turn little Eva into topsy’s granduncle—give him my best. Not that anything would seem less likely than the original Tom should find itself produced in the very teeth of Messrs Draper Kirstein Warburg and Draper’s soviet epic,music by Nabokov,scheduled for appearance at ye Metropolitan Opera(&meanwhile Governor Landon was constantly being photographed surrounded with blossoming offshots. America,sir,is a fine environment)and don’t let nobody kit use”. *Pound/Cummings*, p. 92, 118.

<sup>329</sup> Quoted by Steven Lowe in the compact disc booklet of David Diamond’s “Symphony No. 8/Suite from *Tom/This Sacred Ground*”. Naxos/American Classics, 2004.

It is as though Cummings foresees the work's fate; lacking the promise of a synthesised performance, he maintains that it is possible to cobble together some semblance of the total vision. Connected to the ballet's failure, Diamond's score was not performed until 1985, when it premiered to favourable reception at Carnegie Hall. It was called "a happy amalgam of Americanisms—modal melody, hoedown syncopations, loud brass, banging drums, plus some strikingly original high-pitched, repeated notes in the strings. The music is direct without being naïve".<sup>330</sup> Diamond eventually composed music for several other poems and works by Cummings, notably his memoir of his service as an ambulance driver in the First World War and later his wrongful conviction and time served in a French prisoner of war camp, *The Enormous Room*. The composition was not apparently commissioned by Cummings or any third party, but followed on from Diamond's earlier engagement with *Tom*.<sup>331</sup>

Although the failure of the collaboration might suggest otherwise, Kirstein was devoted to the idea of new ballet based on traditional American themes and motifs: he evidently tried to convince Balanchine to choreograph ballets about sports (a successful example of which was Nijinsky's 1912 tennis ballet, "Jeux") but Balanchine always refused.<sup>332</sup> Balanchine was handed another ballet libretto in 1941, this time with a scenario written by American novelist Glenway Wescott and again scored by Diamond. He again refused to participate because he "would not adhere to Wescott's scenario".<sup>333</sup> The relationship between a ballet company and resident writers was also on Kirstein's mind. He commissioned ballet scenarios from both E. E. Cummings and James Agee, confessing "I

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<sup>330</sup> *New York Times*. "Concert: Waterloo Festival at Carnegie Hall". Bernard Holland. May 15, 1985.

<sup>331</sup> Diamond composed scores for other works by Sandburg, Roethke, Joyce, Pound and Shelley using their words as text. Poems by Cummings for which he composed music include "Love is More", "I Shall Imagine Life" and "All In Green Went My Love Riding" (a popular choral arrangement).

<sup>332</sup> Kirstein adapted several other American stories for ballet. Dawn Lille writes, "Billy The Kid, with a libretto by Kirstein, was choreographed by Eugene Loring to Aaron Copland's music [...]. Other ballets were Pocahontas [...] and Yankee Clipper [...] both contributing to Kirstein's belief that his company should present America in contemporary times, still using the classical idiom." ("Lincoln Kirstein: a Towering Figure in the Arts" *Art Times*, January/February 2008) [[http://www.arttimesjournal.com/dance/j\\_f\\_08\\_Lincoln\\_Kirstein\\_Dawn\\_Lille/Lincoln\\_Kirstein.htm](http://www.arttimesjournal.com/dance/j_f_08_Lincoln_Kirstein_Dawn_Lille/Lincoln_Kirstein.htm)]

<sup>333</sup> Victoria J. Kimberling. *David Diamond, a Bio-Bibliography*. Metuchen, Jew Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1987, p. 10.

felt we needed our own Cocteau”.<sup>334</sup> One wonders what a “useable” text from Cummings would look like.

### **I. “Reelsinking”, “staggerising”: the dancing text**

The second part of this chapter will undertake a reading of the ballet’s structures and themes. Because the text is so unfamiliar, I will begin by offering a summary of the ballet’s first episode, incorporating readings of embedded themes as they appear. In the traditional sense of notation, *Tom: A Ballet* is comprised only partially of what we might call “instructional” material. The care and style with which the ballet articulates its subject separates it distinctly from other ballet texts, which generally follow conventional systems of notation and serve the utilitarian purpose of directing production. The “utilitarian” ballet scenario is never intended to be viewed as art in and of itself; it exists in the present only as an equal player in an archive representing a total, realised, production. Instead, *Tom: A Ballet* conspicuously claims its own independent aesthetic importance calls attention to its visual and poetic qualities in a way that deemphasises its practical purpose. Whereas a system such as Labanotation does not ascribe aesthetic value to itself, Cummings’s blank verse notation *is* the true artistic territory of *Tom: A Ballet*. This can be illustrated by the way that the ballet’s movement is sculpted, how its physical settings and content are articulated, and how the written body exceeds the capabilities of the real body and replaces it.

First, one must ask, how does Cumming’s text dance? Preceding the “live” ballet text are four episode synopses detailing each of the episode’s main actions. The entirety of Stowe’s novel is covered. Then, the first episode begins. The stage is revealed with atmospheric directions serving to characterise the space. Figures appear in medias res in a carefully sculpted stage space as the ballet begins:

halflight  
the stage is a soft grey cube

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<sup>334</sup> Quoted by Jennifer Homans: *Apollo’s Angels*. London: Granta, 2013, p. 430.

centre: a praying pyramidal silence—motionlessly in a  
circle black men and women and children kneel with arms  
lifted toward one black motionlessly erect man<sup>335</sup>

The text's bodies seem to sublimate out of the expository stage directions. Mechanically and spatially, there is no differentiation at first between the performed and the unperformed word. Then, gradually, the verse is tempered by description of physical motion, and the dance begins to materialise. There is a brief break in the text, after which appears:

dance of Religious Ecstasy...blacks  
the kneeling bodies begin together swaying, their asking  
arms meanwhile fall floatingly and rize; together the  
praying children men prostrate slowly and slowly  
raise themselves; together they unkneel, together stand: yearningly  
around the always erect man they whirl with-  
ing upspiral and at his feet collapse together.<sup>336</sup>

The reader easily recognises several things in this passage of movement: the motions of swaying, raising, standing, and collapsing are universal and inspire little interpretive effort. Likewise, the concepts of floating, yearning, and whirling, although more abstract, trigger the vision of certain gestures and contribute emotion to the scene. Constructed from the concrete vocabulary of gestures, the vision of praying bodies signifies a specifically cultural ritual. The final tier of vocabulary contains the compound terms of “unkneel” and “upspiral”. As verbal segments, “un,” “kneel,” “up,” and “spiral,” are all relatively basic, but their grouping into compound neologisms communicates a quality of movement that lessens the blow of their rhetorical strangeness. The word games so typical of a Cummings poem are stretched even further to connote movement: bodies “whirlleap” and “boundtwist fallrisingly.” The pairing of the verb “boundtwist” with the adverb “fallrisingly” is the main verbal building block of this ballet. As the ballet builds a sustained web of these terms, Cummings's gives the effect that the words themselves are dancers.

The eponymous figure of Tom is introduced as a “praying pyramidal silence”, “black” and “motionlessly erect”. Around him, “in a circle black men and women and children kneel with arms lifted” toward Tom. With this image, the text calls attention to a

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<sup>335</sup> All quoted text comes from the reprinted version of *Tom: A Ballet* as it appears in Cummings's *Three Plays and a Ballet*, edited and with an introduction by George J. Firmage. London: Peter Owen, 1968, pp. 140-170.

<sup>336</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 147.



structure that is both calmly still and full of kinetic potential: the dance unfolds. Cummings's first page is aligned beneath the left-most word: "half-light", under which the text is subdivided by two dances—the "dance of Religious Ecstasy" and the "dance of The Book". The text maintains this clarity of division throughout, but within each subdivision Cummings's words run freely. The first dance inspires Cummings's bodies to begin to sway around the dais of Tom's body, "their asking arms meanwhile fall floatingly and rise" as they "unkneel" together around his centrifugal force. Tom is still throughout this dance: he is the maypole, the anchor, the god. The men, women, and children seem to move subconsciously, conjuring images of religious fervour.

Suddenly, as the Dance of the Book begins, "Tom the man stirs". Cummings emphasises Tom's live-ness in order to differentiate him from Tom the godhead, the "praying pyramidal silence" introduced at the beginning of the ballet. Tom possesses a dual nature: human and superhuman. The Dance of the Book marks the foundation of a central trope in the ballet: the animation of an object. Just as Cummings's slave bodies refuse to behave as the objects they are seen as, so do other, non-human symbols. The body generates itself out of the environment, suggesting that all of the makeup of the ballet is made of the same fabric, and needs only to shape shift out of one state and into another: "whereupon the jungle background climbingly reveals blue distance out of which tiptoes Eva—an angel." Similarly, stage properties are undetachable from the inscribed human body. A "shadowarm" is "continued by a shadowwhip", and one pairing reaffirms the interchangeability between Tom and his Bible. "It is important that the ballet scenario figures as one of its very first dances a sanctification of the literary," notes Chaney. "As Cummings's ellipses imply, 'the dance of the Book . . . Tom' equates protagonist and meta-object".<sup>337</sup> This equation extends the very vehicle of this particular ballet (the book) by weaving its material into the world of the ballet through the symbol of the Bible.

The book of the ballet has a metaphorical echo in the dance, and the book appears to buzz with electricity, symbolising Tom's faith. Similarly, Cummings objectifies the dance

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<sup>337</sup> Chaney, p. 27.

through personification to suggest that it has a life of its own. The dance seems at times to overwhelm its participants. In such moments, it seems as though the dance is autonomous and self-controlled rather than dancer-controlled: “—the blacks rush inward. Tom leaps to Eliza; whose body, swallowing its doll, writhe kneels. The dance collapses, left-front-stage”. Just before the dance collapses, it has materialised, solidified into itself. It is a collective product that replaces its individual parts. But this means, too, that when it collapses it separates again into various bodies, objects, attributes, etc. Cummings also describes physical actions in abstractions, as when he describes, “Tom; handcuffed; moving with the motionless moving of despair”. Miss Feely “totters” “with angry abrupt spasmlike epitomes of movement”, and “[a] deepbrown mother and child cringe together up the central stairs”, making cringing a means of crossing space. Affect becomes action.

The layering of concrete signs and kinetic language suspended in the strangeness of the ‘soft grey cube’ unsettles the otherwise comfortable legacy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Cummings has an echo in the world of the story. The playful, energetic tone of the ballet’s vocabulary has a human counterpart in Stowe’s character Topsy, who in the novel as in the ballet disrupts propriety with her larger-than-life personality. Entering the stage “squandering unmitigated vitality” and performing “handsprings and cartwheels crazily among the fleeing creoles,” Topsy’s trickster slave is a kindred spirit to Cummings’s trickster poet.

Part of the trickery in *Tom: A Ballet* resides in his negotiation of the serious and the lighthearted—even the parodic—which is paralleled in the ballet’s many binary structures. Cummings’s creation of “The binary of mannequin and human, trite performance and authentic vigor, inscribes dancing as both the concretization of racial performance and the staging area for Cummings’s neo-transcendental philosophies of aesthetic vitalism”.<sup>338</sup> The classical body has to navigate the abstract space of the text, and the stage directions reference that juxtaposition, as when “pirouettes” and “fusing beams” appear in the same movement phrase. The closeness of the sincere and the satirical, the classical and the

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-27.

abstract, produces a familiar effect. Thinking back to the critical arc of this dissertation, *Tom: A Ballet* embodies a far less overt, but nonetheless intelligible, parodic attitude. Here we find that “the curtain satirizes a tavern interior; to lower left and right are painted groups of ferociously lolling lifesize carousers...” In a woman’s dance, “decorum and distinction heterogeneously whirl; her purposive vigor conscientiously mangling a mode which his supple sensitivity delicately caricatures”. If the action contained in this ballet embodies a blend of attitudes, what is the nature of the space enclosing it? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to the ballet’s stage design.

## II. “the stage is a soft grey cube”

In Cummings’s ballet, atmospheric space serves to characterise an environment that is at once familiar and unfamiliar. While the ballet’s language is unique in its rhetorical purpose in the context of the poet’s other work, it is in the ballet’s evocation of scene that it is most clearly links to Cummings’s extension of the theatre of the avant-garde. Cummings notes the anatomy of the stage elsewhere in his writing, particularly in his description of seeing Josephine Baker perform. He wrote that the dancer, “entered the show twice: first—through a dense electric twilight.” In Baker’s time as in Cummings’s, it was typical artistic practice to challenge the physical properties of the playing space. Cummings transposed the 3-dimensional plan of the space-stage into poetic terms at the opening of *Tom*, which begins, “halflight/ the stage is a soft grey cube.” Thus, the stage is itself referenced within the play’s active text.<sup>339</sup> Cummings’s stage model was largely based on Friedrich Kiesler’s “space stage,” “a kind of four-sided funnel, opening towards the audience,” that would foster “elastic space” (versus “rigid space”), “space by whose relative tensions the action of a word is created and completed”—all of which Cummings calls “a noble ideal.” Calling

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<sup>339</sup> James M. Cherry acknowledges in his article (footnote 314) that other modern dance works inspired by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, including Bill T. Jones’s *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990), have used a similarly ambiguous kind of setting.

back into mind the poet's beloved circus, the space-stage works as an extension of text, morphing, expanding and contracting on demand.

At the beginning of the second episode of the ballet, "the entire stagefloor is a drifting continuously pattern of irregularly squirming brightnesses: elsewhere lives black silence filled with perpetual falling of invisible snow". In the final episode's opening, "a phosphorescent blur drowns stagecube". Then, "to the right and to left whitely rise the sidewalls of a stagecube whose inner wall equals black curtains". The stage itself moves on its own, as when "lines of elaborate white columns recedingly approach each other". The stage world reveals new possibilities as other landscapes appear: "The inner wall of the stagecube opens, revealing a peaceful landscape of sunlit mountains". It is in this inanimate liveliness that Cummings's and Loy's ballets are unified.

Curiously, the morphing stagecube of *Tom* is a deeply telling indication of how his inscribed bodies dance. Michael Chaney has already noted the distinctive ramifications of Cummings's liberal use of puppetry in *Tom*, which is reminiscent of the writer's adoration of the circus and the burlesque. But more than these other performance traditions (ironically, even more than ballet), puppetry informs *Tom*'s construction and activation of the body. As Chaney explains, "From one angle, it must be noted that Cummings rejects Kleist's thesis that the apex of puppetry is achieved only when the manipulator surrenders all shows of skill to the gravity and weight of his puppets, as Cummings prefers to use the thematics of the marionette to showcase his ponderous linguistic mastery".<sup>340</sup> Chaney is right to say that Cummings's poetic treatment of the dancing Tom is a rejection of the Kleistian surrender of the "manipulator" of the drama. However, I see his chosen vehicle of the published text as ironically Kleistian in that the ballet's inscribed bodies are left to dance, unsupervised, on the page. While I agree that Cummings is clearly and proudly the puppeteer of his work, as shown through his heavily wrought and self-conscious rhetoric, I also think it is important to note the inherent dance of the *scene* itself. That the stage is constantly drifting, glowing, drowning, and contracting, indicates that there is little to

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<sup>340</sup> Michael Chaney. "E. E. Cummings's *Tom: A Ballet* and Uncle Tom's Doll-Dance of Modernism" *Journal of Modern Literature* Volume 34, Number 2, p. 36.

differentiate the world from its contents, and that Cummings is narrating not just the phenomenal body dancing in space, but, like Loy, a world made of dance.

