

Light Foot in the Margins: The Dancing Body in the
Modernist Poetic Imagination

by

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Preface

I have always been able to write most clearly after dancing. I realized this at some point during the last four years. After jumping and turning and falling I could come back to my room and write smoothly and freely what would take me hours to compose on other days. I started setting aside time for writing after dancing. This project came from my desire to investigate the relationship between these two things.

I have written a lot about dancing. The ephemeral nature of dance creates an urgent need for creative forms of documentation. I think I turned to writing so often after dancing to find a way to hold on to the rhythms reverberating in my body for a little longer. In language I could record the valuable information I had just learned about weight, time and energy.

I have also danced about writing. The questions that have interested me most choreographically are always about language. I have always been interested in the rhythms and sounds and shapes of words. I remember being drawn to, even in high school, the linguistic potential in ballet, the syntax of how steps had to be arranged, and the rhythm of one phrase following another like a question and an answer. When I went into the studio alone to make choreography, I always returned to questions about language. What movement could the rhythm of a sentence bring out of my body? How could I punctuate my dancing so that some phrases ended with periods and others with commas? My ideas about movement and language fueled each other; I wrote and then danced and then wrote and then danced. When I was

choreographing group pieces I invited my dancers to draw movement from words as well. I found that writing and dancing were ways of processing each other.

Both poetry and dance are time-based. To read a poem or to watch a dance takes time, you must begin somewhere and end somewhere. They have many formal similarities; in dance the body finds a rhythm to move through time and space, in poetry words find a rhythm to move through time and the space of the page.

Rhythms reveal imagery, thoughts and ideas, both on the body and in language.

Dances, though, are over quickly and poems, when you are reading them rather than listening to them, stay on the page for you to read over and over again. Could poetry be a way of documenting dance? Could dance be a way of embodying text?

Emile Benveniste has traced the word rhythm to the Greek *ruthmos*, which was originally used to describe spatial form. The shift in meaning to describe rhythm in time occurred when Plato used the word in its traditional meaning to describe dance. The dancing body is a place where spatial and aural rhythms become the same.¹ I like thinking of dance as a bridge between rhythms in time and rhythms in space. I have wondered many times before, what is so exciting about a poem that I can return to it over and over again? What if the poem were distilled down to the movement of sounds, without the semantics of language, would I still like it then? What could I learn from dancing the rhythm of the poem, experiencing it on my body in that way?

I started this project in order to investigate my twin impulse to write and dance, and the possibilities for dancing poetry and writing dance. I wanted to study

¹ Emile Benveniste, "La Notion De "Rythme" Dans Son Expression Linguistique," Problems De Linguistique Generale, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

the relationships between dance and poetry at three specific moments during the modern era when I think there is something particularly interesting going on between them. Apart from my own interest in writing about dancing and dancing about writing, I had found dance in other poetry. I found William Carlos Williams' poetry full of dance references that interested me and confused me. Sometimes he wrote about the dance as an actual dance, whereas sometimes it was the dance symbolized the creative process. I was surprised to discover that he was friends with Martha Graham but it made sense. She was inventing new forms for dance at the same time as he was inventing new forms for poetry. They were both part of movements that had recently broken away from fixed classical forms and were redefining the concept of line, rhythm and narrative. I soon found more literature exploring the parallels in modern dance and modern poetry. I realized there was a lot to explore.

Benveniste sees dance as the art in which form and content are married to such an extent that they are indistinguishable; they are both "form".² The dance is inseparable from the dancer because the form of dance is the form of the human body. Benveniste was not alone. Symbolist poets saw dance as an essential union of form and content. It makes sense; to them dance was the ultimate embodiment of a non-physical idea. In dance the form for an idea was not another idea, a metaphor for instance, but the rather the physical form of the human body.

When I first came across this idea, probably in Yeats, I was interested but skeptical. Dances have forms, I thought, that can be as closely or distantly related to content as a poems. I've watched dances before that employed structures that stood

² Benveniste, "La Notion De "Rythme" Dans Son Expression Lingquistique," 119.

out awkwardly or dances that were so stubbornly focused on a specific topic that the movement was forced, or the pacing dull. I've been bored and annoyed by classical ballet's uninspired forms for expressing impossible love. I know from experience the difficulty of carving a form out of a movement study, assigning a beginning and ending to improvised structures. It seemed to me that dance had just as much potential for disunity between form and content as writing.

It seemed that the history of modern dance would agree with me. The dancers I examine in this work had interesting dialogues on the relationship of form to content. Martha Graham felt that essential meaning could be expressed through the dancing body, while Merce Cunningham felt that the dancing body was itself meaning. To Graham, a union of form and content meant using the body to access a deeper emotional space, and to Cunningham it meant focusing on the external forms as both "movement and meaning," both form and content.

I went into this project wondering what exactly constituted a unity of form and content. I also wondered what had drawn other poets to the dance, and whether or not any other poets had felt the formal similarities that I had felt between poetry and dance. I wanted to understand, through poetry, what was changing in the modern era in terms of peoples opinions about bodies, art and movement, that allowed for the emergence of modern dance. I also wanted to understand what happened to the sensual experience of dancing in the process of writing about it. To answer these questions I have four investigations.

My first chapter is on the female dancing body in the turn of the century poetic imagination. I will investigate the influence of Loie Fuller on Stephane

Mallarme and investigate the contemporary obsession with Salome figures giving specific attention to the work of Oscar Wilde as well as the reentrance of Salome into the world of modern dance through both poetry and vaudeville. This chapter will reveal a fear of the erotic potential in the female dancing body and a close connection between the “poet’s gaze” and the “imperialist gaze.”

My second chapter will focus on the relationship between Martha Graham and William Carlos Williams. I will study how their formal innovations were parallel and how the formal properties of language and movement were inspiring for them. I will analyze their collaboration in arts of protest and ultimate divergence over the question of original form. Graham moved inward to express the human psyche onstage, carving out a space that would be uniquely human in contrast to the industrial world. Williams on the other hand moved outwards to examine closely the external characteristics of the world around him, including the influence of industrialization, in order to arrive at a sense of the universal.

My third chapter will study a dialogue on the mechanistic, the human and the erotic in the dancing body between poets and dancers at Black Mountain College during the 1950’s.

The fourth chapter is an account of my experience choreographing two pieces inspired by poetic forms and investigating the image of the modern dancing body.

Review of the Relevant Literature

I have employed ideas from Frank Kermode's Romantic Image (1957). His chapter on dancer imagery at the beginning of modernism explains how the dancer is the embodiment of the "Romantic Image"³ which is a "radiant truth out of space and time." Kermode notes that belief in this image is mutually reinforcing with the belief in "the necessary isolation or estrangement of men who can perceive it."⁴ Kermode focuses on dancer imagery in the work of Yeats and briefly considers the influence of Loie Fuller on Mallarme. He summarizes the appeal of the dancer image for symbolist poets in that it represents art in a pure and complete art, a "living symbol" and an ultimate dissolution of artist into work.⁵ He studies how, for Yeats, the dancer becomes a "reconciling image" between fragmented body and mind, form and content, movement and stillness, life and death and artist and work. His essay "The Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev" covers similar themes, giving more attention to Loie Fuller's influence of the poetic imagination and the figure of Salome in modern dance and poetry. Loie Fuller's body, he suggests, represents a unity of the body with the landscape of technology and this was essential to her success as an image.⁶ Kermode does not address the limits of symbolism from the dancer's perspective. In chapter one I will expand his analysis to include considerations of the dancer's agency and subjectivity.

Audrey Rodgers book The Universal Drum (1979) examines dance imagery in the work of four American modernist poets. By studying the recurrence of dance and

³ Frank Kermode, The Romantic Image (New York: Vintage, 1957).

⁴ Kermode, The Romantic Image 2.

⁵ Kermode, The Romantic Image 71.

⁶ Kermode, "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev."

the dancer imagery in the work of William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, Hart Crane and T.S. Eliot, she shows how American poets sought to create new forms using the image of the modern dancer was a uniquely American image. I have used her analysis of dancer imagery in the work of William Carlos Williams as a jumping off point for ideas in chapter two.

In her book, Gendering Bodies Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth Century British Culture (1995) Amy Koritz examines dance history in England from the 1890's to the 1920's, considering "1. The devaluation of the performer combined with greater acceptance of women on the stage, and 2. The influence of non-performative art forms, such as literature and painting, on the creation and reception of performed art."⁷ In an exploration of the dancer in the symbolist imagination she shows how symbolists writers, by accepting the dancer as a "pure symbol," erased the female dancer's agency to make meaning. By juxtaposing their writing with writing by Isadora Duncan, she shows the limitations of symbolism from the perspective of a dancer.⁸ I have employed some of her ideas in my analysis in chapter one.

Terry Mester has examined the influence of modern dance on modernist poetry in her book Movement and Modernism (1997). She considers the "primitivist" appeal of the dancer image in the work of Yeats, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams and D.H. Lawrence. She shows how, for these four writers, the image of the dancer and the dance is bound up in "modernism's language experiments," but also capable

⁷ Amy Koritz Gendering Bodies Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Twentieth Century British Culture (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 2.

⁸ Koritz 56-100.

of expressing something that “eludes verbal utterance.”⁹ She includes a page on the friendship and mutual influences of Martha Graham and William Carlos Williams that I have expanded on in Chapter 2.

In her book Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine (1998) Felicia McCarren shows how the female dancing body is a “nineteenth-century site of problematic femininity, subjectivity, and illness, as well as idealization.”¹⁰ In a chapter analyzing Mallarmé’s writing about Loie Fuller she shows how his “absolute gaze,” is an example of the nineteenth century physician’s “absolute gaze,” and how the female dancing body in his poetry reveals tensions and concerns toward female sexuality and hysteria.

A great deal has been written about the Salome figure in art, literature and dance. Toni Bentley’s Sisters of Salome traces the Salome figures from Oscar Wilde’s play to Vaudeville and early modern dance and I have developed her analysis of this trajectory in part one. Andrea Deagon, in a chapter titled "Dance of the Seven Veils: The Revision of Revelation in the Oriental Dance Community" in the book Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism & Harem Fantasy, considers why the Salome was appealing for audiences and female dancers,¹¹ and I have also employed some of her ideas.

⁹ Mester 157.

¹⁰ Felicia McCarren, Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Andrea Deagon, "Dance of the Seven Veils: The Revision of Revelation in the Oriental Dance Community." Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism & Harem Fantasy. Ed. Anthony Shay & Barbara Sellers-Young. Costa Meza: Mazda, 2005.

Introduction

During the modern era, European and American poets took an interest in the image of the dancer. The industrial revolutions had accelerated the pace of every day life and dance provided an expression of harmony with nature, opposing the mechanized rhythms of the industrial world.¹² a new form of American concert dance emerged during this time period from a combination of Vaudeville, minstrel shows, and Delsarte rhythmic gymnastics. Poets found the image of the modern dancer appealing. The dancer's free form style of movement resisted the mechanization of the modern world, providing a symbol of unity between body and the world of ideas.¹³

The development of modern dance was influenced by the accelerated pace of life during the Industrial Revolution. The train moved people and objects safely and efficiently from point a to b, electricity revealed an invisible movement of forces resulting in light and the telegraph and telephone provided a way to close the distance between people as communication zapped across miles in a millisecond. Goods were produced by assembly lines in factories that moved in evenly choreographed rhythms towards efficient production of automobiles, so that even the human body was incorporated into the mechanized rhythms of the machine world.¹⁴ Modern dance

¹² Deborah Jowitt, Time and the Dancing Image (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 70. Kermode, Frank. "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev." What Is Dance? ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, (New York: Oxford, 1983). 145-160

¹³ Kermode, "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev," 147.

¹⁴ Mark Franko, Dancing Modernism, Performing Politics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 57-64.

was an embodied form of expression that provided resistance to these industrialized rhythms.¹⁵

Discoveries in physics and the invention of cinema provided a fragmented view of movement.¹⁶ The German physicist Ludwig Boltzmann wrote that energy should be considered “a discrete variable rather than a continuous one.”¹⁷ Movements could be thought of in divisible units, rather than a never-ending stream. The relationships of movement, work, heat and energy all depended on the movements of charged parts of atoms.¹⁸ Movement was no longer understood as a seamless flow.

The invention of cinema also provided a way of thinking about movement in terms of fractured flow. Joseph Plateau had shown in 1836 that if photographs followed at a rate of sixteen frames or more per second the "persistence of vision" would show continuous movement, due to the optical cortex sweeping the brain at slightly faster than 16 times per second.¹⁹ Small differences between nearly identical still frames created the illusion of movement. Like physicists, filmmakers had to think of movement as a discrete rather than continuous.

Understandings of movement and space were also affected by a shift from a religious paradigm to a scientific one.²⁰ During the nineteenth century a positivist scientific logic came to be accepted as a form of truth. The scientist stood outside the phenomenon and observed, therefore grasping an “objective” viewpoint on the

¹⁵ Jowitt 70.

¹⁶ Jowitt 202.

¹⁷ William R. Everdell, The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origin of Twentieth Century Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 45.

¹⁸ Everdell 45.

¹⁹ Everdell 193-205.

²⁰ Everdell 1-12.

subject. The idea that God was the clock-winder of the universe, governing the rules and mechanics underneath phenomena was losing popularity and people accepted laws of nature as the overall functioning mechanism. The scientific paradigm provided a different way to experience the physical world.²¹

The harsh rhythms of the industrial revolution and the inauguration of a scientific paradigm led to many to experience a sense of dissociation between the physical and spiritual aspects of life.²² Not only did understandings of the physical world and human body shift to be defined scientifically but light, heat, communication and transportation were becoming controlled by machines. With the assembly line the machine-like rhythm of movement was extended to humans as well. People romanticized a primitive state of ideal unity between the body and mind.²³

One place many turned to for this sense of unity was in the mystical “Orient.”²⁴ Americans and Europeans understood the wide range of colonized groups from the Middle East to Central Africa as a single pool of exotic influences that were all alike in terms of belonging to this mystical and primitive Orient.²⁵ Edward Said considers the Orient to be “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and reflect each other.”²⁶ Constructing the Orient was essential for the cultural imperial project of defining European superiority

²¹ Everdell 10-11.

²² Everdell 6-12.

²³ Kermode, “Poet and Dance before Diaghilev” 146.

²⁴ Jowitt 50.

²⁵ Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

²⁶ Said, Orientalism 5.

over colonized groups and therefore justifying the project of colonization.²⁷ The Orient was constructed as a mystical, primitive world untouched by the industrial revolution. Oriental groups were considered inferior to the more civilized, technologically advanced West.²⁸

Dance provided another source of idealized unity between the body and mind. Audiences and writers responded to dance because it provided embodied expression that resisted the mechanization of the industrial world.²⁹ Around the turn of the century a new form of dance emerged called “skirt dancing” or “barefoot dancing.” Later, it would be called modern dance. Modern dance developed out of a unique set of conditions including the influence of Puritanism in America, the interaction of African and European influences, and nineteenth century domesticity and an imperialist taste Oriental imagery.

Puritans were closely tied to the principles of Calvinism, emphasizing productivity and physical and mental labor. Pleasure, especially when associated with the body, was great source of mistrust, and this meant that dance was rarely enjoyed.³⁰ Dance scholars do not consider Puritanism harmful to the development of dance, but rather believe that by de-emphasizing European art forms, Puritans made space for the emergence of unique traditions expressing American experience and way of life.³¹

²⁷ Said, Orientalism 2.

²⁸ Said, Orientalism 9.

²⁹ Jowitt 70.

³⁰ Helen Thomas, The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory (New York: Macmillan, 2003) 33.

³¹ Thomas, The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory 33.

