THREE RUSSIAN DANCERS: DECADENCE, ART NOUVEAU, DEGENERATION

Why was Russia, of all countries in the world, destined to be the place where the greatest of arts began and flourished? ... [The answer] resides in the involvement and pre-eminence of Russian women. ... Anatomical studies have long established the ethnographic fact that Russian women have the most beautiful legs. ... But the Russian woman's pliancy resides not only in her legs. What a back she has, what a truly swan-like neck, what a beautiful head. ... (Akim Volynsky)¹

If the Russian people could do everything as expertly as they dance, they would have long ago conquered the whole world, wrote a German journalist in response to a performance of the Ballets Russes.²

The decadent hothouse of the turn of the twentieth century problematized nature by privileging artifice. Refusing the dictum of biology as destiny, it subordinated both the female and male body to an aesthetic impulse that was against nature, a condition described by J.-K. Huysmans in his programmatic decadent novel A Rebours (Against Nature, 1884). Among the representations that he affiliates with artifice as an aesthetic ideal is the figure of the androgyne, the paradigmatic decadent hybrid, whose desire is linked to the death instinct. Entwined with the preference for artifice in the decadence were the aesthetics of art nouveau based on nature's organic serpentine lines and their decorative potential. Decadent femininity also had a biological subtext to be found not in nature, even as stylized in art nouveau, but in the medical discourse of degeneracy, the phantasmatic physical and mental affliction of the fin de siècle. The main claim of degeneration theory was that the affliction poses a threat to the health of individuals and whole nations. Some of the characteristic symptoms of degeneracy, considered a pathology of the central nervous systems, were hysteria, neurasthenia, fetishism, and same-sex eroticism, symptoms that were supposed to undermine the reproductive power of modern men and women. Paranoia regarding declining ra-

¹. Akim Volynsky, "Against the Grain," Dance Research, 1, No. 14 (1923), 23-44.
². Ibid., pp. 5-6.
cial and familial health and the concurrent crisis of masculinity resulted in male anxiety about heredity and female sexuality.

One of the aesthetic consequences of interlacing artistic decadence and degeneracy was the creation of a new language in the writings of early modernists. It was characterized by a synesthetic poetics that reflected the desire to find ways of representing the heightened stimulation of the nervous system. Synesthesia was one of Symbolism’s key aesthetic strategies designed to express referred physical sensations that stimulate the nervous system by means of metaphors which fuse the senses into one, especially sound, color, smell, and texture. Max Nordau, fin-de-siècle prophet of the dangers of degeneracy, warned that “the [enervated degenerate] mind mingles the perceptions attained through the different senses [especially of sight and sound], and transforms them one into another.” He supported his arrogation of the commingling of the senses to pathology by referring to medical authority, for instance the authority of the leading psychopathologist Alfred Binet who considered the fusion of the senses a stigma (Nordau’s term for symptom) of hysteria.

Perhaps the first Russian critic to note the “thirst for these unknown sensations” and the “desire to create a new language” to express them was the translator and critic Zinaida Vengerova, who wrote about it in 1892 in the first Russian discussion of French symbolist poetry. Synesthetic poetics as fusion of the acoustic sphere of language with nervous stimuli and an aestheticization of the five senses characterized the poetry of Baudelaire and his progeny as well as the Gesamtkunstwerk, introduced in Wagner’s operatic project. This modernist poetics also penetrated the sphere of dance.

So what do these concerns regarding nature, degeneration, synesthesia, and female sexuality have to do with dance movement at the turn of the twentieth century? Let me propose that modern dance in its initial stages was affected, if not infected, by the discourses of the decadence, art nouveau, and enervation. I will make my case by considering three quite different Russian female dancers – Anna Pavlova, Ida Rubinstein, and Vera Karalli – who all performed in the First Season of the Ballet Russes in 1909. I will consider them separately, examining closely one role or performance in each case.

One of the ways to approach the dancing female body of the turn of the century is at the intersection of contemporary aesthetics and obsession with

5. Zinaida Vengerova, “Poety simvolisty vo Frantsii,” Vestnik Evropy, No. 9 (1892), p. 117. Vengerova was sister of the famous Pushkinist Semen Vengerov and close friend of Zinaida Gippius, St. Petersburg’s own fin-de-siècle Cleopatra.