In the same way that Baker's primitive performance was made ultramodern by its "electric twilight," Cummings's "soft grey cube" seriously affects the story he tells in *Tom: A Ballet*.<sup>341</sup> It makes strange the otherwise traditional, recognisable properties of Stowe's novel.<sup>342</sup> Ripped out of one book and transposed into another, the historically, culturally, and aesthetically specific boundaries of the novel shift into a new place and time. In order to make itself new, the textual space of Cummings's ballet works to communicate the non-textual properties of the dance. It even diagnoses the properties of the universe beyond the boundaries of the stage: "elsewhere lives black silence filled with perpetual falling of invisible snow." In other moments, inanimate objects inherit performative properties, as when "a curtain falls: halving the stage." We are aware of a textual legacy at the same time that we are encouraged to move away from it.

### III. The phenomenal text: path, sound, and tempo

While the "space stage" and its distinct abilities house the ballet's actions, typographical space manages the ballet's imagined movement. In this section, I will evaluate Cummings's creation of a page-stage in *Tom* to show how typography and other kinds of visualisation complement the text's kinetic quality.<sup>343</sup> Readers of Cummings's poetry are familiar with the whimsical path of the word across the page and his inventive manipulation of typography. In his famous poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", the text seems to hop down the page like its subject:

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<sup>341</sup> Michael Chaney considers the racial significance of grey as the ballet's central colour, p. 27.

<sup>342</sup> Incidentally, in 1952, the American choreographer Jerome Robbins choreographed the ballet interlude for the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*. Four years later, Robbins's choreography appeared in the film version of the musical.

<sup>343</sup> Michael Chaney has also observed this quality in *Tom*: "intensified poetic register obtains in the episodes themselves, where Cummings eschews the grammatical clarity of the summary (a style comparable to the sentimental realism of Stowe) to exploit, one may assume, emergent similarities between rhythmical language and dance", p. 26.

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r  
 who  
 a)s w(e loo)k  
 upnowgath  
 PPEGORHRASS  
 eringint(o-  
 aThe):l  
 eA  
 !p:  
 S a  
 (r  
 rIvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)  
 to  
 rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly  
 ,grasshopper;

Harvey Gross observes that “the poem does not so much look like the grasshopper’s action as give the feel of action. Cummings uses an elaborate technique of synaesthesia, a complex visual and aural derangement to signify emotional meaning”.<sup>344</sup> The poem’s subject, the grasshopper, *is* its movement. The reader’s eye travels along the lines of text, gathering clues to the eventual identity of the grasshopper, which, only by way of its journey down the page, assembles into itself. In its leap, the grasshopper becomes a grasshopper: a physical moment transposed onto the page. *Tom: A Ballet*, though bound to the page like the grasshopper, “whirlleaps” into being and, I argue, is every bit as alive. I refer to this kind of motion poem because it encourages our enquiry into the innate motion of the poet’s ballet text. This synaesthetic language of action comes to fruition in the task of writing a ballet, where the inscribed bodies are not objects but the personifications of prayer, suffering, jubilation: whatever energy moves them across the page and the reader’s mind.

This is Cummings’s hallmark, whatever the eventual shape of his verse. “The poet at the typewriter can do Nijinsky leaps or Chaplin-like shuffles and wiggles”, writes Marshall McLuhan,

Because he is an audience for his own mechanical audacities, he never ceases to react to his own performance. Composing on the typewriter is like flying a kite. The E. E. Cummings poem, when read aloud with widely

<sup>344</sup> Harvey Seymour Gross. *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*. Ed. Robert McDowell. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 121.

varying stresses and paces, will duplicate the perceptual process of its typewriting creator.<sup>345</sup>

In Episode Two of the ballet, Cummings depicts Stowe's famous scene in which Eliza crosses the frozen Ohio River with Legree's men at her back. Stage cues dictating light and atmosphere align to the left of the page with the action of the dance finding greater degrees of indentation as the action accelerates. The aerial effect of the diagonal, leading the eye down the page to Eliza's moment of crisis, emphasises the jolt back to stasis at the word "light":

Dance of crossing The Icechoked River...Eliza  
rising: totteringly balancing herself: on the squirming  
brightness, Eliza leapwhirls to another on which: stag-  
gering: she sinks; rises: balancingly: and whirlleaps to  
another—zigzagging gradually her way outward, toward  
the audience, from brightness to brightness  
hither-and-thither meanwhile, in the high distant dark-  
ness from which Eliza came, spurt brutally luminous  
dogfaces; framing with intricate frustrations her crude  
whirlleaping-reelsinking-staggerising-leapwhirling  
progress.<sup>346</sup>

Then, the stage is referenced again, planting Eliza back into the concrete certainty of the stage. At the same time: the reader is reminded of the position of the eye in its parallel journey: "Precisely when, having almost gained the footlights...

Eliza whirlleaps toward an outmost brightness—  
The suddenly into itself shriveling lightriver comes a mere twinkling  
thread across midstage;  
and  
down out of dark distant height surging to-  
gether bound dogmen  
—between outpouring whom and her a cur-  
tain falls, halving the stage

light

Eliza has disappeared<sup>347</sup>

The crescendo of danger and activity has a direct visual correlative, a tactic that is sustained throughout the text. Cummings directs the reader-spectator's pace and path through the text by arranging it as such. The reader's eye jumps from one patch of ice to another, mimicking

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<sup>345</sup> Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Introduction by Lewis H. Lapham. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994, p. 261.

<sup>346</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 151.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

Eliza's own flight.

Embedded in its own reality, the page mimics the stage, upon which our attention mimics the darting path of the inscribed body. Cummings's arrangement of verse notation suggests a visual orchestration meant to instruct the pace of the reader's mental image of the dance. Cummings suggests through his precise visual layout that the ballet is meant to be visually appreciated like his other works of poetry. On the page-stage, the ballet's sections are signposted by variations in the left margin, in which hang descriptions of lighting, once or twice per page. This suggests light as a kind of re-setting mechanism: it is how Cummings excuses or introduces breaks in the story. This system is in line with conventional dance texts, where at a certain point in the production process, light cues and other technical notes are added to the prompt-book.

However, lighting is not usually introduced in the story-based libretto of a ballet. Here, the text's re-setting of light—"light," "half-light," "almost-darkness," "darkness," "almost-light"—direct the dimming and brightening of the reader's mental image. The text evokes lighting and sound more actively than the simple cues generally included in a performance text. Cummings writes sound into the text in much the same way that he approximates movement and light. A trumpeting sound is sculpted by degrees of volume (*forte*, *ff*, and *fff*) leading up to the "vital immense triumphing sphere of sound, a luminously enormous world of alive voices," leading Tom to heaven. Here, the trumpets have given way to operatic vocals. In one passage, Cummings conducts a choir of voices:

low, clear, and sweet, begins a negro spiritual  
climblingly which wanders (gropingly) openingly radi-  
ates hope faith, love  
(hushing the song rebuilds)  
luminously (searching brightly) seeking (glori-  
ously finding peace trust, joy)  
deeply (again softly  
enters) whispering grows (mounting  
purely) sweetly (passionately ascending  
firmly) marching (seriously) toward a truly (to-  
ward a shining alive) only toward some un-  
imagined Self—

stopped suddenly voices do not sing<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 160.



Note how, as the “song” builds, the text alternates with parentheticals: a system reminiscent of dramatic texts, which provide the reader with details that are not part of the text, but will be seen in performance. Here, where Cummings uses the parentheticals to actually shape text, there is no rhetorical difference between what seems to be instruction and what seems to be text. Technically, the parentheticals add to the momentum of reading, supplementing the real text with a kind of affirmational echo. Although the singing of the negroes is silent by nature of its printed form, it creates an interlude in the mental vision of the ballet. But it is not a sheer break from dance: the song dances in place of the bodies. The spiritual “climblingly” “wanders,” and gropes, seeks, whispers, and marches. It is as though the singers’ bodies, long held captive on the page, submit to the song and its freedom.

The tempo of movement is directed just as carefully. At the normal speed of reading, the text moves along at a feasible speed of dance. Thus, the reader’s shifting mental image from movement to movement matches the spectator’s vision. It is in this respect that the printed ballet achieves its fluidity and accomplishes an illusion of dance. Although it does not/has not instructed physical execution, it guides the reader through a mental ballet. Cummings’s notation is prescriptive in the sense that, by being poetic, it establishes and feeds a distinctive coloration or atmosphere over the instructive text. Labanotation is familiar to an enactor of dance; a succession of *tour jetés* and *pirouettes* has a stark, predictable (or at least recognizable) nature to it. It is the rest of the *mise en scène* and the dancer’s own bodily execution of the steps that give fuller dimension to the dance.

Although *Tom* is dancing every moment of its duration, it does include signposted dances that are separate from the otherwise always-dancing universe. First, the benevolent white Master and Mistress Shelby dance to entertain their applauding slaves. In the next episode, George dances disguised as a Spanish gentleman in the tavern where Haley’s slavecatchers are also disguised. Then there is the Dance of New England and New Orleans in the estate of St Clare, during which St Clare, his prim and proper housekeeper Miss Feely, and the unruly child Topsy share a dance “with all awkwardness illuminating one

gracefulness”. Lastly, in the third episode, Tom appears to heal little Eva through his dance of his faith in his Creator. These dances are all dictated by Cummings’s synopses, which otherwise neglect the fact that these periodic dances are embedded in never-ending movement.

In his poems, Cummings looked for ways to designate reading pace, usually by manipulating left-right orientation and either exaggerating or deleting spaces between letters and words. Here, in a poem from his “Portraits” sequence, Cummings directs the readers eye to mimic the motion of his subject:

pho  
 nographisrunn  
 ingd o w, n      phonograph  
                                  stopS.<sup>349</sup>

The ballet introduces crescendos in rhythm and volume to sculpt the dance’s arc. Guided by intermittent technical cues, the reader charges through the extended, claustrophobic passages of movement; this is where the printed ballet acquires a kind of orchestration. Cummings’s arrangement of various rhetorical pieces contributes a percussive rhythm to the reading (and subsequent mental view), and his run-on sentences and congested phrasing of the body encourages a rhapsodic, fast-paced reading. Syntax is distorted to suggest physical chaos. Thus, the body must surrender to the reader’s pace.

In the reading of a conventional performance text, time is understood in a specific manner: this is because the text is understood to anticipate performance. While we read a play, we understand pacing and rhythm to be ultimately dictated by the performer, not by our preliminary reading. As Mikel Dufrenne notes in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, ‘the essential function of imagination is to preform the real in an act of expectation’: thus our imagined version of the work is subordinate to reality.<sup>350</sup> With a text like *Tom*, which exists purely in its anticipatory state, the nature of our reading is different to this normal scheme. The way that Cummings structures the ballet’s language combined

<sup>349</sup> E. E. Cummings “XIII” in *Tulips & Chimneys*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996, p. 76.

<sup>350</sup> Mikel Dufrenne. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy). Edward S. Casey, trans. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 355.

with its status as an unperformed work, encourages us to experience reading like we would experience a performance. Our interpretative experience is, by default, the text's ultimate reality.

The ballet is structured by the same line and word spacing, compound language, and inverted syntax that have always characterised Cummings's poems. In the poems, these devices are the poet's way of managing the rate of reading. I would argue that this effect has an even greater impact in reading Cummings's ballet; the mechanics of the language here contribute not just to our digestion of words, but to our ongoing kinetic vision of the dance as reader-spectators (go back to definitions and earlier references).

Although one senses an instructive purpose in the layout of this work, Cummings's method also grants this purportedly practical text another, aesthetic value. Whereas Loy's ballet fills the margins in the same manner as prose, Cummings suggests through his precise visual layout that the ballet is meant to be visually appreciated like his other works of poetry. However, we must consider the relationship between the text's visual tempo and the absent orchestral score. The absence of music (or its replacement by text), which encourages a kind of silent reading out of a silent dance. This is only to a minor degree true of Cummings's *Tom*, for which a score was composed and still exists. Conversely, Loy's text was never fitted or retro-fitted with music, and only contains scattered references to diegetic noises/rhythms/music that occur in the world of the dance.

In its stillest moments, Cummings's vocabulary is clear, but he introduces crescendos in rhythm and volume to sculpt the dance's arc. In theory and in discussion, the balletic dance is synonymous with an orchestral score. Likewise, in typical notational methods, movement phrases are set along bars of music, in a similar manner to sung lyrics. In *Tom: A Ballet*, the music is not represented—or even mentioned—in the text. Rhythm is instead implied by a visual succession of phrases rather than dictated by the lost master score, which, if found, could lay out the spatiality of Cummings's rhapsodic movement sequences in relation to other production elements, including the aforementioned music.

#### IV. The body in the stagecube

What are the implications for the body in a system of language that seems to negate its presence? In an unperformed performance, we could say that reader compensates for unrealised physical presence. The reader-spectator injects his or her own mental dimensions into the text, thus creating one of an infinite hybrid readings. In the case of Cummings's ballet, the reader imagines the body/bodies on a mental stage enacting Cummings's poetic directions for physical movement. Thus, when the reader encounters:

—whirlswirling the blacks disintegrate; swirl-  
whirling disappear, left-backstage

...he or she is able to anchor the visual understanding in the concrete notion of "left-backstage," but is unable to interpret with any certainty what "whirlswirling" is or looks like. Consequently, like a verse drama intended only for reading, the ballet is subject to myriad iterations from one reader to the next, but here—uniquely—in the physical realization of Cummings's words.

Some of Cummings's verse is clearly and manageably directive. He is specific about the coverage of movement on the stage-floor, and although Cummings does not use conventional ballet terminology, his description of motion inspires mimicry. But *within* the episodes, Cummings includes action sequences that seem to defy physicalisation: here is where Cummings injects performance with poetic substance that perhaps he feels cannot be expressed through dance. Moreover, we have a work of art capable, in some senses, of more than what an actual human body can do.

Despite its self-created vocabulary, the dance generally feels possible, if unclear. However, there are sections that seem to defy physical execution. When Cummings writes phrases like, "reelsinking staggerising," he offers seemingly impossible instructions to emphasise the chaotic moment. Thus, the dancer, in a frenzy, may boundtwist where a whirlleap is commanded, but the loss of control and clarity is the poet's desired effect. Another characteristic of the poet's dancing body is its limitlessness: Cummings writes that

“Tom, uplooking, lifts very gradually his manacled hands: scooping all the world into the sky”. This is not a directive for movement, but rather a colouration of Tom’s bodily expression. To scoop all the world is reminiscent of Cummings’s poetic sense of wonder in the relationship between human and universe. We are meant to appreciate the image without seeing it physically articulated. The written body can perform what the living body cannot. The ballet text, therefore, through its printed medium, both inhibits *and* extends the boundaries of physical art.

The dance emphasises through different nuances of movement the characters involved in a ballet about slavery. He portrays the slavecatcher Legree through angular, sickly colourful words:

Dance of the Unman...Legree masked  
in upgreen and cooldown travelling radiance caught, crouches a  
twittering notness plucked by invisible everywheres of  
anguish;  
through immaculate devouring lifefulness outpeers, transfixed  
by nowhereish forevers, a dimensionless unbeing  
high at coolgreen who soardarts—inwincing, drops  
twistedly.<sup>351</sup>

The sharp, volatile “green” movements of Legree provide contrast to the rapturous, more human movements of Tom and the other black bodies. Cummings seems, overall, to draw a decisive line between the physical vocabularies of a body that is free and a body that is not.

One biographer cites a drama fragment among Cummings’s writings in order to illustrate Cummings’s ardent personal disgust for the continuing persecution of black Americans. In the fragment, dated 1938, an unseen and unheard defendant is decisively condemned by a larger-than-life-judge, who decrees that the man has “committed a foul degenerate heinous and inhuman offense against your innocent and unsuspecting fellowcitizens [...] namely and to wit, that hereby you were black in colour at the time of your hereby birth.” In an undated poem called “tonite”, Cummings imagines God hurling the Earth into hell and watching all bodies of every colour turn to black. The poet wrote to Norman Friedman in July of 1962, just two months before his death. That letter bears the most comprehensive explanation for *Tom: A Ballet* ever offered by its creator:

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<sup>351</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, pp. 167-168.