Modern dance also developed out of the fusion of African and European cultures as a result of the African slave trade. Dancing was an important part of black slaves' experience, which, as Lynne Emery points out, has been excluded from histories of "serious" American theatrical dance.³² Slaves danced on ships and at auctions as well as at the command of slave-owners for entertainment. As cultural influences of African slaves and European settlers interacted, black spiritual rituals were "improvised to fit within the structure of the Protestant church."³³ This hybrid ritual was formative to the development of modern dance.

Theatrical culture in urban America included minstrel shows and circuses, which influenced the development of this new dance form. Before the 20th century there was no tradition of serious concert dance in America, as ballet never became widely popular. Concert dance was relegated to low culture traditions of vaudeville and variety shows where it existed as entertainment rather than high art.³⁴ Dancers found work in the theater, dancing in ballet extravaganzas or being dancer-actors, but dancing was largely seen as an obscene occupation. In order for dance to become an acceptable profession and accepted art form, it was necessary to dissolve Puritan fear of sexuality associated with the dancing body.³⁵

³² L.F. Emery, Black Dance from 1619 to Today (London: Dance Books, 1972).

³³ Emery 120.

³⁴ Julia L. Foulkes, Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 8-9.

³⁵ Helen Thomas, Dance Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance. (London: Routledge, 1995) 47.

A more public acceptance of sexuality was inaugurated by Sigmund Freud's On The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900.³⁶ Freud observed that the nervous system could cause "inorganic" disorders, which usually had a sexual root. One such disorder was hysteria. The neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot believed that hysteria was a hereditary degenerate condition.³⁷ Symptoms included local losses of feeling and susceptibility to hypnotism. He agreed with Freud that most cases of hysteria could be traced to a sexual cause. The deep concern for hysteria reflected shifting attitudes towards women's sexuality and independence.³⁸ At the turn of the century women were slowly gaining more rights and freedom. In America people discussed the phenomenon of "New Women," who were self-sufficient, educated or physically active; women who took off their corsets and let their hair go free.³⁹ A more open acceptance of sexuality and women's increased independence began to make space for dance to be seen as a respectable art form.

A movement among female reformers at this time emphasized physical exercise, for the importance of physical and spiritual wellbeing.⁴⁰ Physical education took the form of aesthetic dancing, German or Swedish gymnastics, and the Delsarte system of expression. The Delsarte system was largely responsible for changing prejudices towards dancing.⁴¹ It was a system of physical expression made up of gestures, tone and observations. Popular manuals focused on exercising physical

³⁶ Everdell 136.

³⁷ Everdell 133.

³⁸ Mcarren 6-48.

³⁹ Foulkes, Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey 9.

⁴⁰ Jowitt 78-81.

⁴¹ Jowitt 78-81.

expression with pantomimes and interpretations of poetry. The Delsarte system domesticated dance by situating movement in a context of spirituality and health. This made it acceptable for middle class women to dance.⁴²

Modern dance emerged from the popularity of Delsarte rhythmic gymnastics, combined with the influence of vaudeville, minstrel shows and music hall culture. The first modern dancers were women who danced barefoot to concert music wearing corset-less dresses and free flowing hair. These modern dance pioneers traveled to Europe to perform because in America there was no tradition of concert dance.⁴³

One of the first modern dancers to arrive in Europe was Loie Fuller. She arrived Paris to find a lively cultural scene in which artists across disciplines were breaking conventions to understand the bare workings of their media, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue and development of new forms.⁴⁴ Painters were influenced by a fractured sense of space and fragmented sense of flow. Seurat divided visual perception into discrete elements of light and color fragmenting the continuity of vision. Pablo Picasso and George Braque invented a form called cubism that crowded the canvas with different perspectives of an object in space. Symbolist poets broke conventions of fixed poetic forms, writing prose poems and composing in free verse. One symbolist poet, Stephane Mallarme, took a special interest in Loie Fuller's dance.

⁴² Helen Thomas, Dance, Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance 48.

⁴³ Foulkes 2-26.

⁴⁴ Rhonda Garelick, Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 32.

Symbolist poets rejected the Romantic symbol, which meant one word had one specific referent, in favor of a poetic language as a complex system of suggestion and association. Rules of poetic forms were more serious in French than in English and symbolists were the first to break away from them, providing some of the first examples of free verse. The symbolist poet Baudelaire wrote in his sonnet “Correspondences” that

Nature's a temple where each living column,
At times, gives forth vague words. There Man advances
Through forest-groves of symbols, strange and solemn,
Who follow him with their familiar glances. (1-4)⁴⁵

Symbolists considered words themselves to be symbols with associations, evoking a reality just beyond the reach of the senses. Beyond the physical world existed the elusive *idée*, or ideal, that could potentially be evoked in art. Stephane Mallarme believed an ideal theater would reveal this *idée* and he encountered the closest approximation to this theater ideal in Loie Fuller’s dance.

While Mallarme was enthralled by Loie Fuller, his English counterparts across the channel, Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats, obsessed over music hall dancers at the Palace and the Alhambra.⁴⁶ For symbolists, dance provided art in an un-dissociated form, free from the associations of words. Symons noted that in the dance “there is no intrusion of words used for the irrelevant purpose of describing; a world rises before one, the picture lasts only long enough to have been

⁴⁵ Roy Campbell, *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952).

⁴⁶ Mester 28.

there.”⁴⁷ Dance evoked a self-contained world without referencing anything outside; the dancer was “pure symbol.” Mallarme’s disciple Paul Valery wondered

What is a metaphor if not a kind of pirouette performed
by an idea, enabling us to assemble its diverse names or
images? And what are all the figures we employ, all
those instruments, such as rhyme, inversion, antithesis,
if not an exercise of all the possibilities of language,
which removes us from the practical world and shapes,
for us too, a private universe, a privileged abode of the
intellectual dance.⁴⁸

Dance was a physical, embodied expression of the writer’s creative process. For symbolist poets, the dancer symbolized unity between physical world and idea, a return to a primitive un-dissociated form of art, unclouded by the associations of language.⁴⁹

Loie Fuller awed guests at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, where she was dubbed “La fee electricite.”⁵⁰ Guests were presented with technological and artistic wonders, electrical displays and cinematic marvels. Fair spectators observed the *danse du ventre* dances from Algeria, Java, Indonesia, and Egypt. These dances often involved sensuous movement of hips and stomach, unfamiliar to European

⁴⁷ Arthur Symons, “The World as Ballet.” The Dance Anthology ed. Cobbett Steinberg (New York: New American Library, 1980) 347.

⁴⁸ Paul Valery, “Philosophy of the Dance.” What is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 65.

⁴⁹ Mester, 20.

⁵⁰ Rhonda Garelick, Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 79.

audiences.⁵¹ Anne Decoret-Ahiha has observed how the term *danse du ventre* is actually "an Occidental term coined by leering colonial soldiers, implying a single choreographic essence common to the whole Orient and to all Oriental women."⁵² Some of the "exotic" dancers were paid to carry out daily activities publicly in "native villages", a human zoo exhibiting the daily lives of colonized groups. Rhonda Garelick has shown how Loie Fuller's performance "helped carry out the ideological work of the fair," as spectators were encouraged to observe with an "imperialist gaze, a surgically penetrative gaze constructed to give spectators the impression of unveiling secret, hidden worlds."⁵³ Exhibitions allowed spectators "to see at a glance their empire, to take visual possession of it, and to show the backward living conditions of the colonized nations, which were being elevated by France's colonial mission civilisatrice."⁵⁴ The spectatorship constructed at the fair cultivated a sense of superiority over the primitive, erotic Orient, a sense of gratitude for having "advanced" these colonized groups, and a sense of entitlement to watch their bodies and every day activities. This gaze of superiority and entitlement was the same gaze with which spectators turned to watch dance.

The influence of Orientalism, and the "dans du ventre" is foundational to the development of modern dance.⁵⁵ Jane C. Desmond has shown that "the essentialist

⁵¹ Wendy Buonaventura, Something in the Way She Moves, Dancing Women from Salome to Madonna (New York: De Capo Press, 2004) 32.

⁵² Decore-Ahiha, Les Danses Exotique En France 1880-1940 (Paris: National de la Danse 2004) 28.

⁵³ Garelick 84.

⁵⁴ Paul Greenhalgh, Ephemeral Vistas (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988) 84.

⁵⁵ Jane C. Desmond. "Dancing Out Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's Radha of 1906," Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader

strains of Delsartism and Orientalism mixed well.”⁵⁶ Oriental imagery shared a sense of “primitive” unity, harmony between the body and nature, with dance. It also situated modern dance within respected American philosophical and literary traditions beginning with transcendentalism.⁵⁷ Modern dance pioneers made use of the Oriental image bank in their movements, story telling and visual designs.⁵⁸

Modern dance developed a more technical and refined modern dance aesthetic by World War I. An internal, emotional focus on expressionism was at its very core. American modern dancers and choreographers, like German Expressionist painters and American Precisionists, committed themselves to expressing feelings- not abstraction but subjects that could be recognized.⁵⁹ During the Depression Martha Graham became a leading voice in the modern dance along with Doris Humphrey and Helen Tamiris. Their aesthetic was stark, matching the austerity of the time, with sharp curves and few excess flourishes. Modern dance aesthetic may have been influenced by the architecture of the time, which emphasized sharp austere buildings without a lot of decoration.⁶⁰ Modern designers had trouble producing curves in steel. Modern dance aesthetic was also influenced by the pace and rhythms of labor efficiency experiments from the 1920’s.⁶¹

ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001) 256-287.

⁵⁶ Jane C. Desmond 258.

⁵⁷ Thomas, Dance, Modernity and Culture 79.

⁵⁸ Thomas, Dance, Modernity and Culture 79.

⁵⁹ Jowitt 164.

⁶⁰ Jowitt, Time and the Dancing Image 171.

⁶¹ Mark Franko, Dancing Modernism Performing Politics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 57-64.

By World War II, Martha Graham had become of the loudest voice in American modern dance. Her work had cultivated an audience for modern dance as a high art form drawing from literary and historical themes and performing for artists, writers and intellectuals.⁶² One writer who was particularly interested in her work was William Carlos Williams.

Williams was one of the first American modernist writers. His friend Ezra Pound had founded imagism in 1912, which was considered the formal beginning of modernism.⁶³ Imagists rejected the formalism and flowery language in Victorian poetry for clear and concrete images written in free verse with varieties of rhythms.⁶⁴ Pound wrote “As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.”⁶⁵ Lines were not tied to a specific length or meter. Modern poets desires for new rhythms outside of fixed forms and concrete images without flourishes mirrored those of modern choreographers in the 1930’s and 40’s.

Modern poets took an interest in the dancer because the modern era led to a new experience of the physical world and that created the desire for expressions of unity with nature and the spiritual world. The development of modern dance was influenced by modern era understandings of movement and forms, as well new roles for women. Contemporary imperialism influenced the spectatorship of dance by cultivating a gaze of visual entitlement. Audiences and poets turned to the dance

⁶² Jowitt 212.

⁶³ Christopher Macgowan, Twentieth Century American Poetry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004) 51.

⁶⁴ Macgowan 51.

⁶⁵ Macgowan 51

because it provided an embodied resistance to the mechanized rhythms of the industrial world.

1. The Poet's Gaze and the Imperialist Gaze: Salome and the Female Dancing

Body at the Turn of the Century

Modern dance pioneer Loie Fuller presented a spectacle of electric lights and fabric onstage, absorbing the body of the dancer into the mysterious capabilities of technology. The poet Stephane Mallarme responded to Fuller's dance as a symbol of the "ideal theater." His writing about the female dancing body ultimately erases the dancer's agency to make meaning as she becomes a symbol of unity between artist and work. Mallarme's erasure of Fuller's agency in writing represents a larger cultural fear of the erotic potential in the female dancing body that was also expressed in the rising popularity of the story of Salome. The absorption of this story into literary and popular culture reveals how erotic potential of the female dancing body is mapped onto the Oriental body to reinforce a Western sense of civilized purity.

Mallarme and Loie Fuller's adaptations of the Salome story reveal how the fear of the dancing body was central to this project of constructing the West and the Orient. By contrast, another Salome adaptation by Oscar Wilde reveals how the erotic dance can provide space for resistance to constructions of gender roles and the Orient. My investigation of the female dancing body in the turn of the century poetic imagination will reveal a fear of the erotic, expressive power of female dancing bodies, informed by the colonial project of an "imperialist gaze."

Loie Fuller's Dance

On November 5 1892 the American dancer Loie Fuller gave her first performance at the Folio Bergere in Paris. The venue was exclusively male at the time and considered taboo for respectable society, frequented instead by the avant-garde fringe.⁶⁶ Fuller had tried to convince the Paris Opera of her talents, but the management was not interested in her free-form style.⁶⁷ She performed an early form of solo modern dance, often called “aesthetic” or “barefoot” dancing. Fuller danced barefoot, bare-limbed and corset-less with hair flowing freely. Some believed Fuller and other modern dance pioneers were rebelling against the formal classicism of ballet but none of them had really seen any ballet before they began.⁶⁸

On her Paris debut, Fuller performed four dances: *Serpentine*, *Violet*, *Butterfly* and XXXX, later called *La Danse Blanche*. She danced in draping China silk and was lit by multi-colored electric lights, choreographing the interplay of light and fabric to suggest the shapes of butterflies, flowers, and fire. A critic called the performance, “a success without precedent in this theater.”⁶⁹ Fuller was an overnight sensation.

Fuller’s work was different from other early modern dancers because of her extensive use of theatrical lighting. With new electrical stage lights she choreographed the interplay of light and fabric on her body, wearing arm extensions from which draped swathes of fabric. Frank Kermode would comment that she

⁶⁶ Julie Townsend, “Alchemic Visions and Technological Advances: Sexual Morphology in Loie Fuller’s Dance” Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage ed. Jane C Desmond (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press: 2001) 79.

⁶⁷ Garelick 31.

⁶⁸ Reynolds & McCormick 2.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Reynolds & McCormick 5.

“seemed to be doing almost single-handed what Diaghilev was later to achieve only with the help of great painters, musicians and dancers.”⁷⁰ Her impressive stagecraft was truly a performance of the technological capabilities of modernity.

The interplay of light and fabric absorbed Fuller’s body into a magical space where the wonders of technology and mysterious imagery took over. Her physical form was dissolved into the technology of the performance, displaying a seamless unity between the human body and the technological advancements of the modern era.⁷¹ The shapes she created with light and fabric presented an erotic vocabulary of imagery including the shapes of the vagina, uterus and fallopian tube.⁷² Loie Fuller’s body was simultaneously mechanical and erotic. Modern audiences responded to the unity of her body with technology that transported them to a world of erotic shapes.⁷³

A wide range of artists and intellectuals attended Fuller’s performances including Toulouse Lautrec, Rodin, Sarah Bernhardt, George Seurat, Debussy, Marie Curie, Stephane Mallarme. Her popularity soared and she became muse and collaborator to many modernist artists and intellectuals living in Paris at the time.⁷⁴ Lautrec, dazzled by her innovations of theatrical lighting, made a lithograph of her *Fire Dance*, and the sculptor Raoul Larche modeled her into an ormolu lamp with her scarves flying over her head like storm clouds. No one, however, was more enthralled than the symbolist poet, Stephane Mallarme.

⁷⁰ Kermode, “Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev” 151.

⁷¹ Kermode, “Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev” 159.

⁷² Townsend, 73.

⁷³ Kermode, “Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev” 159.

⁷⁴ Thomas, Dance, Modernit and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance 56-57.

