Knowing the Dancer: Modernism, Choreography, and the Question of Authority

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The connection between literary Modernism and Modernism in music and in the visual arts has been well documented. Yet the relation between dance and literature in this period has been passed over with little notice or critical comment. However, references to dance and the figure of the dancer in turn-of-the-twentieth-century literature occur far more frequently than we might expect. Even if we limit the search to those writers drawing on a Symbolist aesthetics in their citation of dance, we can identify Wilde’s Salomé, T. S. Eliot’s early poem, “The Burnt Dancer”, and the speaker of Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady”, who proclaims, “And I must borrow every changing shape / To find expression ... dance, dance / Like a dancing bear.”

W. B. Yeats alluded to dance as an appropriate metaphorical expression of the relationship between “The Cat and the Moon”, where the speaker asks: “Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance? / When two close kindred meet, / What better than call a dance?” The speaker comments further, “Maybe the moon may learn, / Tired of that courtly fahion, / A new dance turn”. In “A Prayer for My Daughter” Yeats invokes dance as a metaphor for the turbulence of Irish history: “That the future years had come, / Dancing to a frenzied drum, / Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.” Other titles directly refer to dance as the subject of Yeats’ work: “To a Child Dancing in the Wind”; “Michael Robartes and the Dancer”; and Four Plays for Dancers. In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” he mentions the

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3 Ibid., 212.
popular solo dancer, Loïe Fuller. His description of her dramatic incorporation of materials and lighting effects into her dances, where she “enwound / A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth” suggests his familiarity with the innovative dance forms of the time.

Allusions to dance appear just as often in the prose fiction of the period. In his short story, “The Dead”, James Joyce reminds us of the military associations of social dance when the narrator announces “Lancers were arranged”, referring to a kind of quadrille, a dance forming part of the background to the narrative, and one among several martial allusions throughout the story. Dance’s literary associations with the closure of comedy plays a subversive role in structuring Virginia Woolf’s The Voyage Out (1915) and The Years (1937), while references to the Russian Ballet occur in both those novels. Jinny in The Waves (1931) is characterized by her dancing, and a dance occupies an important narrative moment in D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love (1920) and in his short stories “The White Stocking” and “The Woman Who Rode Away”. Dance therefore presents something of a conundrum (or a query) for discussions of Modernism. What was it about dance at this time that so engaged European writers of the period?

The question may seem surprising, but it is prompted by late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century philosophical discussions in which dance plays a more significant role than we might expect. In this essay I shall explore the ways in which developments in dance at this time stimulated contemporary preoccupations in literary aesthetics. At a period when performance dance was distancing itself from its traditional association with a mimetic form, I argue that a relationship between dance and literary Modernism existed in a tension between aesthetic polarities that applied to both art forms. One was a rather refined aesthetics associated with Walter Pater in England and Stéphane Mallarmé in France. The other was a tougher, more dramatic, masculinist aesthetics deriving from the writings of

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5 Yeats, Collected Poems, 234.