LKirstein commissioned me to write a ballet-scenario: I asked Marion what its subject should be, & she suggested UTC: I wrote the scenario, for which David Diamond made a complete orchestral score, but Balanchine balked [...] When Marion made her suggestion, I'd never taken seriously UT'sC or read it carefully all through [...] I now red (sic)—& was astonished. My scenario is the direct result of this astonishment.<sup>352</sup>

The text of the ballet, both bombastic and emotionally lyrical, does not attempt to disguise the poet's astonishment.

Another critic has noted a correlative in Jean le Nègre, a character in Cummings's World War One memoir, *The Enormous Room*. When Jean arrives at the French prison they are to share, Cummings is enchanted immediately: "I heard the inimitable, unmistakable divine laugh of a negro. The door opened at last. Entered a beautiful pillar of black strutting muscle topped with a tremendous display of the whitest teeth on earth".<sup>353</sup> Cummings refers to Jean interchangeably as a grin, a muscle, and a cascading laugh throughout the memoir, conspicuously fusing his reverence for the man with standard cultural objectification.

In a scene of violent abuse, "Thwarted in his hope and burning with the ignominy of his situation," Jean vocally blames his skin colour for the brutality. Cummings's description of anguish turns back to poetic expression, once again fixated on Jean's superhuman (yet less-than-human) strength:

...by a single movement of his arms, he sent the four [officers] reeling to a distance of ten feet: leaped at the pillar: seized it in both hands like a Samson, and (gazing for another second with a smile of absolute beatitude at its length) dashed his head against it. Once, twice, thrice he smote himself, before the [officers] seized him—and suddenly his whole strength wilted; [...] he stood with bowed head, tears streaming from his eyes...<sup>354</sup>

Jean's brute strength, like Tom's, is never separate from his despair.

The two characters Tom and Jean (one fictional, one real) share the physical prowess and primal sadness Cummings found astonishing in Stowe's novel: however, in two different times and two different vehicles, they stand for separate conditions. Uncle Tom gets a romantic treatment in the 1935 ballet; life on earth is a holding cell, in the shape of mechanised whiteness, just below Heaven. He has a Book under which he thrusts his

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<sup>352</sup> Norman Friedman. "Knowing and Remembering Cummings". *Harvard Library Bulletin* (29:2) Cambridge: Harvard University Library Press, 1981, p. 132.

<sup>353</sup> *The Enormous Room*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

arms always to the sky. His death comes with liberation, and he climbs a white staircase at the ballet's end. But in 1922 (and, indeed, in reality) Jean le Nègre gets no liberation. He has no God. Cummings's portrayal of Jean is tinged with the author's awareness of the suffocating depth of racism in 1922, which at the time did not seem likely to diminish. That Jean's resurrection in the figure of Uncle Tom is a *danced* being is a critical difference, especially for its 1935 time stamp.

Importantly, if *Tom* had indeed been produced by Kirstein for the New York City Ballet's 1935 season, it would have come to life in the middle of modern Manhattan. The suspenseful sequence of Eliza's escape across the ice-choked river would have struck a very different chord in any particular place and time, and here and now the issues of White Flight and the boom of Harlem would have been in the audience's consciousness. It would also have been known to theatre aficionados that at the nearby Vanderbilt Theatre, Langston Hughes's commercially successful *Mulatto* had opened on Broadway (and would run for 373 performances). Tense racial divisions were all too familiar. That Cummings's text is a ballet demands a certain attention to body politics. Although Kirstein early on in the 1930s was writing of his plans for a revolutionary free ballet academy with a corps of eight black students and eight white students, the dance world was still resoundingly white.<sup>355</sup> Cummings was curiously ambiguous about his negotiation of casting the work, but it is likely that all roles in *Tom* would have been performed by white bodies. If racial tension was the material, the ballet was its chosen shape, and the relationship between those two forces provides a new way of examining Cummings's use of the stage.

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<sup>355</sup> It seems interestingly fitting that *Tom* is set in the snowy 'whiteness' of the stage when we know that Cummings was keenly aware of black life in a white world after his experiences in France. It must be noted, however, that Cummings was writing about black bodies—in the snow, incidentally—in earlier poetry, such as in the recently discovered poem beginning "(tonite/in nigger/street/the snow is perfectly falling...". This contrast between black and white, both as corporeal difference and as a visual scheme, seems to have been a natural point of interest for Cummings in adapting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

## V. Rethinking the dancer and the reader

Hitherto I have examined the theoretical and typographical space of the ballet. This section poses the question: what (or more importantly, who) *inhabits* the space? Philip Auslander considers circumstances in which the space of the performance document (in his case, photography or film which captures a live event) is the only space in which the performance occurs. He describes two situations: one in which performance is conducted not for presentation as a live event, but only for the sake of recording. The second situation occurs when documentation re-enacts performance (though in fewer dimensions) after the live event has transpired. Cummings's ballet text introduces another shape into this scheme: here, not only does performance documentation precede what it 'records', but it replaces the live event through remediation. As the ballet's imaginary medium, the body inscribes and reinscribes the dance even in its absence.

Importantly, the players in *Tom* are not limited to dancing bodies. At the end of the first page, the audience is named. This audience is not the reading audience, which the text otherwise necessitates, but an *imagined* theatre audience independent of the reader:

twistfalling crisply through air filled with the book's fall-  
twisting leaves, brutality upscoops torture : outsurging,  
a man faces Legree  
    whose with malice gloating grossness bloats;  
    mightily into nervous air whose fist lifts death  
    —Cassy's sprouted life glides leftward, disap-  
    pearing  
while between protagonists and audience billowingly lives  
a snowy silence screaming crimsonly KILL  
    —quickly the red word, the white curtain gradually, die in  
almostdarkness.<sup>356</sup>

There is a specific spatial relationship "between protagonists and audience". When Cummings mentions the inner audience, he establishes a group of spectators essentially frozen in time along with the dancing body. They are not made to move by the ballet—presumably they sit, and provide a static foil to the presence of the dancer. References to a stage and an audience can be read in one of two ways: they could indicate, simply, the

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<sup>356</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 165.



work's practical intention—that it is meant to be read as a blueprint for performance. Alternatively, the text's inclusion of a built-in audience and a double stage (the one described and the book itself) suggests another kind of dynamism. The reader is one degree further removed from the world of the story, viewing it from behind the backs of another, imaginary audience who are both placeless and timeless. With the naming of an internal spectator, suddenly, the dance is reframed. If the audience lives inside the text, who are *we*? If they are watching the ballet, what are *we* doing? While *Tom* references its performative nature through built-in elements of music and light, it also establishes its own self-sufficiency by implanting within its text a permanent audience.

Doubled by a built-in audience, the reader of this ballet performs a complicated task. The role of the reader-spectator is comprised of one real action—reading—and two imagined actions—seeing and hearing—and when Cummings mentions an inner audience, our role is complicated further still. The quality of the movement can be suggested only through the reader-spectator's interpretation of Cummings's vocabulary and visual negotiation of the page-stage. How does that make the vision specific, or authorial? A reader supplements text with his or her own projections of sound and scene, gesture, tone—a multitude of layers that colour the final product. The intended text, then, or what the author produces, is a terminal creation. By the moment of publication, he or she has little control of the work's machinations from reader to reader. When we read 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood' we can see Frost's image: our own approximation of Frost's vision of the wood and its yellowness, the road and its particular divergence. Similarly, to read Cummings's ballet is to see all the static components of the scene. But whereas the action of Frost's poem is gradual, occurring off-stage, as it were, the aesthetic emphasis of the ballet is its movement, which is activated and stopped according to the whim of the reader. These characteristic flourishes, present in poem and ballet alike, alter the normal activity of reading so that "one's experience of the work becomes its real meaning".<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Cohen, p. 239.

His first dedicated critic, Norman Friedman, observed five distinct forms in Cummings's poetry:

[...] the description, that locates its speaker in the presence of some sensory stimulus and represents him as perceiving; praise and eulogy, that place him in relation to some person, type, or idea, and represent him as admiring; the satire, that places him in relation to society and that represents him as its critic; reflection, that places him before scenes and people and represents him as interpreting and commenting; and persuasion, that places him in the presence of someone else and represents him as speaking to him or her.<sup>358</sup>

The ballet *Tom* illustrates all five of these so-called "forms": description/perception, praise/eulogy, satire, reflection and persuasion. The simple fact of being a ballet one reads on paper ticks the first category. The fervour with which Cummings depicts the black versus white struggle and the religious foundation of his reference text shows his praise/eulogy side. There is, of course, a hefty measure of satire in Cummings's manipulations of balletic conventions. The reflective mode is seen in \_\_\_\_\_. Finally, the persuasive element is captured in *Tom* because of the unashamedly individual, personal style of its delivery. The unorthodoxy of Cummings's poetic voice pervades the ballet, too. Therefore, the ballet puts Cummings, to use Friedman's words, "in the presence of someone else and represents him as speaking to him or her". The difference between what is communicated through a poem and what is communicated through the ballet is not monumental, but important.

While a handful of scholars have interpreted *Tom* already, none has attempted to contextualise the work among other modernist ballets. In truth, contemporary reviewers struggled to understand the text and its place. One critic defends Cummings's otherwise "pointless eccentricities" of language, saying "[f]or once his habit of doubling words to create a new word is inevitably right".<sup>359</sup> Another similarly finds Cummings's prose "especially well adapted to suggesting the involutions of the dance".<sup>360</sup> A third reviewer classifies the scenario as neither play nor prose, but a new combination of both that

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<sup>358</sup> Norman Friedman. *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960, p. 59.

<sup>359</sup> Quoted by Lloyd Dendinger. *E. E. Cummings: The Critical Reception*. London: Lennox Hill Publishing, 1979, p. 180.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

“mold[s] the two media into a prose-poetry which catches the essential mood of the ballet”.<sup>361</sup>

After all, *Tom: A Ballet* is not a fluke within the wider experiment of dance texts, nor is it a fluke within Cummings’s individual body of work. The ballet expands Friedman’s (and many other critics’) impressions of what a Cummings text can do. In this chapter, I have attempted to pull out of Cummings’s better-known prose, poetry, and commentary the many moments that illustrate his impulse to write movement. Reading the ballet against these moments galvanises the ballet as part of the poet’s own canon. Moving toward conclusion, it is time to balance that reading with a reading of Cummings’s ballet as the final step in the study of modernist ballet text.

In the ballet texts of the modernists, we can track the shifting influence of dance on language and textual properties while highlighting a surprisingly common experiment among many writers just as famous as Cummings. But beyond its novelty, I think that the way in which *Tom: A Ballet* directs an imagined performance is worth examining. It yields a dance that happens once, in confidence between the reader and the text. In the sense that it is a transient, one-of-a-kind performance, the imagined ballet is similar to live art which can never be perfectly reproduced. It is a dance unmediated by production: what Cummings articulated is offered in its pure state directly to the interpreting reader. *Tom* is a performance text that defies the normal ephemerality of that kind of writing: having no production history to speak of, it draws attention to its solely textual performativity.

If we consider the phenomenological terms of dance—that it is a lived experience merely enabled by its blueprint—then Cummings’s *Tom: A Ballet* is only a potential thing, its full realisation hanging in limbo on the page. What Cummings does in his composition defies conventions of ballet and theatre by swapping elements between them: ballet inherits words (or even becomes words) and normal play dialogue is replaced by a new kinetic language. The imaginary body replaces the actual body because of its superhuman capacities. Balanchine’s refusal to stage the ballet constitutes evidence not only of an

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

aesthetic judgment on his part, but the possibility that in his mind, there was nothing that could be done to shape the text into a better, more commercially viable form. *Tom* seems somehow complete, however counter-intuitively, in its printed state. But this is always at odds with the text's original intention: if the poetic text exists in anticipation of its realisation as a danced work, what should we make of it now?

The text cunningly directs a mental dance through a reading that is not instructional, but experiential. Cummings's formulation of the stage cube establishes in the reader's mind a concrete structure in which the imagined dance finds a tangible shape. Directions are articulated so that the reader can track the imaginary body's path in relation to the stage-cube. Thus, not only can the ballet's movement vocabulary be interpreted from Cummings's kinetic verse, but its placement within specific boundaries is prescribed. The poet consequently limits what we might imagine, and so directs the dance. The ballet's verse transposes its anticipated layers of movement, light, sound, and space into a single medium, and thus it remains. The built-in music and light interact with the text to the point that the text's very atmosphere is activated by our reading. At the same time, in imagining the ballet, reading time determines the pace of the imagined dance. Cummings's typography and evocation of the three-dimensional stage space encourages acceleration and deceleration appropriate to the authorial vision. As the reader speeds through certain passages and lingers over others, so does the imagined dancer, because the reader conducts the dance by following the signs of the text.

Cummings biographer Richard Kennedy argues that *Tom* is a genuine modern ballet because "its principal actions, relationships, attitudes, and ideas are expressed through dance." In my opinion, the overwhelming reticence of ballet practitioners and composers to engage with the material is due to the fact that *Tom*, in print, is a fully realised work. It is not the instruction manual these potential collaborators were accustomed to working with. Instead, the text of *Tom* claims an autonomous aesthetic value for itself. *Tom* remains a text, but it is a text indicative of modernism's fascination with formal boundaries. It illuminates

an understudied shared territory between visual art, print, and performance and the challenges that merger posed to the culture of artistic collaboration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. My reading of *Tom: A Ballet* in the context of literary modernism is possible only with the clarity of retrospect and the text's dormancy. Any natural critical interest in the work as an outlier in the Cummings canon can be bolstered by its construction of a bespoke reader-spectator. *Tom: A Ballet* inherently claims its own expressive value as a text, and perhaps that is why it feels far more immediate and active than other ballet texts that instruct fleeting performances. The final scene of *Tom: A Ballet* explodes with the vibrance of Heaven:

[...] Appear two mighty golden doors  
upon which blazes

LIGHT

outward goldenly slowly the huge doors open—revealing  
an immeasurable radiance and which, prodigiously forth-  
pouring upon a stage drowned in glory, becomes angels in  
white robes with harps of gold and crowns

CURTAIN<sup>362</sup>

The text's glorious conclusion stands in conspicuous opposition to its reference in a letter from Cummings to his friend Ezra Pound, in which he writes, "[I] shall be sending you [...] one book of a ballet which nobody here will produce by the oozing artichoke of impassioned ishtar".<sup>363</sup>

Through its weaving together of a canonical heritage and avant-garde experimentation, Cummings's ballet establishes a new, third, kind of time that is culturally specific. In the limited family of ballet works by other contemporary poets, history is dismissed in favour of a different kind of reconstruction/construction. Cummings's history stage is a real contrast to Mina Loy's ethereal, timeless fantasy stage in "Crystal Pantomime". There, history gives way to a dreamy and symbolic atmosphere. In that respect, Cummings's ahistorical "soft grey cube" is in keeping with fashion. Native to its time of creation, and by adapting an extant narrative, *Tom: A Ballet* both preserves and

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<sup>362</sup> *Three Plays and a Ballet*, p. 170.

<sup>363</sup> *Pound/Cummings*, p. 82.

combats two contrary textual temporalities—it simultaneously surges forward into avant-garde experimentalism and reaches backward into a canonical literary past, such that it “turns at once into a generative power that is itself historical”.<sup>364</sup> By resurrecting the story of Stowe’s anti-slavery epic, Cummings’s text establishes a specifically cultural point in time. It inserts into the forum of modernism a seemingly anachronistic discourse of race and religiosity; however, structurally, it typifies the popular modernist practice of artistic inter-disciplinarity.