Dance and the Essential Theater for Mallarme

Mallarme was fascinated by the unity of body and space revealed in Fuller's dance. His interest inspired several essays on the connections between dance and poetry. In Mallarme's writing the form of the female dancing body is dissolved into the space of the dance, becoming a vessel for poetic ideas. His writing about the female dancing body ultimately obscures the expressive potential of a woman dancing onstage. The agency of the female dancing body to make meaning is erased as Mallarme transforms her into container for meaning.⁷⁵

Mallarme was obsessed with the concept of an ideal beauty or an "idée" that could not be experienced empirically. Mallarme and other symbolists considered words themselves to be symbols with associations, evoking a reality just beyond the reach of the senses.⁷⁶ Mallarme negotiated the distinction between the symbolic value of words and non-physical atmosphere they could evoke on the female dancing body. In search of a mysterious non-physical reality, Mallarme began to question the value of language.⁷⁷ How could he suggest a non-physical world through writing when words clung to meanings in the physical world? During this period of skepticism towards language Mallarme discovered the dance.⁷⁸

In Loie Fuller's dance Mallarme discovered an art that could reveal the elusive idée. Fuller came closest to achieving Mallarme's concept of an ideal theater, which he conceptualized out of dissatisfaction with contemporary theater. Mallarme

⁷⁵ This point has been made by several scholars including Amy Koritz *Gendering Bodies Performing Art: Dance and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

⁷⁶ Everdell 82-85.

⁷⁷ Mester 15.

⁷⁸ Mester 15.

wrote that theater as a medium was ripe with potential for evoking the *idée*, but the theater around him failed. Society, he wrote, flocked to theater, seeking to be fed, but the contemporary theater proved dull and unimaginative.⁷⁹ Its representations obscured ideas. It provided “a representation, for those not having to see the things themselves at all,”⁸⁰ and this allowed the spectator’s imagination to wither.

Mallarme’s ideal theater would instead develop the spectators’ imagination by provoking them to see what is absent. The “poet’s gaze” widens the perception of the eyes into the perception of the imagination permitting the spectator to see more than what is visible.⁸¹ Mallarme goes to the theater to see both what is missing and what is impossible to see:

The unique training of the imagination consists, in the regular hours of frequenting the sites of Dance without any preliminary aim, patiently and passively to wonder at each step, each strange attitude, on pointes or flat, allonge or jumping, “what can this mean” or better, with inspiration, to read it.⁸²

⁷⁹ Mallarme’s “Crayonne au theatre” begins with the poet desperately bored at the theater. Stephane Mallarme, *Oeuvres completes*. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1945) 293.

⁸⁰ Mallarme 294. Unless otherwise noted translations from *Crayonne au theatre* are by Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸¹ Mallarme’s prose poem *Un Spectacle Interrompu* describes how the “poet’s gaze” is different from the gaze of other spectators, who listen to closely to the performance and neglect their vision. Mallarme disdains his fellow audience members for being “all ears” when they should have been “all eyes.” Mallarme 276-277.

⁸² Mallarme 307.

With practice the spectator will learn to “read” the performance, to transcend the empirical experience of watching the dance and glimpse the idee. The ultimate work of the theater would be to represent “nothing” and this essential nothing is what Mallarme believed the purest poetry reveals.⁸³ Mallarme’s ideal theater would reveal the essential nothing to the spectator by developing the lens of the imagination so the spectator can see what is absent.

The performer who best revealed this essential nothing was Loie Fuller. Mallarme responded to the elaborate interaction between costume and technology that made Fuller invisible behind the swirling shapes of skirts, colored lights and projections.⁸⁴ Kermode contends that Fuller’s “progressive extinction of the dancing body was a necessary component of her own success as an emblem of the Image.”⁸⁵ The dissolution of her form was appealing to Mallarme because as the boundaries of her body became less defined she became less “personal.”⁸⁶ According to his ideas the dancer’s body would have to be detached from personal meaning in order for the dancer to become this essential theater. Her legs become “un instrument direct d’idee,” (a direct instrument of idea).⁸⁷ She must become an impersonal vessel for the dance, not a dancer but poetry itself:

⁸³ Mallarme writes that the theater provides the opportunity for “l’occasion de rien dire” which, Mearren observes, means both “the opportunity to say nothing” and “the opportunity to tell of Nothing.” Mallarme 297-8, Mearren 117.

⁸⁴ In Mallarme’s ideal theater “nothing” is revealed when “a dramatic work shows the sequence of the act’s exteriorities such that no single moment keeps its reality, and such that, in the end, nothing happens.” Fuller achieves this with her stream of imagery. Mallarme, 296.

⁸⁵ Kermode, “The Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev” 159.

⁸⁶ Mallarme 312.

⁸⁷ Mallarme 312.

To understand that the dancer *is not a woman dancing*, for the juxtaposed causes that she *is not a woman*, but a metaphor summarizing one of the elementary aspects of our form, sword, cup, flower, etc., and *that she does not dance*, suggesting, by the marvel ellipsis of élan, with a corporeal writing that would necessitate paragraphs of prose in dialogue as well as description to express, in the rewriting: poem disengaged from all writing apparatus.⁸⁸

Amy Koritz points out that “the dancer’s agency has at best a precarious place” in this problematic equation. She is simultaneously poem, pen and meaning but no longer a woman and therefore no longer “a subject who could write.”⁸⁹ The dancer is the artist who successfully dissolves individuality into the work of art, so that even the tools and technology of its creation are invisible. Mallarme absorbs the dancer’s individuality, agency and gender into the unity of artist and work.

As Fuller dissolves into the movement of light, color and veils, Mallarme discovers that the *idée* will be revealed in rhythm. Rhythm moves between the realms of the visual and metrical: “this transition from sonorities to fabric (is there anything, better, resembling Music!) is, uniquely, the sorcery that Loie Fuller effects...”⁹⁰ Rhythm is an invisible form, a hidden structure for poetry and dance, which reveals images as it moves forward. In Fuller’s dance this invisible structure is made visible in the movement of fabrics and Mallarme glimpses the elusive *idée* in

⁸⁸ Mallarme 304.

⁸⁹ Koritz 64.

⁹⁰ Mallarme 308-9.

the “undulations of fabrics, floating, palpitating, scattered.”⁹¹ Through dance, Mallarme discovered a way to make present what is absent in language.

But rhythm is not the only invisible structure in the performance. Fuller’s body is *also* a hidden structure from which image extends, in actuality the physical structure from which rhythm extends into image. Fuller is both generating image and disappearing in image: “The enchantress creates the ambience, draws it out of herself and goes into it, in the palpitating silence of crepe de Chine.”⁹² With the word “enchantress,” Mallarme stabilizes and genders the dancer’s agency; she creates the image in which she is lost. His ideas mystify the female dancing body; she erases her own boundaries, her own subjectivity.

The invisibility of Fuller’s body in performance facilitated the obfuscation of the dancer’s agency in Mallarme’s theory of the dancer as image. The female dancing body is cast as a fuzzy space of shifting roles and boundaries because Fuller’s body extends into environment, becoming fabric, scrim and light. Mallarme wrote about “the magic that this Loie Fuller creates, with instinct, with exaggeration, the contraction of skirt or wing, instituting a place.”⁹³ Because her boundaries loosened into the space around her, Mallarme did not see her as an expressive agent of meaning. She became, instead, an open container for meaning.

The free form of modern dance is potentially responsible for this loose-ness that made Fuller a vessel for meaning. Mallarme wrote that Fuller’s images could provide a “virginity of undreamt-of place” that ballet could not provide because the

⁹¹ Mallarme 311.

⁹² Mallarme 309.

⁹³ Mallarme 309.

pointe shoes of the ballerina pricked the hymen of the space.⁹⁴ Fuller was not contained in rigid lines or predictable rhythms as a ballerina. Her loose movements provided a “virginity” that could become an instrument of the *idée*.

Perhaps the female modern dancer alone onstage was more difficult to accept as an agent of meaning than a ballerina dancing in the arms of a male dancer. The boundaries of a ballerina’s individuality could be defined in opposition to her male partner, but Fuller danced alone onstage. Fuller’s independence went even farther than this as she authored the technical aspects of stagecraft as well as movement. Her self-sufficiency as artist and performer were unusual for the time. She was truly “a new woman” onstage. She was American living in Europe on her own, unsupported by a husband, floating about the stage barefoot and corset-less, dissolving her body into erotic lights and shapes. Her performance associated her with a new expression of feminine independence and sexuality just emerging at the turn of the century. Mallarme sensed this powerful independence and self-sufficiency in his remark about the “enchantress” who is both creator and created. He taps into this new expression of identity and sexuality in the formulation of an artist who creates her own world but ultimately her distinctness is absorbed into unity, she is an instrument of the *idée*.

Mallarme’s desire to glimpse the “essential nothingness” in the images that extended from Loie Fuller’s body was informed by the “imperialist gaze,” the “surgically penetrative gaze constructed to give spectators the impression of unveiling secret, hidden worlds.” Loie Fuller’s performances at the 1900 World’s Fair assisted

⁹⁴ Mallarme 308.

in cultivating this gaze from spectators.⁹⁵ Mallarme, watched the dance with a “poet’s gaze” that widened vision into imagination, revealing what is absent. He sought to glimpse in Fuller’s performance the “virginity of site undreamt of, that the figure isolates,”⁹⁶ evoking a sexual entitlement to the space of the performance and body of the dancer. He visually claimed her body for meaning, informed by an imperialist gaze for visually claiming space and bodies. Both Mallarme’s poet’s gaze and the imperialist gaze were fueled by a fear or the erotic potential in the female dancing body.

Salome and the Imperialist Gaze

Mallarme’s erasure of Fuller’s agency represented a fear of the female dancing body that was not isolated. A wider fear of the female dancing body is revealed in turn of the century obsession with the biblical story of Salome. The popularity of the story reveals a fear of the desires and expressive powers of the female dancing body.

The original story of Salome is composed of a mere eleven lines in the book of Mark in which very little is written about her dancing. In the story Salome performs a dance for her stepfather and uncle Herod in exchange for the head of John the Baptist, or Iokanaan. Stories differ as to whether or not Salome herself cooked up the gruesome plan, demanding Iokanaan’s head for her erotic display, or whether she only demanded a beheading at her mother’s urging. Commanding Herod’s desire allows Salome to facilitate a beheading as well as sever a spiritual connection, since

⁹⁵ Garelick 84.

⁹⁶ Mallarme 308.

Iokanaan was considered the word of God. The story reveals a fear of castration, symbolized in the beheading, at the hands of the female dancing body's powerful desires and capabilities for deception.⁹⁷ The erotic power of the dancing body results in silencing the word, revealing feminine sexual desire and agency as a powerful threat to men's control through language. Turn of the century interest in the story reveals a fear of the expressive, erotic potential in the female dancing body and the displacement of this fear onto an Oriental body as part of the construction of imperial identity.⁹⁸

The femme fatale Salome image emerged inevitably from late romantic style portrayals of women. Deborah Jowitt, tracing the Salome figure in the Ballet Russe has observed that "instead of a virtuous heroine who prefers death to dishonor or a loveless marriage we have a woman who uses her power to take life."⁹⁹ Salome was the opposite of pure romantic heroines who never expressed erotic desire or dark intentions. She was an expression of the shifting attitudes towards female sexual agency and anxieties about hysteria. Felicia McCarren has written:

"Nineteenth-century French art's fascination with Salome is a fascination with the problems of representation and hysteria; with the impossibility of representing Salome's strange simultaneous madness and beauty. The story of Salome raises the issues of feminine sexuality, perversion, evil, and agency; the various versions of the Salome tale all pass judgment on whether Salome is

⁹⁷ Toni Bentley, Sisters of Salome (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 22-24.

⁹⁸ Koritz 44-45.

⁹⁹ Jowitt 110.

to blame for the beheading of the prophet or is only the agent of her evil mother, in what ways the dancer's beauty is at odds with the bloody result of the dance and whether the dancing body can lie.¹⁰⁰

Salome brings up the question of how to reconcile beautiful form with grotesque content: the beautiful dancing body which leads to the bloody severed head. She reveals the tension between two opposite notions of feminine sexuality, the innocent body, and the guilty desire. This splitting of the female sexuality evokes the split selves of the hysteria patient, the question of how to reconcile the sane woman with the one suffering from hysteria, and inability to understand the sexual root of hysteria. Salome's dance reveals potential for deception and erotic desire outside of male control. Her dance identifies the female dancing body as more than an object of the spectator but a subject with her own desires outside of the spectator's control.

The popularity of the Salome image was influenced not only by anxieties about hysteria but by women's increased power and control over both sex and life.¹⁰¹ Women's greater independence provoked male fear. Bram Dijkstra has shown how nineteenth century male scientists, doctors, artists and writers utilized repressive images of women to oppose (perhaps unconsciously) women's increasing power and demands for rights and equality.¹⁰²

Salome was portrayed as a seductive and evil femme fatale in paintings, poetry and plays. Later she would transition to Opera, vaudeville and variety shows.

¹⁰⁰ McCarren 151.

¹⁰¹ Bentley 22-24.

¹⁰² Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

In addition, the character resonated with early innovators of modern dance. She was the opposite of a light and innocent ballerina, passively lifted by a male partner. The same shifting cultural attitudes towards women's independence and sexuality that permitted women to dance alone onstage awakened an interest in the story of Salome.

Salome was a Jewish princess. Representations of her from mid nineteenth century cast her as a racial other, identified with "exotic" dancers of the *dans du ventre* from the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁰³ Andrea Deagon has pointed out that "in this period of rapidly changing women's roles and heightened consciousness of the East, Salome was constantly reinterpreted to address the issues of gender, power, sexuality, art and foreignness."¹⁰⁴ Salome's ambiguously non-white body became an erotic femme fatale through whom Europeans explore shifting tensions and fears towards female sexuality. Fear of the female dancing body was mapped onto Salome because she was associated with the Orient. Rhonda Garelick has observed that obsession with Salome emerged simultaneously with imperialist expansion and was influenced by "those women perceived as 'living Salomes', the seductive, often veiled *danse du ventre* imported from the colonies."¹⁰⁵ American and Europeans watched "exotic" dancers from the Middle East and Africa with the "imperialist gaze" that informs the Salome of fin de siècle paintings, poetry, and theater.

¹⁰³ Jowitt 110, Garelick 92.

¹⁰⁴ Andrea Deagon, "Dance of the Seven Veils: The Revision of Revelation in the Oriental Dance Community," Belly Dance: Orientalism Transnationalism & Harem Fantasy, ed. Anthony Shay & Barbara Sellers-Young (Costa Meza: Mazda, 2005) 8.

¹⁰⁵ Garelick 92. Wendy Buonventura has also pointed out that the veil dances of Middle Eastern and North African women involved the sensuous movement of hips and stomach, unusual for European audiences. Buonaventura, Wendy. Something in the Way She Moves, Dancing Women from Salome to Madonna. (New York, De Capo Press, 2004) 32.

The imperialist gaze was fueled by a desire to penetrate the veil that “exotic” dancers sometimes wore. Orientalist scholars have noted that the veil hides and conceals the Orient and Oriental woman from apprehension; it hides the real Orient and keeps its truth from Western knowledge/apprehension. It is also a metaphor of membrane, serving as a screen around which Western fantasies of penetration revolve. It is this polysemous character of the veil which seems to play such a crucial role in the unique articulation of the sexual with cultural difference in Orientalist discourse.¹⁰⁶

The veils fueled the penetrative imperialist gaze that sought to visually possess the bodies of the dancers. They kept the “true” Orient distant, inspiring mystical fantasies and the desire to possess this foreignness. Edward Said has defined imperialism as “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.”¹⁰⁷ The imperialist gaze reveals a transgressive sense of visual entitlement to the bodies and land of colonized groups.

In addition, watching the *danse du ventre* with an imperialist gaze reinforced the imperialist identity as civilized and scientifically advanced in opposition to the Orient. Watching Salome’s dance provided the imperialist gaze with a sense of superiority, visual knowledge of the extent of the empire, and space to grapple with tensions about women’s sexual agency and anxieties toward hysteria. The mysterious, erotic and deceptive powers of the female dancing body are mapped onto the body of

¹⁰⁶ Meyda Yegegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 47.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993) 7.

the Oriental women and audiences watched with the “surgically penetrative” gaze that allowed them to visually possess colonial empire.

