Proust’s Choreographies of Writing: *A la recherche du temps perdu* and the Modern Dance Revolution

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Abstract

Beyond the personal interest Proust took in Ballets Russes productions, what role did the modern dance revolution spearheaded by pioneers such as Nijinsky and Isadora Duncan play in shaping the author’s modernist sensitivity? This article explores the manifold resonances between the profound mutation dance underwent in the early decades of the twentieth century and the *Recherche*, from the emergence of new forms of embodied subjectivity to the interest in polyvalent gender and sexual identities, and, more broadly, a preoccupation with the expressive language of the body. Dance, it will be argued, not only informed reflections on the fluidity of artistic contemplation and the impermanence of theatrical art; it was assimilated into choreographic representations of gesture and the kinaesthetic body.

The genesis and publishing history of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are curiously entwined with another watershed in the history of European modernism, the early twentieth-century modern dance revolution: while the novel’s birth in 1909 – that is, the transition from Sainte-Beuve narrative to the novel of remembrance – coincides with the dazzling entry of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes on the Paris stage, the publication of its first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann*, in 1913 is concurrent with the troupe’s most controversial performance, the riot-provoking *Sacre du printemps*. Like many contemporary artists, Proust enthusiastically embraced the new choreographic language and mixed-media forms of Ballets Russes productions, becoming a regular visitor from the 1910 season onwards. He relished such iconic works as *Schéhérazade, Cléopatre, Les Sylphides* and *L’Oiseau de Feu* and is likely to have seen or at least been aware of the more modernist ballets that entered the repertoire in 1912 when the troupe’s star dancer Vaslav Nijinsky took over as chief choreographer. A degree of uncertainty surrounds Proust’s presence at the choreographer’s most challenging works, *L’Après-midi d’un faune* and *Le Sacre du printemps*, but we can assume that he saw *Jeux*, Nijinsky’s « tableau of modern life », which bewildered audiences with its angular, decomposed movement

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1 Though very short, Nijinsky’s role as choreographer radically changed the aesthetic of Ballets Russes choreography. He was replaced by Léonide Massine in 1913.
language.² We know for certain that he attended the avant-gardist Parade co-created by Cocteau, Satie and Massine with striking Cubist-style sets and costumes by Picasso – « [c]omme Picasso est beau », he marvels in a letter to Cocteau.³ What is more, Proust enjoyed a privileged access to and insight into the creative practices of the Ballets Russes thanks to several of his friends, who counted among the troupe’s artistic collaborators: Reynaldo Hahn wrote the music for Le Dieu Bleu to a libretto co-written by Cocteau; the multitalented poet also penned the text of Parade and designed the poster for Le Spectre de la rose, a ballet based on a story by Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, one of Proust’s regular interlocutors. Other acquaintances like the Comtesse Greffulhe (who was a cousin of Diaghilev) and Robert de Montesquiou played an important role as artistic promoters or even financiers of the company’s first Paris seasons. Proust himself socialised with Diaghilev, Léon Bakst and, at least on one occasion, Nijinsky and took a keen interest in publications on Ballets Russes choreography and aesthetics.⁴

In his correspondence, Proust enthuses over Bakst’s sumptuous set and costume designs or the virtuosity and expressiveness of the dancers, declaring in a letter to Hahn that he « [n’a] jamais vu rien de plus beau » than the Orientalist Schéhérazade.⁵ In the Recherche, by contrast, mention of the Ballets Russes and of dance more widely is comparatively sparse. As Michèle M. Magill remarks, of the staggering twenty-five thousand references consecrated to the arts in the Recherche, scarcely a dozen relate to dance.⁶ Like the cinema, automobiles and airplanes, the Ballets Russes appear above all as markers of modernity as well

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2 Maurice Rostand claims to have seen L’Après-midi d’un faune in the company of Proust (Rostand 1948, 175), but, surprisingly, Proust makes no reference to the performance in his correspondence, although he does allude to the ballet in a letter to Paul Morand written in 1918 (Corr. xviii, 143). In his biography of Proust, Jean-Yves Tadié states that he did attend the first night of Le Sacre du printemps, but adds in a footnote that there is no proof of this (Tadié 1996, 694, note 6). According to Philip Kolb, Proust attended all three ballets, including Jeux on 15 May 1913 (Corr. xii, 12 and 175, note 13).


4 He read Hahn’s article on Schéhérazade published in Le Journal, 10 June 1910; Jean-Louis Vaudoyer’s « Variations sur les ballets russes » (Vaudoyer 1910); André Suarès’s « Chronique de Caërdal VII: Beauté de la danse » (Suarès 1912); Henry Bidou’s « L’Après-midi d’un faune et l’esthétique de M. Nijinsky » (Bidou 1912); as well as Cocteau’s reflections on Nijinsky, Le Spectre de la rose and Parade in Le Coq et l’Arlequin (Cocteau 1918). Corr. x, 258. See also his letters to Hahn following Nijinsky’s dismissal from the Imperial Theatres (Corr. x, 248 and x, 258) and a letter to Mme Henri de Régnier in which he expresses compassion for the dancer afflicted by mental illness (Corr. xxii, 232).