Always behind that layer of conformity, however, lies a discord which deserves critical attention. If we consider the phenomenological terms of dance—that it is a lived experience merely enabled by its blueprint—then Cummings’s *Tom: A Ballet* is only a potential thing, its full realisation hanging in limbo on the page. What Cummings does in his composition defies conventions of ballet and of theatre by swapping elements between them: ballet inherits words (or even becomes words) and normal play dialogue is replaced by a new kinetic language. In the temporal sense, *Tom* plays with the notion of time by transposing dance notation into verse, suggesting that time and movement can be sufficiently marked by language where music and metrics normally stand. There is, too, the subliminal statement of the verse ballet: that for some stories, the printed word is not enough—it must move.

Complicating all of this are the implications of hypothetical production, and how the existing juncture between temporalities is further complicated by the text’s inactivity: if the poetic text exists in anticipation of its realisation as a danced work, what should we make of it now? Perhaps it is precisely through the ballet’s challenging nature that it is essential to a more comprehensive study of Cummings’s career and of modernist experimental texts, illuminating an outlier in literary history that attempted to negotiate a concrete cultural past in the context of artistic revolution. Moving back into a broader consideration, *Tom*’s textual dynamism is declared in its self-branding as a ballet. It is not titled “Plan for *Tom: A Ballet*”, or *Tom: a Ballet in Verse*. It introduces itself as a ballet—a

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<sup>364</sup> Paul de Man, “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 150.

form that is by definition non-textual. Cummings's branding echoes similar modernist exchanges of meaning among separate formal entities. But it is also an act of defiance. The poet is saying resolutely that this text *is* a ballet.

## CONCLUSION

### **A Textual Reappraisal of the Modernist Ballet**

This dissertation has taken as its trajectory the movement from practicality to expression evident among the ballet texts by poets, beginning with examples of texts meant to direct production and ending with the displacement of the body *by* text. By grouping together these works, I have offered a picture of the ballet as it evolved in modernism, paying specific attention to its negotiations of textual materiality. In my final chapter, the independently performative *Tom: A Ballet* is positioned at the opposite end of a spectrum that begins with the far more practical texts that informed the revolutionary work of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois. Each of the chapters has been concerned with the way that movement is envisioned by artists and writers on the page, and the rhetoric with which production is instructed and enabled (or challenged, as is the case in the later texts). In addition to my overarching thesis, I hope that this work can contribute to several different specific studies within the broad category of modernism.

One of these is modernism's negotiation with technology. We can draw parallels between ballet and machines, particularly because of their shared use of systems. The classical ballet vocabulary made human movement regular, uniform, and able to be harmonised. Industrial mechanisation has done the same, a similarity exploited by Cocteau, Marinetti, Lee. There are also implicit references to machines and automata in the way that Cocteau's costumes obscure and inhibit the human body. Cummings illustrates another kind of machine, slavery, in his the same systematic quality of ballet, rooted in classical movement and music vocabularies, that allows it to retain a conventional form.

We might also weigh that against the system of the poem, highlighting the structures and conventional forms that govern the genre. These formal systems parallel the Modernist obsession with machines, particularly that a time when many art forms saw integrations of abstraction, dehumanization, synaesthesia, and such themes as automatons and industry.



For all its apparent liberalism, a text like Cummings's *Tom: A Ballet* is built according to specific structures, particularly to the poet's devised system of language. As for the world of the ballet, the narrative of *Tom* articulates human submission to systems. By combining the strict system of verse and the inherent limitations of the human body, Cummings reiterates the entrapment of the human in the system of slavery and the primal struggle for freedom.

In addition, Loy's "Crystal Pantomime" engages with the contested territory of gender power struggles in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and life. As a writer, Loy exemplifies a troubled relationship with the patriarchal tradition of Italian Futurism, while her ballet text articulates the theme through inscribed dance. Situated in a timeless dream-world, Loy frees her ballet from the confines of masculinity and the metropolis; at the same time, she exposes the inevitability of her dancing maiden's submission to marriage and childbirth.

The particular act of writing ballet expands the notion of modernist choreographic innovation, as well. One of the constant threads throughout this dissertation has been George Balanchine, beginning with Jean Cocteau's debut in Balanchine's *Les Ballets 1933* with *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, continuing through his experience as co-author with Brecht and ending with his refusal to stage Cummings's ballet in 1935. Balanchine's branding of *Tom: A Ballet* as "undanceable" ably caps my thesis due to the manner in which text displaced the body in that work. All of these texts, whether performed or not, have invited a consideration of the role of the choreographer and his or her tools. The choreographer, as a writer in three dimensions, can approach text in infinite ways, leading to interesting debates on the ultimate authorship of dance.

Furthermore, the ballet text performs a particularly nuanced reappropriation of tradition at the threshold of modernity. For example, in her allegorical *Ballet of the Nations*, Vernon Lee single-handedly provides a link into modernism from her background in *fin de siècle* decadence and Victorian literature. This mode of study, focusing on the adoption of ballet into new artistic eras and modes, welcomes similar investigations into the role of

ballet in visual art, in film (for example, Fernand Léger's 1920 film *Ballet Mécanique*, with its two-dimensional montage of images), in music, in sculpture, et cetera.

Finally, in its blurring of the practical and impractical, the practice of writing ballet sheds light on the modernists' critique of language. We have seen in these case studies the awareness among artists and writers that body and language are both conspicuously not limitless. The human shape, though evolving, will always be bound by its size and abilities, just as language, though ever-changing, necessarily restricts meanings through systematization. We can see particularly vividly how, especially in the period of modernism, artists were determined to interrogate the limits of the body and language alike. There is an implicit statement in their shared project to write dance: that prose or verse lacks a certain kind of expression that dance afford. A ballet text, therefore, is a better vehicle for narratives that, for whatever reason, must move. Like Brancusi's birds or Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the ballet text moves, surpassing its material boundaries.

We have seen how, in different hands, ballet provided an extension to traditional language and structure for certain narrative purposes. On the one hand, we have seen ballet's function in broadcasting anti-war prophecy and in reflecting upon the destruction of inevitable conflict. We have, on the opposite hand, seen ballet's usefulness as a tool for satire and pastiche, especially since the ballet itself acted as a kind of cultural barometer in the era of modernism. Huxley, Loy, and even Cocteau were just as interested in lampooning the ballet as making sincere contributions to it. In 1925, ten years before he wrote *Tom: A Ballet*, Cummings submitted a series of "Seven Samples of Dramatic Criticism" to *Vanity Fair*, among which there is one devoted to the popular ballet. "Once again, after its triumphant tour of Athens, Constantinople, and Peking, The Bohemian Ballet is with us", the piece begins. Cummings is clearly teasing either the Ballets Russes or the Ballets Suédois, a distinction which he declares does not matter:

...The only fault which your reviewer can find with this invariably extraordinary ballet organization, whose ranks are this year enriched by two dancers of international renown—Gretchen Fahrenheit and Mike Frost—is

that it somehow just misses being neither the Swedish nor yet the Russian Ballet. Nevertheless, there are some far from wholly unpleasant moments...<sup>365</sup>

Cummings mentions a “superb curtain by Wable Wicasse” and describes the whole spectacle in hyperbolic terms that are equally congratulatory and derisive. The effect produced is Cummings’s clear amusement with the state of the contemporary ballet, which is not only the art itself but the great cultural frenzy surrounding it. Here, in one writer and in the space of ten years’ time, we have an explicit demonstration of ballet’s diverse aesthetic capabilities.

With my selected texts, we have had an opportunity to concentrate on the reading of movement, and the way in which we become a spectator of sorts in the act. Derek Attridge, reflecting on the experience of reading new kinds of literature, claimed to:

...register a strangeness, a newness, a singularity, an inventiveness, an alterity in what I read. When this happens, I have two choices: [...] I can deploy reading techniques that will lessen or annul the experience of singularity and alterity—and this will usually involve turning the event into an object of some kind (such as a structure of signification)— or I can seek to preserve the event as an event, to sustain and prolong the experience of otherness.<sup>366</sup>

Attridge’s passage resonates with the way we read ballets. I have repeatedly referenced the stigma-bound cultural idea of ballet as crucial to our unravelling of the complicated job of the reader-spectator. To read a ballet is to trespass over the boundaries of normal experience—we, too register ‘a strangeness, a newness, a singularity’ in the marriage of a familiar action with an unlikely subject. The literary event so central to Attridge’s point usefully complements the spectator half of the reader’s role. It reinforces the essential difference between the reader’s various impressions when he or she moves from novel, story, or poem to ballet. Ballet’s essence is movement, and its static orientation in print is the ironic condition that imbues reading with “newness”.

Returning to Laurence Louppe’s reflection upon the strange nature of dance notation, we see the magnitude of the effect of writers’ hands on the recording of dance.

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<sup>365</sup> E. E. Cummings. *AnOther E. E. Cummings*. Selected and introduced by Richard Kostelanetz and John Rocco. New York: Liveright, 1998, p. 263.

<sup>366</sup> Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 40.

“There are many ways”, she writes “to interpret the appearance of these small, fragile figures, lost in the sheet of paper without any direct relation to space, or time, like the reoccupation of an existential envelope, at once cutaneous and graphic...”.<sup>367</sup> Although Louppe is commenting here on traditional modes of abstract notation, she is also highlighting the potential for expressive experimentation with what could be regarded as a strictly practical mode of writing. The writers involved in this study—dramatists, visual artists, novelists, essayists and poets—have carved the body into the page. As a consequence, their inscribed bodies are not merely “lost in the sheet of paper”, divorced from their eventual activation on stage. Instead, because the page is the stage, the bodies in the modernist ballet text are actively performing through the very act of reading.

To offer an original contribution to knowledge in the field, I have isolated the ballet text as an additional avenue through which to view modernism’s fascination with hybridity: in genre, medium, and purpose. The emergence of text into the space of performance in the Parisian companies coincides with all of the artistic experimentation that pulled ballet out of its classical 19<sup>th</sup> century mode and into modernity. These texts also highlight the incorporation of conventions of the ballet into textual space, text which, I argue, belong to study of the canons of work by Huxley, Lee, Loy, and Cummings.

I do not claim to have uncovered all of the modernist blueprints for dance: there may be many yet buried. The reading I have conducted can and should be applied to other ballets and ballet scenarios by other writers, including Vladimir Nabokov, William Empson, George Gurdjieff, and Gertrude Stein.<sup>368</sup> Nevertheless, the purpose of this dissertation has been to dust off a representative sample of case studies that open up an important new line of enquiry in literary modernism. The study of literary modernism has disseminated the period’s rich convergence of the arts. To conclude, I revisit Susan Jones’s observation from my introduction that “dance’s relative neglect within studies of modernism remains a complex issue”. My venture here has certainly not simplified this complexity, but has rather

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<sup>367</sup> Louppe, Laurence. *Traces of Dance*. Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1994, p 33.

<sup>368</sup> These are Nabokov’s unpublished “Cavalier of the Moonlight”, Empson’s “The Elephant and the Birds”, Gurdjieff’s “The Struggle of the Magicians”, and Stein’s collaboration with composer Gerald Berners, *A Wedding Bouquet*.

added to it. The rich habit of modernism to mix all artistic disciplines into a single productive space means that modernism will never be simple, and there will inevitably be new avenues to explore.

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## APPENDICES

A.

*Parade* (1917)

From the souvenir programme of the  
Ballets Russes; translation by K.  
Anderson, 2013

Le décor représente les maisons à Paris  
un dimanche. Théâtre forain. Trois  
numéros de music-hall servent de parade.

***Prestidigitateur chinois.***

***Acrobates.***

***Petite fille américaine.***

Trois managers organisent la réclame.  
Ils se communiquent dans leur langage  
terrible que la foule prend la parade pour  
le spectacle intérieur et cherchent  
grossièrement à le lui faire comprendre.

Personne ne se laisse convaincre.

Après le numéro final, suprême effort  
des managers.

Chinois, acrobates et petite fille sortent  
du théâtre vide.

Voyant le crach des managers, ils  
essayent une dernière fois la vertu du  
leurs belles grâces.

Mais il est trop tard.

The scene depicts Parisian houses on a  
Sunday. A fairground. Three music hall  
acts serve the parade.

***Chinese magician.***

***Acrobats.***

***A young American girl.***

Three managers advertise the show.  
They communicate in their typical way  
that the crowd mistakes the parade for the  
show inside and looks coarsely at them in  
order to understand.

No one is persuaded to enter.

After the last act, the managers are  
exhausted.

The Chinese man, the acrobats and the  
little girl come back out of the empty  
theater.

Seeing the crashed managers, they try a  
final time to win their good graces.

But it is too late.

B.

*L'Homme et son Désir* (1918)

Claudé, Paul. *Oeuvres Complètes de Paul Claudé*: 215-217.  
(Translation by K. Anderson, 2012)

*La scène est divisée en trois étages, celui le milieu étant le plus large. Sur l'arête extrême du troisième se tiennent les Heures, exprimées par une ligne de femmes en marche.*

The stage is divided into three levels, the middle one being the largest. On the far edge of the third floor appear the Hours, embodied by a line of walking women.

I

*Quelques mesures pour indiquer que le drame continue quelque chose.*

Some measures [of music] to indicate that the drama continues.

II

*Apparition de la Lune.—Il y en aura deux, l'une à l'étage III, l'autre à l'étage I. C'est la Lune et son Réflét dans l'eau. Chacune porte un tambourin sur lequel la main vient s'inscrire. Elles marchent en sens inverse l'une de l'autre. Elles prennent toute la durée du drame pour traverser la scène en un mouvement très lent et quasi insensible. Chacune d'elles précédée par une servante qui la conduit. On peut l'imaginer entièrement recouverte d'un voile noir qui l'enveloppe complètement et ne laisse rien voir de la tête, du corps et des membres. On peut aussi en imaginer plusieurs. Chacun des mouvements de la Lune I et de sa servante (par exemple si elle est cachée un instant) est exactement et en même temps reproduit par la Lune II et son groupe.—Avec les Heures et la Lune dont la marche et le défilé sur des mouvements particuliers et à des paliers différents ne cessent pas pendant toute la durée de l'action, on obtient l'équivalent plastique de ce qu'est la basse pour la musique.*

The Moon appears.—There will be two of them, one on the third level and one on the first. These are the Moon and its reflection in the water. Both of them have a small drum inscribed with their hand. They move in opposite directions to one another. They spend the entire time performing a very slow movement, almost imperceptible. Both are led by a servant. One can imagine [the servant] completely covered with a black veil that envelops completely and leaves nothing to see [of the] the head, body and limbs. One can also imagine several [of them]. Each of the movements of the Moon I and his servant (eg if she is momentarily hidden) is exactly reproduced at the same time by the Moon II and his group.—The Hours and the Moon continue their specific movements on their different tiers without ceasing throughout the duration of the action; it is the visual equivalent of the bass in music.

III

*L'Homme endormi et le fantôme de la Femme Morte.—Ce fantôme est double, l'un qui marche devant lui comme pour le conduire, l'autre par-derrière qui le pousse:*

*alternativement. Elles l'égareront peu à peu comme on fait pour les enfants à qui on bande les yeux et qu'on fait virevolter de tous côtés pour qu'ils ne sachent plus où ils sont. Elles disparaissent par le fond de la scène.*

The sleeping Man and the ghost of the Dead Woman. —This ghost is twofold, one who goes before him as if to lead, the other behind which pushes: alternatingly. They lead him astray little by little like we do for children who are blindfolded and twirl them to all sides so that they no longer know where they are. [The double-ghost] disappears by the end of the scene.