Loie Fuller’s Salome

When Loie Fuller took an interest in the story it was certainly time the character made an appearance onstage.¹⁰⁸ Fuller presented the story twice, her first adaptation took place in 1895 and she excerpted from it in her performance at the 1900 Worlds’ Fair. Her adaptation of the story reveals how construction of the Western imperial identity that depended on the Orient for definition.

In Fuller’s Salome, she allowed spectators a rare glimpse of her own body onstage, free from lights, fabric and illusion. Perhaps Fuller thought greater sensuality could be evoked by exposing herself this way. Critics disagreed. One wrote that, “seen up close by the public in a specific setting with a defined action, (Fuller) loses all charm and mystery.”¹⁰⁹ The excitement of Salome depended upon the imperialist gaze of being allowed to see something forbidden. When Fuller appeared without her scarves, lights and illusions, there was no mystery and no magic, the imperialist gaze fell flat. The poet Jean Lorraine saw Fuller as “a laundress misusing her paddle...with gestures of an English boxer and the physique of Mr. Oscar Wilde, this is a Salome for Yankee Drunkards.”¹¹⁰ Fuller was not a mysterious, erotic “other” from the orient. She was an American, performing without the mysteries of elusive

¹⁰⁸ Bentley 44.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Giovanni Lista, Danseuse de la Belle Epoque (Paris: Editions Somogy, 1995) 229.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Garelick 106.

effects, and this made her a dull show. Her Salome failed to capture the surgically penetrative “imperialist gaze.”

Fuller was a “Salome for Yankee Drunkards” because she explicitly chose not to emphasize oriental tones. She adorned her white gown with red roses instead of lotus blossoms, which were in vogue for Salome portraits.¹¹¹ Garelick has pointed out that the lotus suggests the Orient whereas roses place Salome more clearly in a Christian tradition.¹¹² Bringing the dancing princess closer to home made the audience less likely to see her eroticism. In Fuller’s production, Salome is absolved of sin. Instead of Salome desiring the head of Iokanaan, Herod plots Iokanaan’s murder while Salome worships him. She is so infatuated that she offers her own life in exchange for his, begging Herod to murder her in his place. Herod refuses and kills Iokanaan. When Salome sees his head on a platter she dies of grief. Garelick observes that “the result was a modernist spectacle that ostensibly refused the power of narrative, Orientalism, and sexuality while at the same time, being deeply informed by all three.”¹¹³ Fuller responded to the fear of female sexuality and the imperialist, penetrative gaze by separating herself from them and this made her adaptation an utter failure. In an attempt to exorcise the story of erotic and oriental influences, she only revealed the extent to which they had made Salome appealing in the first place. She exposed the constructions of Orientalism at work in the story of the dancing princess and the imperialist gaze guiding spectatorship of the female dancing body.

¹¹¹ Garelick 96.

¹¹² Garelick 97-8.

¹¹³ Garelick 103.

Mallarme's Salome Adaptation: Herodiade

Mallarme's adaptation of Salome also chooses not to engage with erotic or Oriental tones. His poem, "Herodiade," is a psychological portrait of the female dancing body that reveals a tension between the purity of the spiritual world and the impurity of physical things. The female dancing body becomes the embodiment of desire for non-physical purity. She is no longer a vessel for poetry but rather an agent of pure, nonsexual desire, a symbol of poetry itself.¹¹⁴ Mallarme's poem erases the sensual experience and erotic potential of the female dancing body. Salome desires to erase her desires, she is a body aspiring to disembodiment.

Mallarme invested his "entire being" in Herodiade.¹¹⁵ The poem absorbed the better part of his career. His earlier work on the poem culminated in two sections: Scene, the only part of the poem published during his lifetime, and Overture Ancienne, was published posthumously. Mallarme referred periodically to his work on Herodiade throughout his career and late in life completed a great deal of his final version, *Les Noces de Herodiade, Mystere*.¹¹⁶ At the time of his death the poem remained incomplete. I will consider the way the female dancing body is desexualized in the two sections of the poem that were finished earlier in Mallarme's lifetime.

Mallarme decreases the erotic potential of the female dancing body by merging mother with daughter and dancing body with intellectual aspiration.

¹¹⁴ McCarren 135.

¹¹⁵ "Herodiade, ou je m'etais mis tout entire sans le savoir" Stephane Mallarme *Propos sur la poesie*. Ed. Hendri Mondor. (Monaco: editions du Rocher, 1953) 68.

¹¹⁶ Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarme: The Passage from Art to Ritual*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) 104.

Mallarme's "Herodiade" is a fusion of the characters Salome and Herodias, who are mother and daughter in the traditional, Old Testament story. Their merging in Mallarme's work echoes the way he wrote about Loie Fuller; She is both mother and child, creator and created, an embodiment of *idée*. The dancing body embodies the intellectual search for purity, seeking to erase the physical body and all its impurities.

The name Mallarme chose for his poem, "Herodiade," retains some of the erotic power of the female dancing body. The sound of the name evokes hero, Eros and rose.¹¹⁷ Mary Lewis Shaw exposes a division at the root of the character since the "morpheme 'dia'" suggests the division of a unity,¹¹⁸ expressing both the unity body and mind aspire to but the reality of the division between them. The name alludes to a similar imagery choice to Fuller's. "Rose" evokes Christianity, purity, and virginity, qualities representing the West in opposition to the Orient.

The break between Herodiade's body and spirit becomes the disconnect between reality and the ideal. She seeks an ideal purity and this desire makes her the perfect symbol of Mallarme's poetry: she is poetry seeking to be released from words,¹¹⁹ just like Fuller's "unwritten poem." Herodiade admires the purity of her "ghostly twin," the soul that has no body, seeking to be released from the impurities of her physical form. She is poetry that seeks to be released from the confines of language. Mallarme erases the expressive, erotic potential in the female dancing body, representing disembodiment as a form of superior purity.

In "Scene", Nurse asks Herodiade,

¹¹⁷ Shaw 112.

¹¹⁸ Shaw 112.

¹¹⁹ Mearren 135.

for whom, eaten up

With anguish, does our being vainly keep

Its mystery and splendor sealed? (95-98)¹²⁰

Herodiade replies, “for me.” Her only allegiance is to herself, she seeks a pure spiritual virginity, refusing displays of “mystery and splendor,” qualities associated with a veiled, Oriental Salome. Just as Loie Fuller’s performance provided a “virginity of undreamt-of site,” Herodiade, symbolizing poetry, preserves the virginity of form from the contamination of words, aspiring to a purer meaning. The ideal poetry is connected to a Western construction of identity that privileges purity and spirituality.

The image of Herodiade gazing at her reflection permeates the rest of the poem so that all things are reflected, a ghostly double staring back at them. At the start of the “Ancienne Overture,” the first section of the poem, the sun is at daybreak, reflected in a pool of water. Herodiade’s nurse is reciting an incantation:

None can forget: ruins of autumn stand

Mirrored in water putting out their brand:

Of the swan when amid the pallid grave

Or plumage dipped its head, now bowed to grieve

By the pure diamond of some star, but still

Earlier, which was never seen to sparkle.¹¹⁻¹⁵

Daybreak reflected in the water is described as a bird, which becomes a swan represented in a constellation of stars. Everything is reflected in some other plane.

¹²⁰ Stephane Mallarme. “Scene” *Poems*. Trans. Keith Bosley. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 109. All translations of Herodiade are by Keith Bosley.

Later the crescent moon is Lucifer's sheath slicing a pomegranate into twin halves of day and night, and then each hour again in two, so that even the smallest units of time have a double. Everything is split and reflected, all things and parts of things have an elusive doppelganger, suggesting the real and ideal staring at each other in a mirror. Mallarme suggests the whole physical world as a form from which to be released, the *idée* is a non-physical idea that physical things aspire to.¹²¹ The dissatisfaction with physical things corresponds to Herodiade's desire to erase her body in search of a spiritual purity, poetry's desire to escape language.

At the start of *Scene*, we meet Herodiade's reflection in the mirror before we meet the character herself. The nurse exclaims, "do I see the shade of a princess?" (103). She dreams of her ideal in the mirror:

"Your lonely sister, this is my dream to you

Shall climb, eternal sister: such already

A rare clear heart devoted to its study," (133-135)

Herodiade is "devoted" and studious, her heart is "rare" and "clear." Her pursuits are obviously superior to embodiment, to any fulfillments provided by the physical world. Herodiade is a dancing body that aspires to disembodiment, disdaining the impurity of the physical world. She symbolizes a poetry that seeks to be released from words and language. Mallarme's Salome is informed by turn of the century fear of the female dancing body, displaced onto the Oriental body of Salome. Eroticism was associated with the *dans du ventre* of Oriental Salomes, affirming the purity and superiority of the Western imperial identity. Herodiade idealizes

¹²¹ Shaw 107.

disembodied purity, revealing the how Western ideals of purity were constructed in opposition to the Orient.

For “Herodiade,” Mallarme wrote that he would have to invent a new poetic language “in which the referential value of words would become subordinate to the value of their effect.”¹²² He wanted to transcend the associations of words to arrive at a quality, in this way revealing some essence in language that was disconnected from the physical world and the every day uses of language. Forms uncontaminated by the rigid meanings and associations of the empirical world hold an appealing “virginity” for Mallarme, they surrender themselves to a more pure meaning.

By using the dancing body as a symbol of this transcendence Mallarme devalues the sensual experience of the dancer. His dancing bodies do not enjoy the sensual experience; Loie Fuller is dissolved into pure poetry while Herodiade desires disembodiment. His dancer image does not dance for the physical experience of dancing, the sensual knowledge gained from this experience, or the awareness and agency over the body. Rather, she dances to erase her body. The dancing body in his poetry is translated through a poet’s gaze for transcending senses and an imperialist gaze, hungry for the “virginity of undreamt of sites.” Just as the imperialist gaze seeks to penetrate the veil gaining knowledge of the Orient, the poet’s gaze seeks to transcend the physical dance and glimpse an essential “nothing.” Imperial entitlement to the body of the Oriental woman (and by extension the Orient), translates to entitlement to the dancer’s body and therefore meaning. Writing about dance, for Mallarme, meant erasing the dancing body’s sensual experience and

¹²²Stephane Mallarme. Correspondance:1862-1871. Ed. Henri Mondor and Jean-Pierre Richard, (Paris: Galimard, 1959) 137.

agency to make meaning, appropriating her as a symbol. Mallarme's desire for a pure poetry is informed by the imperialist project of colonization.

Oscar Wilde's Salome

While Mallarme gazes at the dancing body with a poet's gaze informed by an imperialist gaze, Oscar Wilde turns the gaze back to the spectator; his adaptation of Salome becomes a mirror for revealing the spectator's own desires. Oscar Wilde's Salome reveals a dissonance between the purity of the body and the impurity of desire. While Mallarme's Herodiade stares at herself in the mirror, Wilde's Herod gazes at Salome. Wilde's adaptation exposes forbidden desires in both the dancing body and the spectator of the dance. Salome's dance becomes a space for exposing forbidden desires, resisting gender roles and the construction of the Orient.

Oscar Wilde's adaptation, published before Mallarme's, provided Salome's passage from high culture to low culture by inaugurating a new interpretation of her dance.¹²³ Because of Wilde's adaptation, Salome entered the worlds of opera, vaudeville, and film and returned to the world of modern dance. The piece generated much controversy and was only performed once in Wilde's lifetime, at the Theatre Libre in Paris in 1896. Wilde was in prison in Reading at the time. His play could not be performed in England because it was illegal to portray biblical characters on stage. Censorship of Wilde's script clarifies the extent to which it was an unprecedented examination of forbidden desires.

¹²³ Bentley 27-33.

Wilde provided Salome with a dance that gave her control over both her own desires and the desires of her spectators. He supplied only one stage direction for Salome's dance but it made a lasting impact: "Salome dances the dance of the seven veils."¹²⁴ Only one person knew what Wilde meant by this. On a copy of the original French edition he wrote to his illustrator Aubrey Beardsley: "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance."¹²⁵ This is the first time that seven veils have been attributed to Salome and it certainly shifted the course of adaptations to come. The "seven veils" apparently derive from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar who, according to Toni Bentley,

performed the first documented striptease when she descended to the underworld to retrieve her lover-son-husband, the mortal Tammuz. In this death and resurrection myth, Ishtar must relinquish her jewels and robes at each of the seven gates to the underworld until she stands naked in the "land of no return."

Wilde assigned Salome a strip-tease, an artful removal of masks of purity. She is not only the object of spectator's desires but an agent of desire herself. The naked body we encounter at the end of the dance is a symbol of forbidden, erotic desire.

Herod's gaze guides the action of the play as he moves from gazing at the moon to gazing at Salome to gazing at Salome as she dances. Herod's vision of Salome in the moon reveals the dissociation between the purity of the body and the

¹²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *Salome* trans. Lord Alfred Douglas, (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2002) first English translation 1894, 37.

¹²⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962) 348.

impurity of desire. From the first line of the play Salome is equated with the moon and marked as a specifically female bloodthirsty presence; “She is like a dead woman,” the page of Herodias proclaims, “One might fancy she was looking for dead things.”¹²⁶ Her desire is dirty, but her body is pure: “She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.”¹²⁷ The moon, or Salome, wears masks of purity. Innocence is connected to her dancing feet while evil is tied to her gaze. When she wears her veil her innocent feet are speaking. However when she is a “dead woman” her gaze is evil, she looks for “dead things.”

The impurity of desire is revealed in the impurity of sight. The eyes have dangerous potential to paint the body sensual. When Salome sees Iokanaan for the first time she responds intensely to his black eyes. They are “like black holes burnt by torches in a tapestry of tyre.”¹²⁸ While Iokanaan’s eyes are the ultimate black his body is the ultimate white: “There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Suffer me to touch thy body.”¹²⁹ The body is innocent and the eyes are guilty. This is not only true about Salome, the “dancing princess” who “looks for dead things,” and about Herod, the spectator of the dance, but also about Iokanaan, the object of Salome’s desires.

Iokanaan symbolizes the power of the word, and this is what Salome most desires. She claims that her true desire is for Iokanaan’s voice- the instrument of the word of god. Sound, voice and language are marked as male in this universe. Both

¹²⁶ Wilde, Salome 3.

¹²⁷ Wilde, Salome 3.

¹²⁸ Wilde, Salome 14.

¹²⁹ Wilde, Salome 16.

Herod and Iokanaan “hear” the beating of the wings of the angel of death, which no one else hears. These two privileged males possess the most power with their voices; Iokanaan, although ultimately silenced, is the voice of God and Herod’s voice commands the kingdom and silences Salome. Her desire for Iokanaan’s decapitation represents the fear of castration and female power over the male word.

The guilty power of sight leads to this beheading/castration. After her dance Salome demands the head of Iokanaan and Herod is horrified; his impure gaze as a spectator is revealed. It has caused the ceding of the word of God:

Thy beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at thee
overmuch...One should not look at anything. Neither at things,
nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors is it well to look,
for mirrors do but show us masks.”¹³⁰

Mirrors show only the pure and impure veils of the self. Watching the dance of Salome’s veils, Herod realizes, has given her power to manipulate his desires with her masks. His imperialist gaze, hungry for forbidden visual pleasures, has been tricked and exposed. He will no longer trust the veils worn by anyone but himself.

The consequences of his gaze have been so intense that Herod seeks to make any further gazing impossible. When Salome has finally been presented with the head she so desires he cries out: “put out the torches. I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars! Let us hide ourselves in our palace, Herodias. I begin to be afraid.”¹³¹ By doing this

¹³⁰ Wilde, Salome 39.