#### IV

*L'Homme qui dort debout, oscillant comme dans un courant d'eau et comme sans aucun poids.*

The sleeping Man stands, oscillating as in a breeze, weightless.

#### V

*Toutes les choses de la forêt qui viennent regarder l'Homme endormi. Représentées uniquement par des rythmes et des mouvements. Pas de costumes. Danseurs et danseuses en costumes de travail. Mouvements sauvages et furtifs et tous à coup extrêmement rapides et précipités. Le papillon nocturne, l'oiseau, la biche, l'essaim de choses ennemies qu'on écarte, le feuille (un baiser sur la joue), les divers instruments de l'orchestre, etc. Tout cela ne doit pas durer trop longtemps.*

All the forest comes to watch Man asleep. Represented only by rhythms and movements. No costumes. Dancers in work clothes. Wild and stealthy movements and all of a sudden extremely fast. The moth, bird, deer, the swarm of departing enemies, the sheet (a kiss on the cheek), the various instruments of the orchestra, etc. All this should not take too long.

#### VI

*Danse de la passion. Un mouvement de va-et-vient de plus en plus ardent et désespéré, comme l'animal qui rencontre la paroi et revient sans cesse à la même place. Peut-être sans que les pieds changent de place. Toute espèce de modalités possibles. Par exemple au lieu d'un obstacle on peut imaginer parfois une odeur si délicieuse qu'elle lui ôte tout sentiment. Ou une main qui vient le chercher et qui le ramène en arrière. Puis l'idée fixe et le mouvement de désir désespéré recommencent.*

Dance of passion. A back and forth movement, increasingly ardent and desperate, like an animal meeting a wall and returning continuously to the same place. Maybe without the feet changing position. All kinds of modalities. For example [...] one can sometimes imagine a fragrance so delicious that it disables any other sense. Or a hand that goes on a search and brings back the opposite. Then the desperate desire to resume movement.

#### VII

*Réapparition de la Femme qui entraîne l'Homme peu à peu en tournant lentement devant lui sur la scène et l'enroule entièrement dans sa voile: quand il y est enveloppé, elle est nue. Ils marchent ainsi vers le côté de la scène à la distance marquée par le bras rigide de la Femme qui le tient écarté d'elle, la main appuyée sur le milieu de la figure.*

The Woman reappears. She leads the Man gradually, turning slowly in front of him at the front of the stage, wrapping him entirely in her veil: when he is wrapped, she is naked.



They walk along the side of the stage at a distance marked by the woman's rigid arms which keep him away from her, his hand resting on the middle of her figure.

### VIII

*La Lune I a disparu la première, la Lune II disparaît à son tour. Les Heures noires se sont écoulées. On voit apparaître les premières Heures blanches.*

Moon I disappears first, then Moon II. The black Hours have passed. We can see the first white Hours appearing.

Rio de Janeiro, 1917.

C.

*La Creation du Monde* (1923)

Cendrars, Blaise. As it appears in Häger, Bengt. *Ballets Suédois*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1990.

1. The curtain slowly rises on a dark stage. In the middle of the stage, we see a confused mass of intertwined bodies: chaos prior to creation. Three giant deities move slowly round the periphery. These are Nzame, Medere, and K'kva, the masters of creation.<sup>369</sup> They hold counsel together, circle round the formless mass, and utter magic incantations. 2. There is movement in the central mass, a series of convulsions. A tree gradually begins to grow, gets taller and taller, rising up straight, and when one of its seeds falls to the ground, a new tree sprouts. When one of the tree's leaves touches the ground, it lengthens, swells, rocks back and forth, begins to walk, becomes an animal. An elephant hanging in mid-air, a creeping tortoise, a crab, monkeys sliding down from the ceiling. The stage has gradually become lighter in the course of creation, and with each new animal it is brilliantly illuminated. 3. Each creature, with a dancer bursting from its centre, evolves in its own individual way, takes a few steps, then gently begins to move in a circle, gradually gathering speed as it revolves round the three initial deities. An opening appears in the circle, the three deities utter fresh incantations, and we see the formless mass seething. Everything vibrates. A monstrous leg appears, backs quiver, a hairy head emerges, arms are extended. All of a sudden, two torsos straighten, cling together: this is man and woman, suddenly upright. They recognize one another; they come face to face. 4. And while the couple perform the dance of desire, followed by the mating dance, all the formless beings that remained on the ground stealthily creep up and join in round the dance, leading it at a frenetic, dizzy pace. These are the N'guils, the invokers, the sorcerers and sorceresses, the fetishists. 5. The round's frenzy abates; it checks and slows and fades right out. The figures disperse in little groups. The couple stand apart in an embrace which lifts them up like a wave. Spring has arrived.

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<sup>369</sup> Nzame is an African creation god; the other two names are likely to be similar figures.

D.

*Le Boeuf sur le Toit, or The Nothing-Doing Bar*  
[Translated by Nancy E. Nes]

From an article by Jean Cocteau. Milhaud, Darius; Jean Cocteau; J. M.; Nancy E. Nes; Louis Laloy; Jean Bastia; Victoria Nes Kirby. *The Drama Review* (The 'Puppet' Issue) 16:3 (September 1972), 27-45.

FARCE By Jean Cocteau conceived and directed by the author  
Costumes by G.P. FAUCONNET  
Sets and masks by RAOUL DUFY  
Music by DARIUS MILHAUD  
Orchestra of 25 musicians conducted by WLADIMIR GOLDSCHMANN

Performed for the first time in Paris on Saturday, February 21, 1920 at the Comédie des Champs Elysées and in London on July 12, 1920 at the Coliseum

Cast in Paris	
The Barman	Paul Fratellini
The Red-haired Lady	Francois Fratellini
The Lady in a Low-cut Gown	Albert Fratellini
The Policeman	Busby
The Negro Boxer	Cyrillo
The Bookmaker	Roberts
The Man in Evening Clothes	Pinocchio
The Negro Playing Billiards	Boda, the Dwarf

*Le Boeuf sur le Toit* is a harshly lit bar. A yellow wooden screen is turned to hide the right wing. The corner of a billiard table juts out from the left upright, on which a garnet-red drapery is painted. In the left foreground, a leather armchair. In the right foreground, a table. The table and chair, visible in front of the curtain, indicate the grossness of the set like a type of prologue. As soon as the curtain rises, they take their positions in the ensemble. A ceiling fan. The fan turns slowly and casts shadows on the characters. They wear cardboard heads, three times normal size. They act in the style of the set. They are props that move. They all perform the essential movements of their roles in slow-motion, heavily like divers, and in opposition to the music.

The accessories: bottles, glasses, straws, cigarettes, chalk, saucers, are on the same scale as the artificial heads.

Five smoke rings made out of tulle are suspended from a border in the fore-ground that is painted with multicolored flags. The smoke rings begin at the chair and move toward the center. When the curtain rises, the barman is alone, all white, all pink. He shakes his cocktail shakers behind the bar. A cigar, fat like a torpedo, burns on a table behind the chair. The Negro Boxer in a sky-blue sweater enters left from the billiard room. He orders a cocktail, flexes his muscles, falls into a chair, crosses his legs and picks up his cigar. Instantly, the smoke rings become his. A little Negro boy in shirtsleeves exits from the billiard room backwards. Throughout the entire first sequence you can see him playing billiards in the wings, raising his leg and aiming, as in American lithographs.

One by one, the following enter: the Lady in the Low-cut Gown, dressed in red, very affected and common; the Red-haired Lady with paper hair, pretty with a masculine air, a little stooped, her hands in her pockets; the Gentleman in velvet evening clothes who looks at his wristwatch and does not leave his stool until he exits; a Bookmaker in scarlet, with gold teeth, wearing a grey bowler and a hunt-ing cravat fixed with a pearl the size of a small boule ball.

All these attractive people install themselves, play with dice. (The dice game between the Gentleman and the Bookmaker should be a mechanical tableau composed of their heads, the head of the barman behind a newspaper with billboard-size lettering, and the two dice, real cardboard boxes, which they move by turning them on their axes.) The elegant woman powders her face, discovers the Negro boy. He is struggling onto a stool. She puts him over her shoulder and carries him into the billiard room. The Red-haired Lady crosses the stage, removes the smoke rings with her arm, drops them around the barman's neck and flirts with the boxer. The Boxer leaves his chair to follow her. The bookmaker watches them, gets angry, stamps his foot, approaches stealthily, takes off his pearl pin and strikes the Negro on his head with it, who then collapses. The little Negro boy puts down his billiard cue, helps the Boxer, puts him in the chair and fans him with a napkin. A little triumphant dance by the Bookmaker. Tango by the women.<sup>370</sup> A whistle blows. It is the police. Everyone trembles. The Barman puts up a large placard: We only drink milk here, hides the glasses, bottles, distributes bowls and mixes the milk in a churn.

The giant Policeman sticks his head in. He enters. He looks the situation over. He approaches each person to smell their breath. He tastes the milk.

Influenced by the bucolic atmosphere, he dances a cheerful ballet. While the Policeman turns with the grace of a ballerina in the center, the Barman pulls a lever. The fan descends and decapitates the Policeman. He staggers. He searches for his head, tries to put it on backwards and falls dead.

Nothing shocks the night-owls. After rejoicing briefly, during which the Negro boy sings a romantic song with his hand on his heart, the Barman presents the Red-haired Lady with the head on a platter, but she remains indifferent, looking into the left wing of the stage.

She dances. In general, her dance is a take-off on Salome's dance. She stretches, she smokes, she shakes the Policeman's head like a cocktail. Finally, she walks on her hands like the Salomé in the Rouen Cathedral, circles around the head and, still on her hands, leaves the bar followed by the Bookmaker.

Before making their exit, the Lady in the Low-cut Gown turns aside, takes the rose out of the Gentleman's buttonhole and throws it at the Barman. The Gentleman pays, and they exit. The Boxer wakes up, rises, staggers and leaves in turn, followed by the little Negro boy, who refuses to pay the Barman.

Alone, the Barman tidies up. He sees the Policeman's corpse, drags it as best he can to a chair behind the table. The corpse tries to regain its balance. Once the corpse is propped up, the Barman brings in piles of saucers, which he places on the table, and a bottle of gin, which he empties into the corpse. He picks up the head, shoves it on between the shoulders. He tickles it and hypnotizes it. The Policeman revives. Then the Barman unwinds a bill three meters long.

P.S. The title of *Boeuf sur le Toit* was a Brazilian ensign. Paul Claudel gave it to me.

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<sup>370</sup> These are the first two dances specifically referenced in the farce. Note, however, that movement itself is not articulated, but is rather directed by the broad classifications of tango or ballet; otherwise, specific dances (like Salomé's dance) promote a sense of intertextuality.

E.

## THE BALLET OF THE NATIONS, 1915

Transcribed from Lee, Vernon. *The Ballet of the Nations*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1915.

FOR a quarter or so of a century, Death's celebrated Dances had gone rather out of fashion.

Then, with the end of the proverbially bourgeois Victorian age, there set in a revival of taste, and therefore of this higher form of tragic art, combining, as it does, the truest classical tradition with the romantic attractions of the best Middle Ages. In South Africa and the Far East, and then in the Near East quite recently, the well-known Ballet-Master Death had staged some of his vastest and most successful productions.

"It is time", said Satan, the Lessee of the World, to "re-open the Theatre of the West. The Politicians and Armament Shareholders have long got all the stage-property in readiness, and the Scene-Shifters of the Press are only waiting for the signal".<sup>371</sup>

"Your orders shall have my very best attention", answered Ballet-Master Death, "for, to tell you the truth, my dear Lord Satan, this West, with its Doctors and Economists and Trade Unions, is fast losing the habit of those sublimer forms of Art of which Aristotle pithily remarks, that they purge the world of its inhabitants by terror and pity. I myself will answer for the Dancers, if you will see to getting an adequate orchestra; for, as you are aware, Death himself cannot set the Nations dancing, still less keep up the dance, without the Music of the Passions".

"That shall be my business", said Satan, the World's immortal Impresario; "let us lose no time".<sup>372</sup>

The first Instrumentalist whom they called upon was Self-Interest, who is usually engaged to play the ground-bass of Human Life. But he had joined a Trade Union. "I am busy", yawned Self-Interest, "come some other day"; and he turned upon his ear, and dreamed of reconstituting Society upon a broader basis.

"Self-interest was always a dull dog; not a particle of divine fire in him" grumbled Death. "What was the good of wasting time on such a fellow?"

"May I remark that you Skeletons are apt to be a trifle testy?" answered Satan, quite unruffled in his delicate iron wings. "Don't you see that by knocking at Self-Interest's door, I have brought Fear, that over-retiring old slut, to her window? Hi! Widow Fear, it's only a couple of old friends inviting you to a little entertainment. Come down, my dear, and bring some of your ungraceful but amusing offspring".

So Fear, squalid beyond all other Passions, came down, hesitating just a little, because she had heard Self-Interest refuse the invitation. But she was speedily dragged along by her shabby, restless twins, Suspicion and Panic; and the family carried penny-whistles and foghorns and a cracked storm-and-massacre bell, genuine mediaeval but wrapped in yesterday's *Daily Mail* and *Globe*.<sup>373</sup>

"Rather an unrepresentable lot, though such first-rate performers", mused Satan; "we must have something handsome to make up for them, for the Nations have grown dreadfully superfine of late, and some of the other indispensable members of the band aren't very attractive either. Deign to join our little amateur orchestra", he cried in a fine round voice, and rustling his arch-angelic wings ceremoniously, "dear my Lady Idealism and my young Prince Adventure". And the couple, bride and bridegroom, came out of their palace of cloud and sunbeams; very magnificent they were, and of noblest bearing, if a little overdressed. Idealism carried a silver trumpet and Adventure a woodland horn. There came also Death's mother (or wife, for their family relations are best not inquired into) Sin, whom the gods call Disease; nor was there any need of calling her. With her came her well-

<sup>371</sup> The "World" refers to the theatre in which the *Ballet* is staged; that Satan is the "Lessee" indicates in legalistic and financial terms that he is the tenant for the proceedings.

<sup>372</sup> Lee's use of "Impresario" is an unflattering nod to infamous managers in the ballet scene like Serge Diaghilev.

<sup>373</sup> The modern newspapers are an instance of the *Ballet's* play with the concept of temporality.

known crew. Rapine, Lust, Murder and Famine, fitted out with bull-roarers and rattles and other cannibalistic instruments.

“Here comes Hatred with Self-Righteousness”, said Satan, nodding in the direction of a pair who pretended not to be acquainted, but were nevertheless hurrying together out of the Inn of Vanity, and trundling between them a huge double-bass and a small harmonium, upon which, once they had taken place, side by side, Self-Righteousness, most obligingly, gave Hatred his right pitch.

“That'll do to begin with”, cried Death, who was always in a hurry. “Heroism is sure to join as soon as we have well begun; and he can be plopped down anywhere. See! here come the Dancers! Just strike up a bit; Fear and you; Idealism; and you. Hatred, growl on the deep string; just a bar or two to make the Nations hurry up and get over that tiresome *mauvaise honte* of theirs”.<sup>374</sup>

The Nations had meanwhile assembled, each brilliant and tidy in its ballet dress, which was far better cut, and of handsomer stuff, of course, than its everyday broad-cloth or rags. And Idealism and Adventure, Hatred and Self-Righteousness, were already busy tuning, for unlike the rest of the orchestra they were sticklers for correctness, when Ballet-Master Death's preliminary instructions were cut short by the appearance of an unsuspected and very odd pair of additional musicians. For while the rest of the band were dressed, or in some cases undressed, in classical, mediaeval, biblical or savage costumes, these two were habited in a manner uncompromisingly modern, the one like a city clerk who should have joined the Red Cross, and the other, who was a lady, in the spectacles and smock most commonly seen in laboratories.