¹³¹ Wilde, Salome 45.

he gives ultimate power to Salome's voice; she comes as close as possible to realizing her desires. The stage goes dark and we hear only the voice of Salome:

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth.
There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood? Nay;
but perchance it was the taste of love...They say that love hath a
bitter taste...But what matter? What matter? I have kissed thy
mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth.¹³²

The realization of Salome's desire is tinged with a bitter taste; Iokanaan is dead and so her desire cannot be fully realized. There is a cost to her forbidden desire that tinges its realization with bitterness. She desires word and voice, forbidden to her in the world of the play, where Herod and Iokanaan, men in power, control the word.

Salome's voice is an instrument of power capable of silencing Herod's evil gaze, but only for a moment. A stage direction breaks the darkness: "A ray of moonlight falls on Salome and illumines her."¹³³ Herod sees Salome and orders her death. Herod's gaze has been the driving source of evil throughout the play. Salome cannot possess the power of the voice because Herod's imperialist gaze silences her. Salome cannot assume the spiritual voice even when she receives the head of John the Baptist, but is trapped in the physical, feminized body, "imprisoned" by the constructions of femininity and Orient.¹³⁴

A woman who uses her body to possess sound, word and voice, all gendered as male, meets dangerous consequences. The female dancing body is a dangerous

¹³² Wilde, *Salome* 45.

¹³³ Wilde, *Salome* 45.

¹³⁴ Koritz 81.

source of power, and worst of all it goes masquerading as innocent, skillfully concealing the dark desire at the root of the dance.

Watching Salome dance is the culmination of a dangerous gaze, revealing both the dancer and the spectator's dirty desires. Watching her dance reveals the dancing body as a desiring subject who is also capable of manipulating the spectator's desires. As Wilde's Salome performs her forbidden desires, the audience experiences them with her. . In the world of the play audiences are allowed to indulge in otherwise forbidden pleasures, sexual and violent.¹³⁵ Just as Herod's desire is exposed, the forbidden desires of the audience are exposed

Wilde's veil dance provides the opportunity to subvert the imperialist gaze. The veil as a symbol reveals how sexual difference is mapped onto cultural difference, and how sexual desires are mapped onto the construction of the Orient. Because the veil both conceals and reveals it provides space for resistance to the construction of the Orient

It is through the veil that the colonial/Western desire to see emerges and is erased simultaneously, and this is what enables the veiled other to destabilize the identificatory process of the subject. It is this moment of seeing or these eyes that filter through the veil which frustrate the voyeuristic desire of the colonialist and displaces his surveillant eye.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Elliot L. Gilbert "Tumult of Images: Wilde, Beardsley and Salome." Victorian Studies 26:2 (Winter 1983) 133-159.

¹³⁶ Yegegenoglu, Colonial Fantasies. 63.

The dancer performing the dance of the veils can reorient or control the spectator's desires subverting the penetrative imperialist gaze. Wilde's dance of veils makes the female dancing body a powerful agent of revealing and concealing its desires, acknowledging how forbidden desires are buried beneath masks of purity, and, through the dance of the veils, exposing the spectator's own desires. The veil and themes of masks reveal the potential for resistance to the construction of gender identities and the Orient. By presenting the spectator with their own forbidden desires, the imperialist gaze is eroded. The dancing body is a body with its own desires not just an object for claiming and dissolving into space. In Salome Wilde found the space to expose the fear of forbidden desires and the power they command. He provides the dance of the veils as a space for resisting dominant constructions of identity and reorienting the imperialist gaze inward towards itself.

Dancing Salomes

Wilde's adaptation of Salome permitted her entry into the worlds of vaudeville and music halls in America. His recognition of Salome's desires provided space for women to perform their desires onstage, confronting fear of female sexual agency. The dance that made women agents of forbidden desires provided an opposition to the fear of the female dancing body and resisted the imperialist gaze of entitlement. However, the dance simultaneously re-established the imperial identity by constructing western superiority to the erotic orient.

Wilde's adaptation catalyzed Salome's movement from the high arts of poetry and painting to Vaudeville via Opera. Strauss was inspired by the 1903 Berlin

production of Wilde's play and decided to use the libretto for his next opera. He wrote nine minutes of music for the Dance of the Seven Veils, but he specified that it should be "thoroughly decent, as if it were being done on a prayer mat."¹³⁷

Apparently the dance that was called for did not quite meet these standards. The woman playing the title role claimed she could not perform it, "I am a decent woman," she declared, and a ballerina was called in¹³⁸. Wilde's adaptation had given Salome permission to be indecent in a way that could not be diminished. She was an agent of forbidden desires and this made her dance threatening.

Wilde's stage direction and Strauss' nine minutes of music paved the way for truly outrageous dancing by the standards of the time. When this performance of sexuality was deemed inappropriate for Opera, it was quickly transferred to a more permissible space. The opera was banned after one performance in New York in 1907 because the dancer who performed the dance of the Seven Veils, a prima ballerina from the Metropolitan, apparently "spared the audience nothing in active and suggestive detail."¹³⁹ After being banned from the legitimate stage the dancer, Bianca Froelich, took her performance to the Lincoln Square Variety Theater starting a Salome craze in vaudeville and burlesque.¹⁴⁰ The Follies of 1907 was presented at the "Jardin de Paris" of the New York Theatre, and Salome was the show's most successful act, the dance inspired by Aubrey Beardley's illustrations. The piece went over so well that the dancer, Daisy Peterkin from Detroit, opened a school for "dancing Salomes." Every morning she taught a two-hour class on "Salome" style

¹³⁷ Quoted in Bentley 35.

¹³⁸ Bentley 38.

¹³⁹ W.J. Henderson, quoted in Bentley 38.

¹⁴⁰ Bentley 39.

erotic dancing, training a hundred and fifty Salomes per month¹⁴¹. In August 1908 there were four Salomes performing in New York, by October there were 24 and by 1909 every Vaudeville and Variety show in America could boast of a Salome act.¹⁴²

The rapid rise in popularity demonstrates that audiences were quick to respond to Salome's dance. It allowed indulgence in forbidden desires, both sexual and violent. The story's popularity also reveals that women wanted to perform the dance. Salome's dance provided women the opportunity to perform their desires, reclaiming the erotic potential of the female dancing body. Even outside of Vaudeville, solo women performers went to great lengths to author their own Salome productions. The Russian actress and dancer Ida Rubinstein planned an expensive solo performance in 1908, engaging in time consuming study with the choreographer Michel Fokine and risking the social and familial disapproval, only to be shut down by censors.¹⁴³ The Canadian modern dancer Maud Allan made a career with her solo performance, *Visions of Salome* in which she played over 200 engagements in London alone. These examples illustrate women's need to author their own Salomes. The template of a dance that allowed both audience and dancer to indulge in forbidden desires provided the space for women to perform their own desires, reclaiming them from fear of female sexual agency.

Salome's dance was not only appealing because it provided the space for indulging in forbidden desires but also because it reinforced the superiority of the

¹⁴¹ Bentley 39.

¹⁴² Bentley 40.

¹⁴³ Deagon 250.

Euro-American imperialist identity over the mystical orient.¹⁴⁴ Audiences were allowed to respond to the appealing display of sexuality while still being allowed the knowledge that the dance was “other” and foreign. Feminist Julia Ward Howe characterized “Oriental dancing” as “simply horrid, no touch of grace about it, only the most deforming movement of the whole abdominal and lumbar region.”¹⁴⁵ Her comment reveals how forbidden desires are conflated with the Orient and constructed in opposition to “grace” in dance, as a superior, European quality. Salome performances in Vaudeville only reinforced Western superiority to the Orient.

Wilde catalyzed the transition of Salome to Vaudeville.¹⁴⁶ The dancing body became a way of confronting fear of sexualities in both high and low art. Audiences responded to Salome dancing because it provided space for indulging in forbidden desires, in the space of the performance the fear of the female dancing body is exposed. Women’s performance of their own desires began to deconstruct the imperialist gaze of entitlement to the visual pleasures of the body but the location of forbidden desires in the Orient ultimately reinforced Western superiority.

Conclusion

Loie Fuller presented an erotic unity of the body with technology that captivated Mallarme’s gaze. When Mallarme’s poet’s gaze translated her dancing body into poetry, the sensual experience of the dance was erased. The female dancing body was desexualized to serve Mallame’s desire to see past the dance to a

¹⁴⁴ Koritz 38.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Wendy Buonaventura, Serpent of the Nile, (New York: Interlink, 1994) 102.

¹⁴⁶ Bentley 27-46.

purser meaning. This is connected to an imperialist desire to see past the veil of the “exotic dancer” and by extension know the Orient. Visual possession of the dancing body becomes visual possession of the space she occupies and her agency to make meaning. Wilde’s *Salome* provides a way to subvert this penetrative gaze by making the spectator aware of their own forbidden desires. Vaudeville dancers performed their sexuality and desire, further subverting the gaze of entitlement. The resistance dance provided was confined to the space of the show, however, ultimately reinforcing constructions of West and Orient.

2. A Graph of the Heart and a Machine of Words

Embodied Language in the Work of William Carlos Williams and Martha Graham

"The origin of our verse was the dance," wrote Williams Carlos Williams in a 1917 essay, "America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry." "Even if it had not been the dance," he felt, "the heart when it is stirred has multiple beats, and verse at its most impassioned sets the heart violently beating."¹⁴⁷ Forty years later, his opinion had not changed about the origin of poetry; he had only grown more technical with his language. In a 1955 letter, he wrote that "Poetry began with measure, it began with the dance, whose divisions we have all but forgotten but are still known as measures. Measure they were and we still speak of their minuter elements as feet."¹⁴⁸

While Williams traced the heart-beating foot of poetry back to its origin in dance, his friend Martha Graham created a new dance technique based on the percussive rhythms of breath. Graham connected rhythms of breath to intensities of feeling to carve out an emotional landscape onstage. Both Graham and Williams sought to distill the rhythms of words and movements down to the biological sources of rhythm in the human body. While Williams traced verse back to dance, Graham drew choreography out of poetry. Their shared interest in reuniting the "feet" of poetry with the "feet" of dance reveals a desire for embodied language. This shared

¹⁴⁷William Carlos Williams, "America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry," Poetry Journal 8 (1917): 23.

¹⁴⁸William Carlos Williams, The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams ed. John T. Thirlwall (New York: New Directions, 1969) 331.

desire fueled collaboration in protesting the mechanization of bodies for war, but ultimately resulted in divergence over the question of original form. Graham's study of poetry and dance led her to turn inward to the landscape of the mind in an effort to portray something uniquely human about the psyche. By contrast William's search for embodied language led him to focus on exteriority, revealing the truth in the local world around him. Graham sought an embodied language that would protect the space of human creativity from the mechanization of the world, while Williams incorporated structures of the industrialized world into his embodied language.

Graham and Williams' Friendship

Graham found Williams' articulation of the American experience exciting. After he published his book, In the American Grain (1925), Graham wrote him to say that she, "could not have gone on without it."¹⁴⁹ When the book was published Graham had never met Williams. She had only recently left the Denishawn company, where she received most of her training, and wouldn't give her first recital in New York until the next April.¹⁵⁰ Williams had already published several books of poetry, although they were not immediately well received. *In The American Grain* told the story of the founding of America. Williams exposed "the niggardliness of the

¹⁴⁹ William notes having received the letter from Graham in his autobiography but does not supply the date of the correspondence and I have not been able to find the letter. He writes that she wrote to him that "she could not have gone on with her choreographic projects without it," suggesting she came across it after she had begun to choreograph for her own company, later than it's original date of publication. William Carlos Williams, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1948) 236-237.

¹⁵⁰ Ernestine Stodelle, Deep Song: The Dance Story of Martha Graham (London: Shirmer Books, 1984) 47.

damning Puritanical tradition" which denied early Americans "the pleasure of motion to release itself." He identified the Puritan emphasis on productivity and spiritual devotion as objection towards embodied expression.¹⁵¹ In a section on "May-Pole and Merry Mount" he attacked Puritans for their intolerance of dancing and merry-making.¹⁵² Graham shared his interest in eroding a fear of sex and embodied expression so that dance could become a serious art.¹⁵³ She responded strongly to William's book. Rooting expression in the rhythms of the body provided a way to reclaim embodied expression from Puritan influence. Later it would provide resistance to the mechanization of bodies for war.

Williams and Graham met at Bennington college but Williams noted that "she was so closed about by the sheer physical necessities of her position that nothing interesting came of it."¹⁵⁴ Graham was making her first pieces that would be considered distinctly original at the time, large-scale dance theater productions with a dark and introspective tone. Williams was working on an important collection of anti-war poems called *The Wedge*.

A New Line

Focusing on the rhythms of the body in poetry and dance necessitated a new concept of line. Graham and Williams re-imagined the line on the body and the page to visually and spatially express different rhythms. The invention of cinema, cubism and the theory of relativity made artists across disciplines interested in

¹⁵¹ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1925) 130.

¹⁵² Williams, *In the American Grain* 75-80.

¹⁵³ Foulkes 148.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 237.

breaking and fragmenting shapes, rhythms and narratives.¹⁵⁵ Re-imagined lines of words and movement absorbed this interest in fragmentation.

By the time Williams was writing the line of poetry was already undergoing revision. French symbolist poets and Williams' fellow modernists broke away from poetic forms, which required specific measures and number of syllables per line.¹⁵⁶ As free verse poetry developed, new models of line lengths and rhythms emerged. Williams felt that "the one thing essential to rhythm is not sound but motion, of the two kinds, forward and up and down, rapidity of motion and quality of motion."¹⁵⁷ He developed a line concept called the triadic meter, made up of units called "variable feet." The system consisted of shorter groups of 3 lines in successive indentation.¹⁵⁸

Graham needed new lines on the body that would fit the rhythms of breath.¹⁵⁹ "The American rhythm is sharp and angular," she wrote "stripped of unessentials. It is something related only to itself, not laid on, but of a piece with that spirit which was willing to face a pioneer country."¹⁶⁰ American dance needed a bare and essential rhythm. Graham carved the torso and limbs into sharp curves. Bodies onstage shifted quickly from one sharp curve to another creating a sense of fractured continuity. Graham at one point printed on a flyer that "her angular gestures could be considered as segments of a curve; they implied a curve, which the spectators eyes

¹⁵⁵ Jowitt 202.

¹⁵⁶ Everdell 80-99.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Mike Weaver, William Carlos Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 82-83.

¹⁵⁸ Eleanor Berry, "William Carlos Williams' Triadic-Line Verse: An Analysis of Its Prosody," Twentieth Century Literature, 35-3 (1989): 364-388.

¹⁵⁹ Jowitt 166.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Franko 54.

could complete."¹⁶¹ This description of the fracturing of image reveals how greatly Graham was influenced by the cinema and cubism. Her disjointed flow suggests a line of cinema stills that create the sensation of movement, or an object divided into perspectives on a Picasso canvas.

A sense of downward pull was also important to both Graham and Williams' re-conceiving of space and rhythm. New lines of words and movements expressed not only a disjointed continuity moving forward but also tension with gravity. Rejecting the balletic emphasis on lightness and lifting up, Graham focused on the ground as a source of energy. Williams allowed enjambment to pull the reader across lines down the bottom of the page.¹⁶² The tension between moving forward and gravity pulling downwards gives the body a sense of strength and weight that was made invisible in the ballet tradition. Similarly the tension between "motion forward and up and down" gives the reader a sense of weighty awkwardness or flowing ease. Williams explored the tension between these movements in his poetry, especially when writing about dance.

Formal similarities reveal the extent to which Williams and Graham were responding to the same social and cultural influences in fragmentation and rejecting classical techniques. They shared a modernist desire to whittle forms down to their basic inner workings- in this case the rhythms of breath and heartbeats.

In a 1952 lecture to students at Julliard, Graham spoke of "the fear of the artist, of a blank white page when writing a composition, the fear of the empty studio

¹⁶¹ Jowitt 171.

¹⁶² Mester 139.

when starting a dance.¹⁶³ The creative mind of the writer became an anchor of inspiration for Graham and several of her most innovative pieces would study the minds of specific writers. Conversely for Williams, the dance became the ultimate metaphor for the act of writing a poem. In many poems, the mind dances with inspiration, or ideas dance into concrete form. The inspiration they provided each other reveals the attention both artists paid to the limitations of writing or of dancing, and the ways in which they sought to push these boundaries.

Dance in Williams' Poetry

Dance provided Williams with two enduring forms of imagery: a celebratory social dance, and the writer's solitary creative dance. By contrasting the raucous social dancing that Puritans so disdained to the creative intellectual dancing Williams confronted Puritan biases towards embodied expression. Poems from late in his career such as "Pictures from Brueghel" and "The Desert Music" suggest a desire to understand the poem as a dance, driving language with the rhythms of the body. Williams' dance imagery erodes Puritan fears of the body establishing poetry as embodied language.

Williams engaged with dance and poetic form by writing about two different dancing scenes in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel the elder. By translating these painted dancing scenes into poetry, Williams' writing restored movement to the frozen dance through the flow and meter of his poetry. Brueghel's dancing scenes portrayed the vitality of peasant life and the dancers he depicted were raucous, tipsy

¹⁶³ Jowitt 209.

and awkwardly off-balance. Williams sought to awaken the vitality of this tradition by writing the frozen painted scene in moving measure, accessing the embodied “pleasure of motion”¹⁶⁴ that Puritans forbade.

In 1941 Williams wrote “The Dance,” focusing on Brueghel’s “the Kermess.” Williams captured a raucous peasant dance in repetition, internal rhyme and alliteration. The poem is twelve even lines arranged in a block, perhaps to emphasize the movement of the dance caught in the fixed angular space of the canvas. The lines are in triple meter with the emphasis on the first beat suggesting a waltz. The first line of the poem is: “in Brueghel’s great picture, “The Kermess,” and Williams repeats this line at the end of the poem, both emphasizing the circular movement of the dance and reminding us that the movement of the dance is caught inside the frame of the painting. Williams brings the dancers’ awkwardness into the poem through tension between enjambment and poetic devices. Sentences spill over line-breaks and the reader must continue moving forward over internal rhyme and alliteration that provide the sense of repetition, as in a circle dance. Poetic devices often come up in a way that does not quite fit easily in the rhythmic flow of the piece, creating the sense of a clumsy, drunken dance:

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 (5-8)

¹⁶⁴ Williams, In the American Grain 236.

The repetition of “bellies” is awkward, and the rhyme of “round” and “impound” comes unexpectedly. Williams accesses the clumsy dance through tension between “the motion downward and the motion forward,” between enjambment and sonic devices.

In 1949, Williams wrote about ten Brueghel paintings in a series called “Pictures from Brueghel.” One of these was “The Wedding Dance in Open Air.” Like “the Kermess,” the dance in the painting has a raucous, celebratory feeling. Peasants dance in pairs, moving around each other. Unlike the Kermess, however, the dance takes place in the foreground of the painting with a crowd of people standing around and behind, extending into the woods. Williams stirs the round, repetitive dance into movement through spare three line stanzas, rather than a block of twelve lines, suggesting, in the space between stanzas, the still forms surrounding the dancers. The dance, he is aware, has already been

disciplined by the artist

to go round

& round (1-3)

The line breaks bring the reader “round/&round” in a more controlled way than in “The Dance” (the dancers go round, they go round and/around). Like “the Dance”, the r sounds, open vowels and enjambment of lines work to create a rhythmic sensation of dancing:

round and around in

rough shoes and

farm breeches (16-18)

As in “the Dance” the whole poem moves quickly downward as enjambment takes the reader from one group of three lines to the next, arriving at the last:

mouths agape

Oya!

Kicking up their heels (19-21)

Instead of the circular movement of “the Dance,” which brought the reader back to the beginning at the end, the movement spirals downward in a pull that feels gravitational.

The question of how to wake Brueghel’s raucous dance sleeping on canvas reveals the poem as, paradoxically, both a moving, breathing dance and a way of fixing things that are in motion. Williams envisions a painter’s view of dancing. When the “heels” of the dance arrive in the poem, the moving and still, physical and non-physical aspects of the poem are revealed. This representational friction presents Williams’ idea of poetry originating in dance. It invites the reader to understand the poem as a dance, emphasizing the movement of language. Williams makes the reader conscious of the paradoxical moving and frozen status of the poem but invigorates the moving aspect, calling for embodied language.

In the poem *The Desert Music* (published in 1954 with *Pictures from Brueghel*), dance is both vulgar spectacle and the creative transformation of idea into form. Williams reveals the poet at the intersection of physical and non-physical dancing and dance is revealed as the movement of ideas into concrete poetic form.

Dance is introduced at the beginning of the poem as the creative force that will wake the sleeping form of the poem. Williams engages with the idea of writing a

poem as discovering the shape of an idea. Dance is the process of discovering this shape:

the dance begins: to end about a form
propped motionless- on the bridge
between Juarez and El Paso- unrecognizable
in the semi-dark (1-4)

An “unrecognizable” form is situated on a very specific site. Tension between specificity of idea and ambiguity of form is where the dance of the poem begins. The form is encountered “motionless.” The dance’s task is to wake it through moving measure, to bring it from the non-physical stillness of ideas into the physical movement of language:

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:
to imitate, not to copy nature, not
to copy nature
NOT prostrate, to copy nature
But to dance! To dance (22-26)

The poem will “imitate,” not “copy” nature. It will reinterpret the physical, tangible world in a “dance” of language that imitates the movements of the world. This “counted” dance, “to an exact measure” will thaw the frozen shape of the poem, stirring into movement the sleeping form on the bridge. The dancing measures of poetry root the poem in physical movement.

The poems’ form dances in measures spatially and sonically mirroring the movement of the speaker. As the poem takes the reader on a walk around the streets

of Mexico, snippets of sounds, images and thoughts are sewn together in rapid succession. Sentences are broken across lines and scattered about the page, reflecting the busy market where the speaker finds himself. After traipsing “from booth to booth along the curb” he arrives at a bar and declares: “My feet are beginning to ache me,” (151). The line facilitates a switch from the rapid succession of movement in the outdoor market to sitting calmly in a bar. Shifting from a spill of sentences across lines, this line is a self-contained sentence. It’s syntax, “my feet are beginning to ache me,” mirrors the Spanish construction in which “to ache” is a reflexive verb. In English, it puts an unusual emphasis on the speaker: “My feet are beginning to ache me,” and it attributes unusual agency to the “feet.” The foot is again revealed as the unit of rhythm driving the poem. The first person emphasis suggests the speaker’s role in the “made poem.” Seeing is composing a picture, choosing a rhythm from the chaotic movements of the world. All experiments in foot and measure in the rapid succession of sentences spilling over lines come to an abrupt halt here in the bar, where the speaker/writer anchors on a single sentence to focus in on one image.

In the bar the creative dance of finding form for a poem confronts the vulgar, embodied dance of a strip tease. The speaker places heightened emphasis on the stripper’s inadequacy:

Do you mean it? Wow! Look at her.

You’d have to be

pretty drunk to get any kick out of that.

She’s no Mexican. Some worn-out trouper from

the States. Look at those breasts. (64-68)

Developing this engagement with dirty bar culture, the poem shifts to a very specific shape. The dancer is described in a centered block of short line quatrains, sentences again spilling over into the next line. Here it is more controlled than in the market place because of the very specific length and placement of each line:

She gyrates but it's
not what you think,
one does not laugh
to watch her belly.

One is moved but not
At the dull show. The
Guitarist yawns. She
Cannot even sing. (73-80)

The controlled shape of the poem, consistency of the quatrains, and the formality of the third person (one does not laugh...one is moved) point to the tension between poetry as a high art form and the vulgar dancing in the bar. The failure of the verse to “imitate nature” by reflecting the dancer’s movement in language, reveal the space between these two forms. While the speaker places heightened emphasis on the inadequacy of the dancer, the devices point towards the inadequacy of verse.

The poet/speaker wonders “What in the form of an old whore in/a cheap Mexican joint in Juarez, her bare/can waggling crazily can be/ so refreshing to me, raise to my ear/so sweet a tune, built of such slime.” (212-216) The poet is located at

the intersection of embodied and disembodied dancing, building “so sweet a tune” from “such slime.” The poem is “sweet,” detached from physical form, while the strip-tease is “slime” necessarily connected to sex and the body. The poet is identified at the intersection, carving “slime” into a “sweet” tune, mediating between the physical and non-physical.

Williams Carlos Williams, the poet/doctor is exposed carving words and bodies into form:

good-looking man, is working
absorbed, before a chopping block

Old fashioned all around?

So this is William

Carlos Williams, the poet (233-237)

The poet/doctor recognizes the need to carve a physical body for the poem and the task of carving a body for the poem merges into the creative act of writing:

The music
guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,
a benumbing ink that stains the
sea of our minds- to hold us off- shed
of a shape close as it can get to no shape,
a music! a protecting music. (305-309)

The poet must build something tangible from the mucus/music, the inchoate flow of ideas, rooting the non-physical world in the concreteness of language. Dance is the

movement of ambiguity into articulate form, to write a poem is to make a measured dance from the chaos of the mind:

The dance! The verb detaches itself
Seeking to become articulate

And I could not help thinking
Of the wonders of the brain that
Hears that music and of our
Skill sometimes to record it. (314-319)

Williams' vulgar dance of the stripper and creative dance of intellect meet to expose the poet negotiating physical and non-physical dancing, translating the music of the mind into language in measured feet. The dance or the poem is revealed as a form that makes the chaos of the world articulate by capturing it in a rhythm. Poetry is a process of articulation rooted in the body. Williams writes to discover embodied language from the chaos of the world.

Poetry in Graham's choreography

In the months leading up to her collaboration with Williams, Graham was working on *Letter to the World*, a piece about the life and work of Emily Dickinson. *Letter to the World* would become one of Graham's most important pieces, marking a shift in artistic focus towards expressing the landscape of the mind.¹⁶⁵ In *Letter to the*

¹⁶⁵ Stodelle 113.

World, Graham extended poetic rhythms into movement on the body, using these rhythms as a container for emotional narrative about the life of Emily Dickinson.

Graham had two dancers play the role of Emily Dickinson onstage simultaneously. One spoke lines from Dickinson's poetry while the other danced. By splitting the poet in two Graham revealed the layers of the writer's mind. She called attention to the formal limitations of words and movements by using both a speaking and dancing Dickinson, revealing how she drew choreography out of the rhythms of Dickinson's poetry.

The Dickinson who wrote alone in her room for her whole life appears next to the Dickinson who interacted with the world, exposing the secluded part of an artist's mind. In the original production, Graham danced the role of the dancing Emily, calling the part the "hidden impulsive self of the one in white."¹⁶⁶ The dancing Dickinson is an invisible extension of the writing Dickinson, exploring rhythms on the body that the other explored in words.¹⁶⁷ Like Williams, Dickinson's mind engages in a solitary creative dance. Graham also discovers poetry as a negotiation between physical and non-physical dancing. Graham notes that the dancing Dickinson is not only "hidden" but "impulsive;" the private dance of the mind provides freedom not afforded by words.

The piece began as Dickinson's split selves emerged from trellised doorways on opposite ends of the stage. After walking and searching, they meet with Dickinson's famous lines,

¹⁶⁶ From the program at the Bennington College premiere in 1940. Quoted in Jowitt 209.

¹⁶⁷ Stodelle 114.

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you- Nobody- too?

Then there's a pair of us."

A Barbara Morgan photograph shows the two Dickinsons politely curtsying towards each other on this line, heads bowed, in full Victorian skirts.¹⁶⁸ The image suggests a poet writing to unite a fragmented sense of self. The poet writes to know the "hidden, impulsive," self who dances while the speaking Dickinson writes. The two-part image of the poet moved through scenes of her life, allowing fragments of poetry to bloom into character and movement. Morgan's photographs show a party scene: girls in shoulder-less dresses line dance with young men in suit jackets. Another photograph shows the dancing Dickinson, alone onstage collapsing in the arms of the Lover, played by Erick Hawkins.¹⁶⁹ The piece focused on the intersection of "two searing experiences: death and unrequited love."¹⁷⁰ Death was expressed by Jane Dudley in the role of the Ancestress with lines from Dickinson's poetry framing her movement:

"It's coming- the postponeless Creature-

It gains the Block- and now- it gains the Door...

Photographs show the Ancestress in a full-length Victorian black dress. The skirt billows around her, body captured in sharp curves, suggesting the lines creeping across the page, hanging open with a dash.

A dancers became "love," drawing movement from lines such as:

¹⁶⁸ Barbara Morgan, Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Morgan & Morgan:1941) 115.

¹⁶⁹ Barbara Morgan 115.

¹⁷⁰ Stodelle 116.

Inebriate of Air- am I-
And Debauchee of Dew-
Reeling- thro endless summer days-
From inns of Molten Blue-

Another dancer become "hope," "the thing with feathers-/That perches in the soul."
Moving towards the end of the dance, the speaking Dickinson proclaims "I'm 'wife'-
I've finished that-/That other state," and a photograph shows Graham reclining
placidly in the Lover's arms.¹⁷¹ The moment rises to a climax when the ancestress
comes between Dickinson and the Lover. Graham enters her final solo, expressing
the resign and despair of the words:

Of course- I prayed-
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird- had stamped her foot-
And cried "Give me!"

Photographs of Graham's solo leading to the last resigned line show her in her most
famous pose: a sweeping arabesque with wrist to forehead, hand cupped. The skirt of
her dress drapes around the curve of her body like a wheel in motion.

It is difficult to write about the dance without having seen it. I can speculate
about how Graham might have been inspired by Dickinson's dashes, loosely
threading together fragments of scenes, or how nouns capitalized in the middle of
lines emerged in her imagination as dancers on the stage. I can guess from

¹⁷¹ Morgan 117.

photographs of the Ancestress how the quiet inevitability of death in Dickinson's poetry grew into a character in Graham's mind, how the final down stroke of her arm separating Dickinson and the Lover came like death arriving in the house in the poem.¹⁷² I can most easily write about the non-traditional narrative portrait Graham drew around the two-part image of an artist. Splitting the artist in two allowed her to unfold layers of the mind. Excavating the hidden mind of the poet revealed a narrative structure for the characters and emotions, threading together disparate elements to arrive at a structure for the landscape of the mind. Like Williams, she sought an embodied expression for the "music of the mind," a form for the inchoate flow of ideas.

Graham's desire to reveal the space of the mind onstage was connected to a desire to preserve something uniquely human about the mind and body during a time when rapid industrialization of the world had begun to make people move about their lives as machines.¹⁷³ She wrote that she was searching for ways to oppose machine culture with embodied expression.¹⁷⁴ Her two-part interpretation of Emily Dickinson was the first of a series of pieces signifying a shift toward psychological exploration. The movement of poetry allowed her to access the intellectual dance of the writer, a

¹⁷² Jane Dudley, playing the ancestress, wrote that: "The climax of Letter came when I destroyed the relationship between Erick and Martha with a great down stroke with my arm- my arm like a sword. In the end there is a struggle between Martha and me, and she defeats me. Jean recited the words of Emily Dickinson as she walked across the stage. She said, "Glory is a bright, tragic thing that for a moment means something." Then she stood behind Martha, who...sat on the white bench, and said, "This is my Letter to the World." Robert Tracy, Goddess: Martha Graham's Dancers Remember (New York: Proscenium Publishers Inc., 1997) 58.