“Get out with you!” yelled Ballet-Master Death, jumping from his stool at the sight of the new-comers; and, turning to his orchestra, “Kick them out ! Kick out the new-fangled intruders who want to spoil our fun! Knock them down! Trample on them! Don't you see they are alien spies? Spies in the service of Life and Progress!”

“Hush, hush!” answered Satan, with an arch-angelic gesture which sent all the orchestra cowering to their places, and temporarily paralysed the skeleton arm of Death. “Which of us is master here, I wonder? Will you never learn manners, you bony old relic of the Stone Age, with your rabble of instruments fit for an ethnological museum?” Then, turning to the new-comers, “Please excuse his country manners, dear Madam Science and dear Councillor Organisation. You know the habits of Skeletons, their skulls are inevitably empty!”

“Pray don't mention it, my Lord”, answered Science, who had a first-rate gramophone tucked under her arm, “*qui sait comprendre sait tout pardonner*, so it is part of my professional duty to find excuses for your Ballet-Master's behaviour towards us”.<sup>375</sup>

“It's all as it should be”, added Organisation, who had begun un-packing a very handy miniature pianola and its various rollers. “Of course Science and I are permanently in the service of Life and Progress. But that firm is worthing slack at present, so we feel at liberty to take a temporary engagement”.

“Nothing could be more conducive to the success of our Ballet”, answered Satan, pressing their hands affectionately but lightly between his claws, which Science took this opportunity of examining; “and I only hope our collaboration may become permanent. Of course Death”, and he lowered his arch-angelic voice to the politest whisper, “is getting a bit old for his job and dreadfully prejudiced. Besides, I fear it can't be denied that you have done one or two things which have made ignorant people gossip in a manner calculated to rub him the wrong way. Come here, you peppery old Ballet-Master”, and Satan playfully sent an electric stream through the Skeleton which sent him shivering and rattling like a brake of dry reeds, “come and shake hands with this illustrious lady and gentleman, who will keep up our Ballet with their wonderful mechanical instruments when the rest of our classic band have neither breath nor strings left. And now, as soon as our new friends are

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<sup>374</sup> petty shamefulness

<sup>375</sup> “he who understands knows forgiveness”

seated in the front place they deserve, please begin your instructions. And, by the way, you haven't yet given out the title of our new Ballet”.

“This Ballet of ours”, began Death, after rapping three times on his desk, “is called the Ballet of the Nations. Nothing very new in the title, but one that always draws. As regards instructions, long experience has taught me that I can leave both my orchestra and my corps de ballet—the Nations at present have all got excellent heads—to their own inspiration, provided only they will keep their eyes constantly fixed on my baton.<sup>376</sup> The more they depart from the regulation steps, cutting capers according to circumstances and inventing terrifically new figures, the more they will find, odd as it may appear, that their vis-a-vis as well as their partners will respond; and the more indissolubly interlocked will become the novel and majestic pattern of destruction which their gory but indefatigable limbs are weaving for the satisfaction of our enlightened Stage-Lessee, my Lord Satan, and the admiration of History. As to the music, all that is wanted is that the rhythm be well marked, the discords plentiful but adequately relieved by allied harmonies and powerful national unisons; and that our Orchestra of Human Passions should refresh itself with strong spirits as often as is compatible with not falling asleep. The scheme of the Ballet is very simple, and its variety arises out of the great number—I hope I may say the constantly increasing number—of Dancing Nations. The main motif is, of course—for we are thoroughly up to date, although our dear Impresario does not give us credit for it—the main theme is that each Nation is repelling the aggression of its vis-à-vis, and at the same time defending its partner. There are two minor themes of outstanding Dancers flying to the rescue of the main groups: the two themes together giving rise to all manner of surprising inventions. It is, I need scarcely say, very conducive to a fine effect that all the Nations should keep a strictly innocent expression of countenance, while endeavouring to tear off as much of the costume and ornaments, and lop off as many as possible of the limbs of their vis-à-vis. At the end of the main action the Chief Dancers may be called upon to shift sides or take part in a general breakdown of a highly modern and anarchical style, something like the Paris impromptu after the *pas de deux* of 1870, only on a vast scale. And now! the first position, please!”

“One moment!” cried Satan; “I'm sorry to be always interrupting, but what about Heroism? He's sure to join, and where shall we place him when he turns up?”

“Oh, just anywhere”, whispered Ballet-Master Death; “he is always the most obliging of my orchestra, although he usually comes in after we have begun. And not a bit difficult to please, like Idealism and even Adventure, he won't mind sitting alongside that filthy slut Fear, or surrounded by the cannibal music of the Companions of Sin. But here he comes!” For at that moment there entered Heroism, with limbs like a giant, blushes like a girl, and merry eyes like a child's.

“Welcome, Heroism, our Prince of Tenors,” cried Satan, with sham cordiality, for there was no love lost between the new-comer and himself, although Heroism was sincerely attached to Death. “We were just saying, my dear young friend, that there is nothing you shrink from, and that you are the most modest and reliable of our orchestra. Why, I remember the French Revolution Ballet, when Heroism and Panic played not only a duet, but at the same instrument, four hands!<sup>377</sup> That was Lessee Satan's finest Ballet hitherto, with the Marat theme in Paris and the Hoche theme on the frontier. But, with good-will, this new dance of our Ballet-Master Death may be still finer and as long.

Death smiled, for he loved Heroism.

“Come here, my boy”, he said, “you have always been dutiful and loving to your old daddy Death, and cared for him more than for any other of the Immortals”. So saying,

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<sup>376</sup> Here Lee references a statement in *STW*: “I grant you the heads of the nations are somewhat hard featured. But the bodies of the nations are always sound and virginal; and what concerns me most, their heart is always in the right place”. (*STW* pp. 53-54) The heads of the nations, which rule them, are fully obedient to the Ballet-Master's baton, as figureheads of real nations had proved to be obedient to the War. Blind obedience is what makes both events possible.

<sup>377</sup> This reference to one of Death's earlier Ballets suggests that, to Lee, all wars follow a similar performative scheme.

the Skeleton Ballet-Master tapped the budding cheeks of Heroism, that star-like youth, with eyes which laughed but saw not, for even as his cousin Love, he is blind from the cradle. And Heroism, at the sound of Death's well-known voice, kissed his bony fingers with rapture; and, grasping the drum with which he accompanies his heavenly voice, sat down obedient between Fear and Hatred, unconscious of their foulness.

The way the Ballet began was this: Among the Nations appointed by Satan to dance, for a few had to be kept to swell the audience, which would otherwise have consisted only of sundry sleepy Virtues and of the Centuries-to-Come, which are notoriously bodiless and difficult to please—among those Dancing Nations there was a very little one, far too small to have danced with the others, and particularly unwilling to dance at all, because it knew by experience that the dances of Ballet-Master Death oftenest took place upon its prostrate body.<sup>378</sup> So it was told, as it always had been told, it need do nothing but stay quite quiet for the others to dance round. And as it stood there, in the middle of the Western Stage, two or three of the tallest and finest Dancers danced up in a silent step, smiling, wreathing their arms and blowing kisses, all of which is the ballet-language for “Don't be afraid, we will protect you”, and danced away again wagging their finger at a particular one of their vis-à-vis, who was also curtsying and smiling in the most engaging manner on the other side.<sup>379</sup> During this prelude Idealism, Self-Righteousness and a one-eyed hidden Fiddler called Statecraft, played a few conventional variations on the well-known diplomatic hymn to Peace, to which the Nations pirouetted unconcernedly about, although Fear, with Suspicion and Panic, were beginning to whistle and to thump on that mediaeval tocsin-bell concealed in greasy newspapers.

And as the Smallest-of-all-the-Corps-de-Ballet stood quite alone in the middle of the Western Stage, that same tall and very well-trained Dancer sidled up to it with polite gestures of “by your leave”, and, suddenly placing his colossal horny paws on the Tiny One's shoulders, prepared for leap-frog. But at a sign from Death's baton, and with a hideous crash of all the instruments of Satan's orchestra, and a magnificent note from Heroism's clear voice, the poor Smallest-Dancer-of-All tripped up that Giant and made him reel. But the Giant instantly recovered his feet, although his eyes became bloodshot and his brain swam. And, flinging the poor Smallest-Dancer on the floor, he set to performing on its poor little body one of the most terrific *pas seuls* that Ballet-Master Death had ever invented, while the vis-à-vis Nations danced slowly up, till they all came to grips over that Smallest-of-all-the-Dancers, who lay prone on the ground, and continued so to lie, pounded out of all human shape into a dancing-mat for the others.<sup>380</sup>

“This first figure of our Ballet”, said the world's Impresario Satan, rising from his seat and bowing to the audience, that is to say, the Nations who wouldn't dance, and the sleepy Virtues and the Centuries-to-Come; “this first figure of our Ballet is called The Defence of the Weak. It will continue unremittingly at the Western End of the Stage, while the Eastern End is occupied by a not entirely symmetrical (for symmetry is apt to be *fade*) choreographic invention called the Steam-Roller Movement which will end up in the Triumph of such small Nationalities (and I sincerely hope many will join!) as may have any limbs left to dance with”.<sup>381</sup>

During this first figure of the Ballet the scenery of that Western End of the Stage had undergone a slow change, and continued changing in a manner such that the Ages-to-Come, seated among the audience, admitted to one another these new scenic displays surpassed all others with which the courtesy of Satan had wiled away their ennui. For, whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault lit up by

<sup>378</sup> As previously mentioned, this must be meant to signify Belgium.

<sup>379</sup> Lee's definition of “ballet-language” evokes typical balletic concepts of gesture and abstraction as well as romantic sensibilities which, for Lee, effectively mask the horrific underpinnings of the dance.

<sup>380</sup> In ballet, “*pas seuls*” are solo dances.

<sup>381</sup> tasteless



the flare of distant blazing farms, and its blue solemnity rent by the fitful rocket-tracks of shells and the Roman-candles and Catherine-wheels of far-off explosions. Until, little by little, the heavens, painted such a peaceful blue, were blotted out by volumes of flamelit smoke and poisonous vapours, rising and sinking, coming forward and receding like a stifling fog, but ever growing denser and more blinding, and swaying obedient to Death's baton no less than did the bleeding Nations of his Corps-de-Ballet.<sup>382</sup> In and out of that lurid chasm they moved, by twos or threes, now lost to view in the billows of darkness, now issuing thence towards the Ballet-Master's desk; or suddenly revealed, clasped in terrific embrace, by the meteor-curve of a shell or the leaping flame of an exploding munition-magazine, while overhead fluttered and whirred great wings which showered down bomb-lightnings. Backwards and forwards moved the Dancers in that changing play of light and darkness, and undergoing uncertain and fearful changes of aspect.

Since, you should know, that Nations, contrary to the opinion of Politicians, are immortal. Just as the Gods of Valhalla could slash each other to ribbons after breakfast and resurrect for dinner, so every Nation can dance Death's Dance however much bled and maimed, dance upon stumps, or trail itself along, a living jelly of blood and trampled flesh, providing only it has its Head fairly unhurt. And that Head, which each Nation calls its Government, but the other Nations call "France", or "Russia", or "Britain", or "Germany", or "Austria" for short, that Head of each Dancing Nation (except that of the Smallest-Dancer, who never ceased being prostrate on the ground) is very properly helmetted, and rarely gets so much as a scratch, so that it can continue to catch the Ballet-Master's eye, and order the Nation's body to put forth fresh limbs, and, even when that is impossible, keep its stump dancing ever new figures in obedience or disobedience to what are called the Rules of War. This being the case, Death kept up the dance regardless of the state of the Dancers, and also of the state of the Stage, which was such that, what between blood and entrails and heaps of devastated properties, it was barely possible to move even a few yards.

Yet dance they did, lopping each others' limbs and blinding one another with spirits of blood and pellets of human flesh. And as they appeared and disappeared in the moving wreaths of fiery smoke, they lost more and more of their original shape, becoming, in that fitful light, terrible uncertain forms, armless, legless, recognisable for human only by their irreproachable-looking heads which they carried stiff and high even while crawling and staggering along, lying in wait, and leaping and rearing and butting as do fighting animals; until they became, with those decorous well-groomed faces, mere unspeakable hybrids between man and beast, they who had come on to the stage so erect and beautiful. For the Ballet of the Nations, when Satan gets it up regardless of expense, is an unsurpassed spectacle of transformations, such as must be witnessed to be believed in.

Thus on they danced their stranger and stranger antics. And, as they appeared by turns in that chaos of flame and darkness, each of those Dancing Nations kept invoking Satan, crying out to him, "Help me, my own dear Lord". But they called him by Another Name.

And Satan, that creative Connoisseur, rejoiced in his work and saw that it was very good.

"Dear Creatures", he murmured to himself, where he throned invisible above the audience of Neutral Peoples and Sleepy Virtues and Ages-to-Come, "how true it is that great artistic exhibitions, especially when they address themselves to the Group-Emotion, invariably bring home to the Nations that there is, after all, a Power transcending their ephemeral existence! Indeed that is one reason why I prefer the Ballet of the Nations to any of the other mystery-plays, like Earthquake and Pestilence, which Death puts on our stage from time to time. The music is not always very pretty, at once too archaic and too ultra-modern for philistine taste, and the steps are a trifle monotonous. But it gives immense

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<sup>382</sup> The changing atmosphere is further explained in STW near the beginning of the *Ballet*, in which a curtain or scrim of some sort, painted with a pastoral scene, gives way gradually to a cosmic landscape of stars and rockets and the like. Lee seems to suggest that the War is detached—even geographically—from reality.

scope for moral beauty, and revives religious feeling in all its genuine primeval polytheism. It answers perfectly to what the Spaniards call an Auto Sacramental, a sacred drama having all the attractions of a bull-fight.<sup>383</sup> I grant the Heads of the Nations are occasionally a bit hard-featured. But the Bodies of the Nations are always sound and virginal; and their heart is always in the right place. And for true sublimity”, purred Satan gently on his invisible throne, “give me, I always say, one of Death's dances performed by Nations each with its heart absolutely in the right place, and perfectly obedient to its traditional Head”.

So the Ballet went on. But for this it was necessary to keep up the music of that orchestra of Passions and Habits which sat around the slippery and reeking stage: Widow Fear with her nimble children. Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, foghorns and that mediaeval tocsin-bell in its wrapper of newspapers; Idealism and Adventure, that splendid pair, blowing their silver trumpet and wood-land horn; Hatred, who was always tuning afresh at the harmonium of Self-Righteousness; Sin, whom the Gods call Disease, and her classic crew Rapine, Lust and Murder, with their cannibal band of bull-roarers and rattles; Science and Organisation seated a little apart, for none of the others liked their new-fangled looks, but whose gramophone and pianola went on unflaggingly when all the other musicians began showing signs of fatigue; and only Heroism, a smile in his clear blind eyes, found ever fresh breath and ever more jubilant notes.

I have just said that the rest of the band were beginning to flag; either because the Passions are notoriously deficient in staying-power, or because, in the case of the less noble ones, they had fuddled themselves with the strong liquor of literature from Satan's tap-room, and were coming in all at random, Suspicion and Panic, notably, deafening the Heads of the Nations, and Fear, poor slut, being seized with delirium tremens. None of these things were noticed by the Dancers, but they danced a little less fiercely, and began mistaking their vis-à-vis for partners and vice versa, to the despair of the Ballet-Master, who wheeled from side to side at his desk, cracking his fleshless joints like castagnettes, and hitting the somnolent Human Motives of the orchestra tremendous whacks with his baton of fire-hardened root-of-prejudice. But Satan began to fear lest the performance might end untimely, for, except the voice of Heroism and the mechanical instruments of Science and Organisation, the sounds were getting feeble and intermittent, and the Nations were beginning to halt and stumble, and even to curtsy to each other as if the end might be at hand.