¹⁷³ Jowitt 176.

¹⁷⁴ Franko 52.

“hidden, impulsive” dance. By freeing this secluded self, Graham liberated an embodied expression hidden beneath words.

Collaboration

Faced with impending U.S. entrance into World War II in 1941, Williams saw the opportunity for collaboration with Graham in arts of protest. Their shared impulse toward embodied poetry met in resistance of the mechanization of bodies for war. In October the two met at a party at Charles Sheeler's home in Irvington New York.¹⁷⁵ Williams was writing a book of antiwar poems called *The Wedge* and he was frustrated by letters from Ezra Pound that failed to realize the consequences of war.¹⁷⁶ Graham had received attention several years before for refusing to travel to an international festival in Nazi Germany.¹⁷⁷ Along with Barbara Morgan, a photographer working in close collaboration with Graham, they began discussing Williams' poems on the Spanish Loyalists. Williams asked if Morgan could photograph Graham in a way that would symbolize the destructiveness of war.¹⁷⁸ He would write a poem to accompany the photograph. The photograph, *War Theme*, and the poem, "War the Destroyer," were published side by side in the March issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.¹⁷⁹

The photograph suggests a mechanization of the human body as a result of war. Graham is tipped off center with her hair flowing behind her, gazing upward at

¹⁷⁵ Mariani 457.

¹⁷⁶ Mariani 456.

¹⁷⁷ Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1955) 150-1.

¹⁷⁸ Mariani 457.

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Mariani 457.

an implied bomb exploding. Her skirts billow around her as though flung from the jolt of a sudden stop. Her black dress and very light skin gives the piece a harsh industrial feeling, further emphasized by the sharp lines of her body in open space. The lack of facial features and sharp dark shape of Graham's form de-humanize her body, she becomes the shadow of a wheel on a machine. Barbara Morgan used a strobe light at 1/10,000 second exposure to create "a spastic effect in a composition in which I slanted the shadows to dehumanize facial features and imply Death."¹⁸⁰ The photo reveals how bodies might be dehumanized to become weapons in the mass mobilization of people for war.

Beginning in the place where the photograph has caught Graham, gazing at the bomb overhead, Williams wonders "what is war, the destroyer but an appurtenance to the dance?" The war, he claims must be subordinate to Graham's dance. William's language about the mechanization of bodies for war echoes his writing on Puritans forbidding the dance, perhaps connecting the mechanization of bodies in war to the Puritan's emphasis on using the body only for productivity:

the deadly serious who would have us suppress
all exuberance
because of it
are mad.

The Puritans and the instigators of war are both "the deadly serious" that do not acknowledge embodied expression. The language grows more spare as it moves downwards: "because of it/ are mad" suggesting the "suppressed exuberance,"

¹⁸⁰ Mariani 457.

perhaps mirroring the harsh starkness of Graham's shape in the photograph.

Williams suggests reclaiming the body from the mechanization of war expressed in this still spareness. To do this, he stirs a verbal dance from the sound of the word:

when terror blooms- leap and twist

whirl and prance-

that's the show

of this circumstance.

The long 'a' in "prance" is repeated in "circumstance" building a rhythm and momentum. Williams goes on to pull out the long 'a' in the word dance seeking to understand everything inside it: "and if dance be/the answer, dance!/body and mind-substance, balance, elegance!" The repetition of the 'a' gains steam, suggesting a mobilization, a movement forward. The final lines of the poem call for an embodied form of protest, appending the impulse to war to the more powerful impulse to dance, to reclaim the body from the war-fueled mechanization.

While Graham and Williams could agree on the negative impact of the mechanization of bodies for war, they disagreed on the extent to which industrialization should influence art-making. This disagreement, central to the concerns of all artists during the modern era, would provoke shifts in their relationship in the following years, leading to diverging paths on the question of original form.

Shifting currents

By 1944 Williams detected a change in his friend's work. After attending a performance in New York, he wrote to Horace Gregory that he felt her form was no longer original. While the subject matter was interesting, he acknowledged, Graham had lost "that distinction we seek anew with such great difficulty."¹⁸¹ Williams was responding to a shift in Graham's focus towards developing the narrative techniques she had begun to explore in *Letter to the World*, techniques that would express the inner landscape of the mind.

The particular program that Williams objected to in his letter was composed of a shorter piece called *Salem Shore* and, one of the more memorable pieces in Graham's career, *Deaths and Entrances*. Although it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly Williams considered uninteresting form, there is no doubt that Graham's development as an artist was undergoing major shifts and Williams felt it. Three pieces between 1940 and 1944, beginning with *Letter to the World*, reveal this shift towards exploration of the psyche, in particular the psyche of the female artist.¹⁸² By the time Graham arrived at *Deaths and Entrances* in 1944, she was ready to delve into the story that was her inspiration, the life and work of the Bronte sisters, with a darkly refined form and technique. The introspective darkness of this form, influenced greatly by cinema, abstract painting, stream of consciousness writing and French symbolist poetry was, perhaps, exactly what Williams found flat and unoriginal.

Others certainly did not. Edwin Denby called it "the most absorbing dance work" of the season.¹⁸³ He caught on to the subconscious, literary driven, unfolding of

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Mester 140.

¹⁸² Reynolds & McCormick 152.

¹⁸³ Denby 146.

Deaths and Entrances when he wrote, in response to his second viewing, that it could be described "as a poem in the associative or symboliste technique, a sequence of tightly packed and generally violent images following a subconscious logic."¹⁸⁴ The piece employed cinematic flashback techniques, merging imagination with remembered events. Dancers personified memories that the three Bronte sisters interacted with as they moved through them. According to Denby the movement was "shocking" in its originality. He wrote that, "One has the impression of not having seen any of these movements the ten dancers do before, of never having seen bodies take these odd shapes. Such extreme originality is shocking, and it is suited to the shocking subject of the piece."¹⁸⁵

So why didn't Williams find the piece shockingly original? At that moment his priority was discovering a new form for expression of the American experience. Graham, in his opinion, had utterly failed to do that. According to Paul Mariani,

The central question for Williams in mid-1944 was still one of new forms reflecting that new reality he sensed in the younger generation of Americans. The country was still forming itself and so could not allow itself to go back to the empty forms and husks of other countries. Now was the time for the American poet, flanked by the American critic, to 'move into the field of action and go into combat there on the new ground.'¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Denby 108.

¹⁸⁵ Denby 108.

¹⁸⁶ Mariani 491.

Deaths and Entrances, he wrote, was neither “of our history or our culture,” and therefore, all power the story carried was only “a borrowed distinction.”¹⁸⁷

Williams’ search for innovative form, at this moment, was urgent. By the time he saw Graham’s piece he had completed most of the material for what would become the famous epic, Paterson, about his hometown, Paterson, New Jersey. Still, he was agonizing over the form it would take. Mariani notes that he was mostly gesturing towards the form he needed by revealing its absence. Williams had decided to write Paterson in order to focus on the local. He felt that the “poet’s business” is “not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.” In this way Paterson was the local ‘thing’ before him, and Williams had gone to work. It would require

a poetry such as I did not know, it was my duty to discover or make such a context on the “thought.” To make a poem, fulfilling the requirements of the art, and yet new, in the sense that in the very lay of the syllables Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem, to have it- if it rose to flutter into life awhile- it would be as itself, locally, and so like every other place in the world. For it is in that, that it be particular to its own idiom, that it lives.¹⁸⁸

One can see why Williams was not interested in Deaths and Entrances. At a time when his urgent question was discovering the form for expression of localized

¹⁸⁷ Mester 140.

¹⁸⁸ Williams, Autobiography 392.

knowledge, Graham's large-scale, dark, dramatic enactment of the lives of European writers must have seemed irrelevant. His project required new forms for new stories, and the forms and stories of Deaths and Entrances were not, in his opinion, new or local.

Graham's path in connecting the feet of poetry to the feet of dance led her towards investigating onstage the space of the mind. Williams' path to reunite the same feet led him to focus on what was physically before him, the space around him, his local knowledge of Paterson New Jersey. While her work led her to an exploration of interiority, his led him to explore the exterior.

Graham could hang her own experiments and emotions on the lives and work of other writers, but Williams' sought to center his work on exactly what he was familiar with. Graham's impulse to find her own story inside the lives of other artists reveals how she wanted her work to be received, perhaps she feared (even unconsciously) that her own story alone would not be taken seriously. For Graham, one of few women to present American concert dance as a serious, intellectual art-form, finding accepted artistic models and forms on which to anchor herself was a more urgent task than it was for Williams.

Shortly before he saw Graham's performance, Williams published his book *The Wedge*, in which he famously claimed in the preface: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words."¹⁸⁹ This willingness to understand art in terms of the rapidly industrializing world was very different from the way Graham felt about industrialization and

¹⁸⁹ Williams, Collected Poems 54.

machine culture. Graham held firmly that: “the dance today does not express a machine. How can man be a machine or imitate a machine? There has been a change of tempo brought about by the machine. We can only express this tempo.”¹⁹⁰

Williams was specifically attracted to machines because of the absence of emotion: “There’s nothing sentimental about a machine.”¹⁹¹ Interest in machinery meant a focus on external form: “There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine.”¹⁹² Machine culture was desirable for Williams because it meant specific, efficient production of meaning.

While Williams found it useful to understand the poem as a machine of words, Graham would never posit that a dance was a machine of bodies. She associated machine culture with the exterior world and sought to challenge this culture by revealing the interior emotional space of the mind.¹⁹³ As Williams looked to the industrialized world around him for structures and inspiration Graham sought to reveal an interior human truth through the body, preserving this creative space from the outside influence of industrialization.

The formal origin of the feet led two artists down similar and related paths, connecting strongly on the need to release the body from the Puritan influence and the mechanization of bodies for war. The underlying differences in their approaches reveal currents in the shifting American artistic landscape, the effect machines and industrialization was having on artists and their approaches, the way American

¹⁹⁰ Jowitt 176.

¹⁹¹ Williams, Collected Poems 54.

¹⁹² Williams, Collected Poems 55.

¹⁹³ Franko 52.

concert dance and poetry were evolving. Williams turned outward to an examination of the specificity of his the local environment, external forms and machine culture, trusting this focus to lead him to an original universality. Graham turned inward to the mind to excavate a uniquely human presence, un-influenced by industrialization and the mechanization of body for war. The next chapter will reveal a dialogue on the machine-like, the human and the erotic in the dancing body moving into post-modernity.

3. The Postmodern Dancing Body at Black Mountain College

The poet Charles Olson undertook the first use of the term “post-modern” by a writer in order to describe the artistic climate at Black Mountain College.¹⁹⁴ Black Mountain College was founded in North Carolina in the 1930’s and by the 1950’s the school had become a sanctuary for experimental artists. The permissive, artistic environment created space for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration across media.¹⁹⁵ Close interaction between poets and dancers led to an artistic interrogation on the human, the mechanistic and the erotic in the dancing body. The poets Charles Olson and Robert Duncan and the choreographer Merce Cunningham borrowed concepts from one another to work out questions of aesthetics, kinesthetics, form and content, articulating new understandings of humanness in the dancing body.

Olson found Merce Cunningham’s commitment to external form in composition very inspiring for writing. He understood poetry in terms of formal characteristics it shared with dance, for example describing poems as “kinetic energy.”¹⁹⁶ In his 1950 manifesto, *Projective Verse*, Olson wrote that “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader,” and the form of a poem

¹⁹⁴ Andre Furlani “Postmodern and after: Guy Davenport,” *Contemporary Literature* 43.4:(2002) 709.

¹⁹⁵ Rose Lee Goldberg, *Seeing Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, World of Art (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

¹⁹⁶ Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966) 16.

should be “nothing more than an extension of content.”¹⁹⁷ Cunningham felt that meaning is intrinsic in movement and Olson strongly responded to this idea. In a 1954 letter he drew a comparison between his opinion that “form is never more than an extension of content and Cunningham’s idea that: “the meaning of the movement is inherent in its own nature.” He wrote that “it is these flatnesses- in the sense of no distance- which lie at the root of any of these ‘Americans’ practice.”¹⁹⁸ The “flatness” Olson was writing about was the proximity between form and content, between meaning and movement, and he was particularly inspired by the way this happened in Cunningham’s work.

Commitment to external form reflected an important shift in art and art criticism moving into post-modernity. In 1961 Susan Sontag called for “a vocabulary- a descriptive rather than presumptive vocabulary- for forms.”¹⁹⁹ She asked for a criticism that would “dissolve considerations of content into those of form.”²⁰⁰ The artists examined in this chapter develop this vocabulary of forms by considering the dancing body as a form. While Cunningham merged the mechanistic and the human to arrive at a new understanding of the dancing body, Olson revealed humanness in sensation and perceptions in dance. Duncan exposed a forbidden eroticism in the dancing body. Their dialogue reveals a desire to understand humanness by connecting the body to the creative process.

¹⁹⁷ Olson, Selected Writings 16.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Olson, Selected Letters of Charles Olson Ed. Ralph Maud (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 218.

¹⁹⁹ Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1961). 13.

²⁰⁰ Sontag 13.

The Dancing Body in Merce Cunningham's Aesthetic

Merce Cunningham's commitment to external form led to a mechanistic approach to choreography and understanding of the human body. In contrast to Graham, he was not reacting to industrialization but rather responding to its influence. Cunningham ultimately allowed the mechanistic to absorb the human, denying social and cultural meanings of the dancing body onstage.

The weight of Cunningham's declaration that movement is meaning can only be fully grasped within the context of what it meant for Cunningham to leave the Martha Graham Company. Cunningham was a dancer in Martha Graham's company from 1939 to 1945, leaving Graham in the height of her evolving dance theater.²⁰¹ At the time Graham was interested in charting out a psychological landscape or "graph of the heart" onstage. By 1953 her work had evolved into large-scale dance theater productions and her Company was absorbed in dramatic interpretations of Greek mythology.²⁰² Cunningham broke from this tradition entirely. Compared to Graham's mission to reveal an emotional truth through narrative and character on the stage, Cunningham's assertion that movement itself was meaning constituted a formal and theatrical revolution. While Graham sought to reveal an inner psychological truth through the staging of the body as an object of narrative form, Cunningham instead saw the body as a truth itself. The movement of the dancing body did not *have* meaning but rather *was* meaning. Dancing as a narrative endeavor did not require a theatrical structuring of conflict resolution.

²⁰¹ Roger Copeland, Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance (New York: Routledge, 2004) 71.

²⁰² Jowitt 199-234.

Having broken with Graham, Cunningham went on to develop a unique approach to choreography and aesthetics. While Graham was creating intensely personal works, Cunningham sought to separate himself from his work by relying on chance to dictate his choreography. Roger Copeland wrote that Cunningham's chance methods were, "impersonal" and therefore "much more objective."²⁰³ Cunningham himself wrote:

When I choreograph a piece by tossing pennies- by chance, that is- I am finding my resources in that play which is not the product of *my* will, but which is an energy and a law which I obey. Some people think it is inhuman and mechanistic to toss pennies in creating a dance instead of chewing the nails or beating the head against a wall or thumbing through old notebooks for ideas. But the feeling I have when I compose in this way is that I am in touch with (something) far greater than my own personal inventiveness could ever be, much more universally human than the particular habits of my own practice.²⁰⁴

Cunningham dissolves his personal agency and perspective into something "more universally human." His definition of humanness incorporates mechanical structures into creativity.

Cunningham's instinct toward objectivity and external form was part of a larger desire among artists to retreat from imposing a subjective point of view through art. During the 1950's America was in the business of imposing an

²⁰³ Copeland 71.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in Copeland 111.