“This will never do”, said Satan to himself, “Why! we haven't yet come to the figure of Famine and Insurrection!” So, beckoning with his arch-angelic claw to the followers of Sin, he whispered Rapine, Murder and Lust to fetch him two new players from among the Sleepy Virtues of the Audience.

Sleepy indeed they seemed, and some, like Wisdom, Equanimity and Temperance, let alone Truthfulness, had long since fallen into consoling dreams, after closing their eyes and bunging-up their ears against sights and sounds repugnant to their principles, but which they had not grit enough to interrupt. But among the Virtues two were not asleep, and sat motionless under the spell of hideous fascination; their eyes fixed, their hearing intent, with horror so great it almost turned to pleasure. These two were called Pity and Indignation, sister and brother of divinest breed; she, wan like waters under moonlight and as gentle, murmurous and lovely, and also, like such waters, dangerous in her innocence. The other, golden and vivid as flame, and like flame, tipped with terrible scarlet, purifying but devastating.

To them, who were fascinated with horror before that dance, there sprang, at Satan's bidding, Rapine, Murder and Lust, the crew of Death's Mother-Paramour Sin, whom the Gods call Disease. And straightway that noble pair of twins, Pity and Indignation, responded to the hideous summons. Hand in hand they leaped from among the sleeping Virtues, and flew, on rushing pinions, into the midst of Satan's orchestra. Fear and her brood fell back. Idealism and Adventure, by this time wellnigh spent with breathless blowing of their silver trumpet and hunting-horn, eagerly made room for them. Heroism,

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<sup>383</sup> Satan explains this reference adequately, but importantly, Lee is continuing to link her *Ballet* to similar dances of death found among various cultures.

that blind, smiling young giant, recognised at once Pity's delicious healing breath and Indignation's fiery blast; he shook himself, and with renewed vigour his godlike youthful voice sang out words which no one distinguished but all the world understood. And Sin, with her crew, fell down at the new-comers' feet and fawned upon them.

Even before either of that immortal pair had uttered a sound, the flagging Dancers, the bleeding Nations, weary of that stage slippery with blood and entrails, felt the wind of the wings of Pity and Indignation; and, in its pure breath, suddenly revived.

The holy pair required no instruments. Pity merely sobbed, and her sobs were like the welling-up notes of many harps, drowning the soul in tender madness. But Indignation hissed and roared like a burning granary when the sparks crackle as they fly into the ripe standing harvest, and the flames wave scores of feet high in the blast of their own making.

Death was overpowered with delight.

"Now nothing can stop the dancing", he cried; "and this shall yet be the greatest triumph of Ballet-Master Death!" and, rapping on his desk, spoke as follows: "Ladies and Gentlemen, dear valiant Nations of my Corps-de-Ballet! we will now proceed to the third and last figure; the last because, as you know, it is made never to end! For it is called *Revenge*".<sup>384</sup>

"You might have trusted to me, dear Ballet-Master Death", purred Satan, the World's great Stage-Lessee, quite softly to himself. "Pity and Indignation can renew Death's dance when all the Nations have danced themselves to stumps, and the ordinary band, except perhaps Fear and her Children, can fiddle and blow no longer".

And thus the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing.

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<sup>384</sup> The fact that Death's dance is unstoppable reinforces the *Ballet's* ties to the *danse macabre*.

F.

“Ballet in Criticism: Callot” (1923)

Aldous Huxley. *Essays New and Old*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1926, pp. 61-67.

There is no orchestra; but two-and-thirty players perform in unison upon as many harpsichords the most brilliant compositions of Domenico Scarlatti.<sup>385</sup> The dry glitter of the instruments fills and exhilarates the air. It is a music that might cure phthisis.<sup>386</sup>

The scene represents a flat and almost limitless plain, quite bare except for a few small Italian houses, miles away on the horizon, and a vast oak tree which rises a little to the right of centre and within a few feet of the back of the stage. There are no leaves on the tree. It is winter, and the grey, intense light of a northern day illumines the scene.

In the foreground and to the left, a company of vagabond actors are grouped around their hooded waggon. Here are Guarsetto and Mestolino in their linen coats and baggy trousers, their shovel hats stuck with parrots' feathers, their goat's beards and paper noses.<sup>387</sup> Razullo in tights, tattered jerkin and page's cap, plays on a guitar, whose little belly and interminable long neck make it the very antithesis of Curcurucu, who carries—cautiously, carefully, tremulously on a poor, thin pair of legs—a great paunch, hunched shoulders, and a jutting rump. Fracischina and Signora Lucia are dressed in long, flowing skirts, tight bodice, sleeves like a bishop's, fluttering ringlets.<sup>388</sup>

Opposite, on the right of the stage, a group of ladies and gentlemen, gipsies, beggars, idiots, stand watching them. In the open space between, the actors step out and dance.

They dance, alone, in pairs and trios, in every variety of combination. Now it is Franca Trippa and Fritellino kicking up their heels at one another in a sly, low jig. Now Signora Lucia steps nobly and gracefully through a pavane, while Razullo postures over his guitar, showing off the elegance of his legs in a series of lunging steps.<sup>389</sup> Curcurucu walks behind him, trying to imitate, as well as his belly and his feeble legs will allow, these heroic attitudes.<sup>390</sup> They are followed by Fracischina and the two satyr-pantaloons.<sup>391</sup> They dance as though intoxicated; not with wine or any of the grosser joys, but with some more rarefied poison. They dance as though they were philosophers who had succeeded at last in picking the lock of the Absolute's back door. They dance as though they had discovered in a sudden flash that life is what it is. The pantaloons dance with their arms akimbo, their hands twisted back downwards, jutting rump answering to jutting belly—a bounding hornpipe.<sup>392</sup> Arms upstretched and beating a tambourine over her head, Fracischina is all aspiring lines and vertical leaping. She is the living, leaping maypole, and the pantaloons,

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<sup>385</sup> Giuseppe Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757); influential Italian court composer of the Baroque and Classical periods.

<sup>386</sup> A wasting disease, *esp.* one involving the lungs; *spec.* tuberculosis. Now chiefly *hist.* (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

<sup>387</sup> Guarsetto, Mestolino, Razullo, Curcurucu, Fracischina, Signora Lucia, Franca Trippa, Fritellino, Malagamba and Buonavita are *commedia dell'arte*-derived figures depicted in pairs throughout Callot's series of etchings *balli di sfessania*.

<sup>388</sup> In *commedia dell'arte* Fracischina is a female servant character.

<sup>389</sup> A pavane is “A grave and stately court dance in slow double time [...] The pavane was popular in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, often occurring as a prelude to a faster dance or sequence of dances” (*OED*).

<sup>390</sup> In Callot's etchings this is spelled ‘Cucurucu’. I will, however, keep to Huxley's transcription of the name.

<sup>391</sup> While it is difficult to determine to which two characters this refers, the base is derived from Pantalone, the foolish elderly man character in *commedia dell'arte*. The ‘satyr’ prefix may reference an earlier description of Guarsetto and Mestolino's goat-like features.

<sup>392</sup> “Akimbo” describes a posture with hands on hips and turned-out elbows.

Guarsetto and Mestolino, go leaping round her.<sup>393</sup> They dance, they dance as though they would never stop.

In the midst of their dancing, across the dry and glittering music of the harpsichords is heard, far off, the disquieting sound of drums, beating a march. It grows louder and louder, till at last, at the back of the stage. There files in a company of pikemen.<sup>394</sup> Behind the dancing philosophers the soldiers manoeuvre. Their long pikes come together, fall apart, making arithmetical patterns against the sky. It is a grave Pythagorean dance of pure Number.<sup>395</sup>

When, panting, Fracischina and the pantaloons have made an end, the leaders of this troop, redoubtable Captain Malagamba, redoubtable Buonavita, dressed, like all the other gentlemen, in the romantic uniform of Puss-in-Boots, come striding forward.<sup>396</sup> Theirs is a stamping dance of swashbucklers. The pikes continue to manoeuvre against the colourless sky.

A scene of descriptive pantomime follows the dance. The Captains point up towards the branches of the oak tree; then. Turning to their pikemen, make a signal of command. The ranks divide; we see a pinioned prisoner kneeling at the feet of a friar, who holds aloft a crucifix and with choreographic gestures exhorts to repentance. The ranks close again.

It is a little matter of hanging.

The company applauds: 'Bravissimo!' Then in a ring, actors, idiots, gentry, beggars and gipsies—all hand in hand—dance round the two Captains, who blow kisses and bow their appreciation of the compliment.

The ring breaks up. Six acrobats enter with a long ladder and a rope. They balance the ladder on end, climb up, slide down. All the tricks that one can do with a ladder are done. It is set up at last against the tree, and the rope is fastened to the principal branch so that the noose hangs at a point immediately above the centre of the stage.

The ranks reopen. Slowly the prisoner and the gesticulating friar advance. All crowd forward, turning their backs on the audience, to witness the spectacle. Captain Malagamba takes the opportunity to embrace the Signora Lucia. She, at the imminence of his amorous whiskers, starts away from him. Malagamba follows; there is a brief dance of retreat and pursuit. The Captain has driven her into a corner, between the shafts of the waggon, and is about to ravish an embracement in good earnest, when Razullo, happening to look round, sees what is going on. Brandishing his long-necked guitar, he bounds across the stage. And with one magistral blow lays out the Captain along the floor. Then, pirouetting, he slips off with the delivered Signora. Meanwhile, the prisoner has been led forward to the foot of the ladder, on the rungs of which, like a troop of long-limbed monkeys, gambol the playful acrobats. The spectators have eyes for nothing else.

One of the village idiots, who lacks the wit to appreciate the charms of the spectacle, sees as he gapes vacantly about him the prostrate carcase of Malagamba, approaches, and bends over it in imbecile sympathy. Malagamba utters a groan; some one in the crowd looks round, calls the attention of the rest. There is a rush. The imbecile is seized, Malagamba raised to his feet, plied with strong waters from a bottle. Buonavita interrogates the idiot, who is held, smiling and drivelling, between two arquebusiers.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> In this context, the festive maypole image contrasts the morbid consequences of the similarly-shaped tree.

<sup>394</sup> military men armed with pikes

<sup>395</sup> Places the dance in a specific intellectual/artistic time frame when mathematics influenced music and dance both technically and spiritually: "Contemplation of the 'divine dance of numbers' which held both the secrets of music and of the celestial motions became the link in the mystic union between human thought and the *anima mundi*." (Arthur Koestler. *The Act of Creation*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964, pp. 259-260.)

<sup>396</sup> In Callot's etching, spellings are 'Mala Gamba' and 'Bellavita'. Huxley references Charles Perrault's infamous trickster Master Cat; David Brown has noted the presence of the Puss-in-Boots character elsewhere in ballet, in Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* (in *Tchaikovsky*, New York: Pegasus Books LLC, 2007, p. 351).

<sup>397</sup> a soldier armed with a harquebus, a prototype of the musket

While, in the foreground, the descriptive pantomime of the idiot's examination, trial and condemnation is being danced through, behind and above the heads of the spectators, the acrobats are hauling the prisoner up the ladder; they have slipped the noose over his head, they have turned him off. His feet dance a double-shuffle on the wind, then gradually are still.

Captain Buonavita has by this time duly sentenced the idiot to execution. Still smiling, he is led down stage towards the foot of the ladder. The friar proffers him the crucifix.

Everybody dances. Malagamba has by this time sufficiently recovered to seize the vaulting Fracischina by the waist and toss her up into the air. The beggars, the Puss-in-Boots gentlemen, the actors, the idiots even—each seizes a partner, throws her up, brings her floating slowly down. As though reluctant to come to earth again. Fritellino and Franca Trippa jig in and out among the couples, slapping at them with their wooden swords. And the two pantaloons, who know that the world is what it is and are intoxicated with a truth that is 43 percent above proof, go leaping and leaping, back and forth, across the front of the stage.<sup>398</sup>

Still smiling, the idiot is coaxed up the rungs of the ladder. Like the debonairest of black spider-monkeys, the acrobats frisk around him, and in the extreme background the moving pikes come together, break apart, asserting unanswerably that two and two make four and that five over blue beans is the number of blue beans that make five.

As the spider-monkeys drop the noose over the idiot's head there is a long commanding roll of drums. All turn round towards the ladder, forming up in an ordered line across the stage; they stand quite still. Only the two pantaloons, intent on their hornpipe, dance on to the glittering phrases of the harpsichords.

The drums roll on. The noose is tightened. For the last time the friar raises his crucifix towards the idiot's lips; the idiot roars with laughter. The drums change their rhythm to the rub-a-dub rataplan of a dancing march. Without changing their positions the spectators begin to mark time, heel and toe. Their feet twinkle, their heads bob up and down. The spider-monkeys make a sudden gesture, and the idiot is turned off to swing by the side of the other victim. His feet as they tread air keep time with the drums and the silent heel and toe of those who beat the solid earth. Rub-a-dub rataplan, rataplan, rub-dub.

Suddenly there is silence; drums and harpsichords are still. From far off there comes a sound of singing; it swells, it increases, piercingly beautiful. A procession of monks and choristers passes slowly across the stage. They are singing the *Tenebrae* of Victoria.<sup>399</sup> *Dum crucifixissent Jesum....* The voices rise and fall, cross and interpenetrate—five solitary agonies that have come together to make a final sixth and more appalling, a sixth and more piercing, more beautiful agony.<sup>400</sup> Slowly the priests and choristers cross the stage; the music swells and then once more decreases, fading, fainting along the air.

The Puss-in-Boots Captains and their gentlemen, the actors, the beggars, the gipsies and the idiots stare after the retreating procession in an open-mouthed astonishment. And well they may, for the impresario has made an absurd mistake.<sup>401</sup> This music belongs to an entirely different ballet.

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<sup>398</sup> probably whiskey

<sup>399</sup> Eighteen choral responsories by Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611)

<sup>400</sup> Traditional opening of the verse: "*Tenebrae factae sunt, dum crucifixissent Jesum Judaei*/It became dark, when the Jews had crucified Jesus."

<sup>401</sup> Huxley may be referring to himself, tongue in cheek, as a Diaghilev-like figure in who in this case has committed a grave error through the 'execution' of the text.

G.

Ballet in Criticism: SCRIBINE, OR THE VOLUPTUOUS DENTIST  
BALLET TO THE MUSIC OF SCRIBINE'S 'PROMETHEUS'<sup>402</sup>

Aldous Huxley. *Essays New and Old*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1926, pp. 140-146.

A dentist's operating chamber. The chair is placed in the centre of the stage, on a high dais approached by steps from all four sides.<sup>403</sup> A carpet of rich magenta plush covers the dais, and the black chair is upholstered in the same material. The back-cloth is of watered orange silk. A row of nautch girls forms a dado to the sumptuous wall.<sup>404</sup> They remain at their post throughout the whole scene, swaying a little from side to side and making with their arms the movement of seaweed stirring languidly in a subaqueous wind. Their torsos, meanwhile, are in a state of unremitting tremolo; it is the well-known Dance of the Seven Stomachs.<sup>405</sup> They wear bejewelled reggipetti of pure gold, and over their bent knees their skirts are Javanese in contour.<sup>406</sup>

From the ceiling a thick black cable hangs in a graceful and sinister catenary, like a rope in one of Piranesi's prisons.<sup>407</sup> It has, one clearly sees, something to do with the dentist's drill.

The music strikes up—'Prometheus,' the Poem of Fire—and from either side of the stage three female acrobats, carrying enormously magnified versions of those bright steel prods and probes of the dentist's armoury, rush in. From the waist downwards they wear pink fleshings; from the waist upwards they are trained nurses, collared, cuffed and capped.<sup>408</sup> It is they who record the Dentist's appointments, bring restoratives to fainting patients and cut the little gags of lint against the moment of stopping. With the first bars, then, in they rush. Against the slowly swaying, the tremulously palpitating background of the nautch girls, agile and acrobatic, they dance. The dance works up to a culmination, when the leader of the troop skips up on the dais, drives the end of her probe into an eyelet hole in front of the chair, throws up her legs and remains balanced, head downwards, her hands resting on a cross-piece at the top of the probe, her back—the fleshings above, the nurse's collar below—presented to the audience; while her five companions, with an ever-increasing velocity, with vaster and ever vaster bounds, go polejumping on their shining prods round and round the dais, like a troop of lady bull-fighters, tight-waisted and with long, pink, tapering legs, vaulting from between the horns of the charging beast in the royal bull-ring of Cnossos.<sup>409</sup>

The dance disintegrates, the balancer on the dais comes tumbling with a studied grace to earth, and the troop manoeuvres into open formation on one side of the stage.

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<sup>402</sup> Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (Russian, 1872-1915)—by the punctuation it is unclear whether we are meant to read the Dentist as Scriabin, or just to note his musical work. Undoubtedly it is the ballet's soundtrack: Scriabin's 1910 'Poem of Fire' introduced the 'mystic chord', represented in the ballet as the ecstatic sexual climax.

<sup>403</sup> The chair on a "dais" invites a number of possible readings—the focus of religious ceremony is one, and an execution platform is equally viable.

<sup>404</sup> "[N]autch" references a South-Asian dance performed by one or more professional dancing girls (*OED*); that their bodies form a "dado" means that they are in a flattened, architectural formation, lining the wall behind (this echoes the image in Figure 8 of the "frieze of women").

<sup>405</sup> The "tremolo" is vibration of their torsos; the "Dance of the Seven Stomachs" pokes fun at Salomé's "Dance of the Seven Veils".

<sup>406</sup> "[R]eggipetti" are brassieres.

<sup>407</sup> This, like the later term "Piranesian", probably refers to the motifs in the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Italian, 1720-1778), who depicted imaginary prisons with maze-like architecture containing vast systems of torture devices.

<sup>408</sup> "[F]leshings" are likely flesh-coloured stockings.

<sup>409</sup> "Cnossos" is likely Knossos, a Bronze-Age settlement in Crete.

Shot from a spring-board in the opposite wings, the *premier danseur* enters like a flying saint in a picture by Tintoretto.<sup>410</sup> It is the Dentist. He wears a black alpaca jacket and tight check trousers. Above the collar a great false head of wax. Across the cranial hemisphere, seventeen long black hairs are drawn, arachnean bridges between the curly tufts above the ears. The mask is quite featureless, a pink blank with bellying high lights; there is only a wide, bright, toothy smile, topped by a waxed black moustache.

He pirouettes a little with the Trained Nurse against the slow seaweed and the seismic tremolo of the nautch girls—but always with a movement of expectancy, with reiterated turnings and yearnings towards the wings. And at last she comes, radiating ecstasy—the *premiere danseuse*.<sup>411</sup> Tooth-white, gum-pink, with golden tresses semi-permanently undulating over the spherical false head, whose one feature, the smile, is like a swag of pearls looped up between a pair of dimples—in she floats on toes that barely touch the floor. The music becomes perceptibly more clotted. Prometheus points the way upwards; the philosophy grows profounder in its import.

And now the real action of the ballet begins. Seaweed-armed, seismically stomached, the nautch girls provide the fundamental bass of movement. In front of them, the choreographic drama unfolds itself. It is a theme of pursuit and flight: Pan, Syrinx; Dentist-Apollo and Daphne-Patient.<sup>412</sup> He approaches, high-steppedly gambolling. Timorously she stands, head sideways tilted and downcast, arms close to sides, hands clasped before her. He approaches, approaches, playfully amorous, dancing like a snipe, gambolling like a spider. Every now and then he throws a cart-wheel, dances a few steps on his hands, or jumps, on spring-heeled shoes, six or seven feet into the air. He approaches, he approaches. And though she trembles, though she winces like a colt, though she seems every moment on the point of flying—yet, she holds her ground, lets him come nearer, nearer. Suddenly, from the pocket of his alpaca jacket, he whips out an immense pair of forceps. All the instruments of the band utter a scream; Daphne flies in earnest round the dais and Apollo gambols after. Through the convolutions of their twisted flight and pursuit, the Trained Nurses thrud their way, leaping toreadors of Minos.<sup>413</sup>

Another halt. A variation of the first love-play. Suave gestures with the forceps. The love theme is very prominent in the music. Nearer, nearer. The Dentist's blank face seems to take on an expression of triumph; he is so near, so near; the forceps are raised, open-jawed, towards the swag of pearls. The steel jaws are on the point of closing; but off she goes again, the Dentist following in a dizzy series of *sauts perilleux*.<sup>414</sup> Twice round the central dais. Still he follows. This way and that she flutters; he is always there to cut off her retreat. She runs for protection to the Nurses. But instead of succouring, they receive her on the points of their sharp probes, they drive her back towards the pursuer. Distracted, she flaps from side to side. She sees in front of her the Dentist, blowing kisses with one hand, opening and closing with the other the jaws of his forceps, mockingly reflecting in his pursuit her every velleity of flight to right or left.<sup>415</sup> Behind her the points of six steel prods threaten her with imminent puncture. She looks desperately round her; the blank face, the smiling swag of pearls becomes expressive, as the huge round head jerks in panic this way and that, of a lacerating, torturing fear. A loophole of escape seems to present itself. She breaks from between her pursuers, gains in three bounds the summit of the dais and, one hand on the arm of the chair, the other to her heart, stands looking down, momentarily safe. But the safety is only illusory; her position is more than ever hopeless. The Dentist and his

<sup>410</sup> In a ballet company, the *premier danseur* is the principal male dancer (an elite position); Tintoretto (1518-1594), Italian painter of the Renaissance.

<sup>411</sup> The *premiere danseuse* is principal female dancer in a ballet company.

<sup>412</sup> The “pursuit and flight” sequence is populated by figures from Greek mythology: Pan, who chases the nymph syrinx, and the great god Apollo, who chases Daphne after Eros strikes.

<sup>413</sup> “[T]hrud” is perhaps a form of the verb ‘thread’; Minos was the king of Crete.

<sup>414</sup> “[S]auts perilleux” are somersaults.

<sup>415</sup> Note the echoing imagery of sexual predation from the Callot ballet, in which “The Captain has driven her into a corner, between the shafts of the waggon, and is about to ravish an embracement in good earnest”.



Nurses execute a cake-walk in Indian file round the base of the stele on which she has marooned herself.<sup>416</sup> She is trapped beyond the possibility of redemption. The Nurses continue their cake-walk, but the Dentist breaks line and begins to mount the dais, running round and round, spirally, a step higher at every revolution. The Patient gesticulates wildly as he approaches, lifting her blank face, her clawing hands towards heaven. The Dentist reaches the penultimate step. One more revolution, he is on the platform beside her.

He springs forward, embracing her, tries to snatch from the swag of pearls a kiss. She bends backwards, away from his desire, backwards till her head touches her heels. They execute a tango of willowy bendings. The Dentist grows more and more passionate, there is a quickening in the Nurses' cake-walk down below. The Patient begins to yield. She is forced back into the chair. The blank, globed faces come together in a tangential kiss. But even as he kisses, the Dentist reaches up for the Piranesian cable above him, pulls down a formidable drill which revolves as he grasps it. There is a rhythmic and harmonious struggle. The ravished kisses alternate with jabs of the drill, tweaks of the forceps. Resistance grows fainter and fainter, the Dentist more and more surgically amorous. We are at the Coda now; the choir breaks into the music with the supernatural ecstatic note of the human voice.

Resistance is now at an end. The Dentist lifts his yielding Patient from the chair; she droops limply in the crook of his left arm. The rest of the Coda is occupied by the development of a portentous embrace, in which dentistry becomes transcendently one with passion, and love takes on the character of a surgical operation. The embracement culminates in the inenerrable delights of ecstasy. Ecstasy—the final enormous chord of F sharp major. Shatteringly loud, it bursts upon the ears. Choir, orchestra, steam organ, Parsifal bell instrument, gongs, musical glasses—all sound the chord, keep it held, slowly swelling, minute after minute.<sup>417</sup> And with the flowering of that ecstatic chord the heavens open and God the Father slowly descends over the dais. A swarm of cherubs, whose nacreous flesh seems ready to melt in the intense white limelight, hovers over Him in a domed formation, his living canopy. The chord of F sharp major slowly swells and swells, a long introverted cone of sound. The limelight grows brighter and brighter, God the Father smiles. His velvet draperies float out in the wind of ecstasy. Illumined, the Dentist and his Patient look up, still embraced, still in the throes of a surgical love. And gradually, as the ecstasy grows intenser, as the chord of F sharp major becomes more and more terribly, more sweetly and piercingly loud, gradually they float up from their solid platform, they tread the lime-lit air, they bathe in the divine effulgence. And the trained Nurses—they, too, leave the earth; they, too, yearn upwards in a curved, suspended gesture towards the light. And as the chord increases in volume, as the brazen cone of sound expands and appallingly expands within our grasp—slowly the whole heavenly host, the wriggling canopy of putti, the enthroned godhead, the ecstatic mortals float upwards out of sight towards some Higher Sphere.<sup>418</sup>

And suddenly the chord comes to an end; there is the startling silence which follows the stopping of a mill-wheel. The stage is quite empty, save for the dado of nautch girls at the foot of the back wall. They are still swaying weedily, still tremolously palpitating as the curtain descends.

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<sup>416</sup> A “stele” is a vertical stone slab prevalent in ancient architecture. The “cake-walk in Indian file” embeds two dance traditions. Interestingly, Huxley’s ballet sequences for the *Brave New World* music also use Native American tropes.

<sup>417</sup> The “Parsifal bell instrument” must be the stringed musical instrument designed as a substitute for the church bells in the score of Richard Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*. In this paragraph, the rape reaches climax as Scriabin’s aural layers (including the bell) erupt in the Dentist’s “ecstasy”.

<sup>418</sup> “[P]utti” are similar to cherubs.

H.

Excerpted from F T Marinetti's "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance" (1917)

Marinetti, F. T. "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance." *Futurism: An Anthology*. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman, eds. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.

## DANCE OF THE SHRAPNEL

### Part One

I want to give the fusion of the mountain with the parabola of the shrapnel. The fusion of the carnal human song with the mechanical noise of shrapnel. To give the ideal synthesis of the war: a mountain soldier who carelessly sings beneath an uninterrupted vault of shrapnel.

*Movement 1:* With the feet mark the *boom-boom* of the projectile coming from the cannon's mouth.

*Movement 2:* With arms spread apart describe at moderate speed the long whistling parabola of the shrapnel as it passes over the soldier's head and explodes too high or behind him. The danseuse will hold up a sign printed in blue: *Short to the right*

*Movement 3:* With the hands (wearing very long silver thimbles) raised and open, as high as possible, give the proud, blessed, silvery explosion of the shrapnel in its *paaaak*. The danseuse will hold up a sign printed in blue: *Long to the left*. Then she will hold up another printed in silver: *Don't slip on the ice. Synovitis*.

*Movement 4:* With the whole body vibrating, the hips weaving, and the arms making swimming motions, give the waves and flux and reflux and concentric or eccentric motions of echoes in ravines, in open fields and up the slopes of mountains. The danseuse will hold up a sign printed in black: *Water duty*; another in black: *Mess duty*; still another in black: *The mules, the mail*.

*Movement 5:* With little leaping handclaps and a pose of ecstatic suspension, express the indifferent and always idyllic calm of nature and the *cheep-cheep-cheep* of the birds. The danseuse will hold up a sign printed in disordered letters: *300 meters to camp*. Then another in red: *15 degrees below zero. 800 meters red ferocious suave*.

### Part Two

*Movement 6:* The slow, casual, thoughtless gait of the mountain soldiers who march under successive furious parabolas of shrapnel. The danseuse will light a cigarette while hidden voices sing one of the many war songs:

*il comandante del sesto alpine incomincia a sbombardar ....*

*[the commander of the sixth alpines begins the bombardment ....]*

*Movement 7:* The undulation with which the danseuse continues to express the war song will be interrupted by Movement 2 (whistling parabola of shrapnel).

*Movement 8:* The undulation with which the danseuse continues to express the war song will be interrupted by Movement 3 (explosion of the shrapnel high up).

*Movement 9:* The undulation will be interrupted by Movement 4 (waves of echoes).

*Movement 10:* The undulation will be interrupted by Movement 5 (*cheep-cheep-cheep* of the birds in the placidity of nature).

## DANCE OF THE MACHINE GUN

I want to give the Italian carnality of the shout *Savoia!* that rips itself apart and dies heroically in shreds against the mechanical geometrical inexorable rolling-mill of the machine-gun fire.

*Movement 1:* With the feet (arms stretched forward), give the mechanical hammering of the machine gun *tap-tap-tap-tap-tap*. The danseuse will show in a rapid gesture a sign printed in red: *Enemy at 700 meters*.

*Movement 2:* With the hands rounded like cups (one full of white roses, the other full of red roses), imitate fire as it pours steadily and violently out of the machine-gun barrels. The danseuse will have a large white orchid between her lips and will have a sign printed in red: *Enemy at 500 meters*.

*Movement 3:* With arms wide open describe the circling, sprinkling fan of projectiles.

*Movement 4:* Slow turn of the body, while the feet hammer on the wooden floor.

*Movement 5:* Accompany with violent forward thrusts of the body the cry *Savoiaaaaaa!*

*Movement 6:* The danseuse, on hands and knees, will imitate the form of a machine gun, silver-black under its ribbon-belt of cartridges. Stretching her arms forward, she will feverishly shake the white and red orchid like a gun barrel in the act of firing.

## DANCE OF THE AVIATRIX

The danseuse will dance on top of a large, violently coloured geographical map (four meters square) on which will be drawn in large, highly visible characters the mountains, woods, rivers, geometries of the countryside, the great traffic centres of the cities, the sea. The danseuse must form a continual palpitation of blue veils. On her chest, like a flower, a large celluloid propeller that because of its very nature will vibrate with every bodily movement her face dead white under a white hat shaped like a monoplane.

*Movement 1:* Lying on her stomach on the carpet-map, the danseuse will simulate with jerks and weavings of her body the successive efforts of a plane trying to take off. Then she will come forward on hands and knees and suddenly jump to her feet, her arms wide, her body straight but shivering all over.

*Movement 2:* The danseuse, still straight, will shake a sign printed in red: *300 meters—3 spins—climb*. Then, right away, a second sign: *600 meters—avoid mountain*.

*Movement 3:* The danseuse will heap up a lot of green cloth to simulate a green mountain, then will leap over it. She will reappear immediately, arms open, all vibrant.

*Movement 4:* The danseuse all vibrant, will wave in front of herself a great gilded cardboard sun and will run a very fast circle, pretending to follow it (frenzied, mechanical).

*Movement 5:* With *organised noises* imitate the rain and the sighing of the wind and, with continual interruptions of the electric light, imitate the lightning flashes. Meanwhile the danseuse will raise up a frame covered with red vellum paper in the form of a sunset cloud and will break through it in a graceful leap (grand and slow melancholy waves of sound).

*Movement 6:* The danseuse will wave in front of herself another frame covered with dark-blue vellum paper, in the form and colour of a starry night. She will step across it, breaking through. Then she will scatter golden stars on the ground around her (gay ironic thoughtless).