“American Way” on both Americans and other nations with the Korean War and the House Un-American Activities Committee. Defining American-ness against communism required bolstering the prototypical American family and purchasing mass-produced American goods.²⁰⁵ Civic leaders and politicians advocated for this collective homogenized subject and the House Committee on Un-American Activities policed subversive behavior.²⁰⁶ Artists sought to avoid imposition of an idea or viewpoint to counter this mass homogenized culture, instead developing the critical skills of the spectator to make meaning.

In 1953, the same year that Merce Cunningham formed his own dance company, one of his collaborators, the painter Robert Rauschenberg, asked Willem de Kooning for a painting he could erase. According to the critic Roger Copeland, these two events constituted a major paradigm shift in artistic culture. In Copeland’s eyes, the aesthetic revolution of 1953 was an absolute departure from the aesthetics of abstract expressionism and modern dance and the beginning of an “aesthetic of indifference.”²⁰⁷ Copeland argues that the “aesthetic of indifference” is a reaction to the internally focused abstract expressionism that privileges the artist as creator while diminishing the spectator’s critical powers.

The idea of developing the spectator’s agency had been introduced most notably by Bertolt Brecht in the theater. Brecht’s idea of ‘alienation’ entailed keeping the audience from being absorbed in the world onstage in order to encourage the

²⁰⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich. Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class. (New York: Harper, 1989).

²⁰⁶ Davidson 56.

²⁰⁷ This is not Copeland’s term but actually Moira Roth’s, from the essay “The Aesthetic of Indifference” ArtForum, November 1977 46-53.

development of an individual consciousness.²⁰⁸ Brecht's ideas were influenced by the increasing Nazi presence and he sought to encourage social consciousness by alienating the audience from the performance, opposing the techniques of fascist propaganda.²⁰⁹ Cunningham and his generation of artists moved away from creating art that imposed a perspective or actively absorbed the spectator in order to distance themselves from Fascist strategies for cooptation of the masses.²¹⁰

Instead of revealing an internal emotion through art, Cunningham and fellow artists focused on external focus and a de-centered view of space.²¹¹ This shift from introspection to an insistent focus on the formal and external is seen not only in Cunningham's break from Graham but also in Cage's use of found sounds and Rauschenberg's "combines" of found objects.²¹² By moving from abstract expressionism to formal concerns artists believed they could arrive at a more "objective" representation that would provide the spectator more agency.

Cunningham and his collaborator John Cage saw chance procedures as a way of avoiding the imposition of an aesthetic value on an audience.²¹³ The chance structures Cunningham created, however, are also a form of authorship, revealing subjective opinions on space, time and the body. More than revealing opinions about how bodies, space and time can be used in a dance, they reveal a mechanistic

²⁰⁸ Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism," Art in Theory 1900-1990, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

²⁰⁹ Brecht, "Popularity and Realism."

²¹⁰ Copeland, Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance. 1-29.

²¹¹ Copeland, Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance. 1-29.

²¹² Copeland 69-84.

²¹³ Jowitt 284.

approach towards the creative process and an understanding of the human body as a machine.

Chance procedures were already underway by 1951. For “16 dances for Soloist and Company of Three,” Cunningham determined the movement sequences by flipping coins, so that form might be “impersonal” rather than dictated by taste.²¹⁴ Each section of the dance was supposed to express an emotional archetype inspired by the nine “permanent” emotions in classical Indian art.²¹⁵ The emphasis on Oriental art and the expression of fixed emotion echoed Graham in a way that later work would depart from entirely. Later work would focus only on formal characteristics, choosing not to consider emotional or psychological objectives. As he moved further away from Graham, Cunningham began to rely on a wider range of chance methods to determine more variables. The variables included location of dancers, length of phrases, order of steps and number and combinations of dancers. The structures included rolling dice, choosing cards, and numbering marks and specs on a sheet of paper and consulting the *I-ching*.²¹⁶ Some chance procedures were developed to higher levels of mathematical complexity, such as the process for *Summerspace* (1958), which involved numbering sections of the stage, direction of movement, speed, level, length in time and shape of movement, number of dancers, whether or not the movement was performed together or individually and whether or

²¹⁴ Copeland 71.

²¹⁵ Copeland 71.

²¹⁶ Copeland 73.

not the action ended onstage or offstage.²¹⁷ These processes represent a significant shift towards focusing on the material and conceptual elements of movement.

The structuring, however, remains a type of subjective authorship. Even chance processes marked by mathematical precision can reflect an artistic belief. In this case they reflected Cunningham's opinions on how space, time, and bodies can be used in a dance. In addition, rejecting the subjective and turning toward randomness is itself an artistic conviction. Cunningham's approach pretends to be able to erase human choice and bias in the act of creation, handing power over to randomness. He built chance structures to function as machines that produce dances, in this way privileging a dehumanized aesthetic in the act of choreographing.

In addition to privileging a mechanistic aesthetic in choreographing, Cunningham's chance structures treated the human body as a machine for performing movement. Any dancer in Cunningham's company could be a soloist and in fact, *every* dancer was a soloist, since each body was considered "equivalent" to every other.²¹⁸ His perspective that all bodies are equivalent suggests that all bodies are equally capable of all movements and that all movements will have the same meaning on each body. Cunningham's structures are not built around each individual body's unique capabilities and experience, or each individual body's unique possibilities for expression. Rather, his understanding of the dancing body is scientific and

²¹⁷ The process for "Summerspace" was actually quite complex, see David Vaughn, "The Dance of the Avant-Garde: Cunningham and the Post-Cunningham Generation," Dance of the Twentieth Century: Slide Text and Catalogue (New York: Pictura Dance, 1978). 109.

²¹⁸ The chance structures decided which dancer would perform which movements, assuming equivalent meaning of a movement on any dancer's body. Peter Yates and Susan Foster have examined the politics of "equalizing" all bodies this way, and I will examine this idea later.

mathematical, as though the body onstage were a machine whose sole purpose was to perform a movement and any one might be exchanged for any other.

Cunningham's mechanized perspective on the body as a factory produced good was informed by the Cold War culture of mass production. Cold War goods were produced on a mass level, reducing the consumer to a "mass man," a "fictional index of cultural homogenization."²¹⁹ In Cunningham's structures bodies were interchangeable parts, each serving the same function.

Not only was every body equivalent in the "open field" (and for the purposes of chance-based choreography methods), all *parts* of the body were equivalent. Cunningham choreographed movement for subdivided sections of the body by chance, isolating subsections and requiring, for instance, that the torso behave like a limb.²²⁰ According to this structure, Cunningham felt, the movement biases of the choreographer could be overcome, revealing a more de-centered and democratic approach that treated all movement possibilities equally. In actuality, the chance structures revealed movement biases particular to Cunningham's aesthetic orientation as an artist. Cunningham's work was full of classical positions. Bodies stood erect and limbs were extended in precise balletic shapes and flourishes. The reorganization of these classical movements could be read as a deconstruction of classical form. The presentational style of ballet was disrupted and dancers were rearranged non-

²¹⁹Michael Davidson *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 51.

²²⁰Gus Solomons Jr., who danced with the company between 1965 and 1968 stated that Cunningham uses "the spine, with equal articulation in all the joints of that spine, and reduces the center from the whole torso to just the pelvis so that the spine becomes free as a limb." et al Carolyn Brown, "Cunningham and His Dancers," *Merce Cunningham*, ed. R Kostelanetz (Pennington NJ: A Capella Books, 1992). 118.

traditionally throughout the space. Chance structures paired incorrect arms with legs and obliterated all traditional sense of order in terms of what steps were supposed to precede others. It is doubtful, however, whether a complete deconstruction of classical form can be achieved through chance structures. Cunningham's structures sometimes reproduced classical formalist schemes and sometimes subverted them. His structures reveal a preference for classical shapes more than a deconstruction of classical sensibilities.

Cunningham's opinions about the use of space in dance are revealed in the chance structures he created. He wrote that American modern dance had "made space into a series of lumps, or often just static hills on the stage with actually no relation to the larger space of the stage area."²²¹ Pioneers of modern dance had attributed different emotional values to parts of stage space.²²² Cunningham instead sided with Albert Einstein's claim that "there are no fixed points in space." He believed that "every point in space is equally fluid and interesting."²²³ Why should one particular point on stage be "center," Cunningham wondered, when any point could be "center?" Why should a dance be organized, as traditional proscenium concert dances are, around a single "vanishing point?" Cunningham was aware that

²²¹ Merce Cunningham, "'Time, Space, and Dance'," Merce Cunningham, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Pennington NJ: A Cappella Books, 1992).

²²² Doris Humphrey understood the space of the stage according to psychological and emotional values. She wrote: I have often tried to estimate the number of forces operating on the center of a stage and never quite decided on the whole array. I should say there are at least eleven lines converging on it, plus the psychological security of the symmetrical design. This, commonly called by its misnomer, "dead center" is without a doubt the most powerful single spot on the stage." Doris Humphrey, The Art of Making Dances. (New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, 1950). 76.

²²³ Cunningham wrote this in direct connection to Einstein's statement. Quoted in Jowitt 178.

the proscenium developed in late 16th century Italy, in connection with the single point perspective in painting. He wrote that

most stage work, particularly classical dancing, is based on perspective, a center point to and from which everything radiates. But we don't do that anymore- I don't mean in art, but in general. Ever since Einstein and now astronauts, we've realized something wholly different about space- that everything is moving. Well, I apply that to dancing.”²²⁴

Cunningham's approach to determining the space used in dance was influenced by a cultural shift in the understanding of space that placed relevance on disparate, non-centered parts, borrowing a scientific framework.

This approach to space gave the viewer a larger degree of agency, as Cunningham expected them to be able to create continuity from any randomly generated sequence of events. He sought to disrupt the tradition of leading a spectator's eyes through the landscape of the stage, instead composing in an “open field” where the viewer's gaze could enter and travel at its will.²²⁵ “We have a different idea about space now and a different use of it,” he wrote, “recent stage spaces are almost always as wide as they are deep. Your eye can jump from one

²²⁴ Merce Cunningham and Jacqueline Lesschaeve, The Dancer and the Dance (New York: Marian Boyars inc., 1985). 172.

²²⁵ Elliot Caplan, "Cage/Cunningham," (1991), vol., ed. Kultur Cunningham Dance Foundation and La Sept.

point to another, you don't have to be led from one point to another."²²⁶ He identifies a disparate ideological focus in constructing the shared meanings of a performance.

Deborah Jowitt has pointed out that "Cunningham was not the only artist of his day to treat space as an open field."²²⁷ Painters such as Joseph Albers, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns shared his opinions. In some ways, this use of space is similar to what Charles Olson desired in poetry, when he called for "composition by field as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form."²²⁸ He wrote that:

Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.²²⁹

Continuity in the time and space of the poem was de-centered into disparate components. Cunningham and Olson, (along with contemporary painters, musicians and other artists across media) disrupted a commonly understood linear continuity for reading a poem or watching a dance. The reader and viewer is given a new agency, invited to create continuity in a larger field with less obvious linear guidance. Figuratively speaking the line of continuity was no longer the dominant aesthetic paradigm. Rather, multiple vectors as perceived in quantum physics were accepted as a model for understanding space.

²²⁶ Lesschaeve, The Dancer and the Dance. 173.

²²⁷ Jowitt, Time and the Dancing Image. 291.

²²⁸ Olson, Selected Writings. 16.

²²⁹ Olson, Selected Writings. 20.

Space and body and movement were not the only equivalent components of performance. Music, lights, costumes, and décor were also considered equal and autonomous parts of the dance. While Rauschenberg and Cage may have collaborated with Cunningham, their work was not created to complement the dancing but to stand on its own, interacting with dance freely as it would. “Light didn’t serve the customary end of illuminating the dancers,” Roger Copeland noted, “If lighting instruments happened to fade up as dancers darted past them- well and good. But the dimmer had its own agenda independent of the audience’s (perfectly understandable) desire to see the dancing.”²³⁰ Similarly, Cunningham harbored no assumptions that dance was generated from or motivated by music. “Meter was completely abandoned,” he wrote, “and we, the dancers had to rely on our own dance timing to guard the length of any phrase, and the timing of the complete dance.”²³¹ Cunningham believed the dance should be performable and exactly repeatable, entirely independent of whatever happened in the music. No costume design or set piece by Rauschenberg was intended to illustrate or support any theme in the dancing. Rather it was a piece of art that happened to be interacting with a dance. The components of the performance were not oriented to express an emotion or internal perspective, rather they existed independently as multiple vectors in an open field. This “objective” focus provided space for the spectator to make meaning and avoided the imposition of perspective.

²³⁰ Copeland, Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance. 34.

²³¹ David Vaughn, Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years, Chronicle and Commentary, ed. Melissa Harris (New York: Aperture, 1997). 91.

The chance structure made choices about space, time and bodies as it was programmed to do, without an agenda. This meant the question of bridging disparate parts, in space, steps, or elements of design, was a challenge for both performers and spectators. One of Cunningham's dancers Carolyn Brown noted that Cunningham technique "is designed to develop flexibility of the mind as well as the body."²³²

From his first experiment with chance, Cunningham noted this challenge:

It was the first time where you encountered a coordination, going from one thing to another, that I had not encountered before physically- so how do you do it if you're going to accept this idea at all (the idea of chance generated composition), how do you manage to do it? You have to fight with it and struggle with it and try to find the most direct way to go from one of these things to the other.²³³

How to move from one randomly determined movement to another was the fundamental question. By the time Cunningham's chance methods were in full use, a dancer might be required to move from a "whiplash fnette into a penchee arabesque without apparent transition."²³⁴ Cunningham's language about building transitions reveals the mechanistic way he was thinking about both the human body and the creative process. He wrote "you have to struggle with it and try to find the most direct way to go from one thing to another," believing that there would be an

²³² James Klosty, ed., Merce Cunningham (New York: Dutton, 1975). 22.

²³³ Vaughn 59.

²³⁴ Copeland 108.

objectively “most direct way” to move from one thing to another. He does not acknowledge how the “most direct way” might be different on each body.

As hard as it was for a dancer to make the most technically challenging and awkward transition imaginable into a seamless shift, it was symmetrically challenging for an audience to make sense of two movements that they had never seen follow each other and that had no clear relationship to one another. In Cunningham’s world, random relationships were a way of finding a new continuity, which he defined as “the continuum from one thing after another, rather than being related by psychological or thematic or other cause-and-effect devices.”²³⁵ Chance methods allowed Cunningham to disrupt the traditional logic of narrative in every way possible. Pieces avoided any suggestion of build or climax. Steps that in a ballet vocabulary might have been considered preparation leading up to another step were now an end unto themselves. Joan Acocella argued in 1997 that Cunningham’s choreography is “not just non-narrative...but actively resistant to the narrative...the pattern-making mechanism in the mind gets sand thrown in it.”²³⁶ Cunningham had eroded a commonly understood language for watching concert dance.

As a result the spectator had to create a new language. John Cage repeatedly expressed in programs and publicity that:

We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather, doing something. The

²³⁵ quoted in Copeland 78.

²³⁶ Acocella said this at a panel discussion at Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1997. Quoted in Copeland 20.

meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it.²³⁷”

In other words, the spectator is given increased agency. Rather than access a universal truth authored by the creator, each viewer must make meaning for herself.

Turning toward objective focus allowed Cunningham to turn a blind eye to the social and cultural implications of the dancing body. Susan Foster has argued that Cunningham’s emphasis on chance and equivalent parts allowed him to negate the body as a site of social and political tensions. His “determination to cultivate the body as a neutral field of possibilities,” she has written, “denied the standard cultural codes for gendered and sexual identities. His approach assumed an absolute equivalence of male and female bodies, and black and white bodies.”²³⁸ Cunningham was turning a blind eye to the real differences bodies make for how we live in the world.

Cunningham’s willingness to maintain blindness to the social and cultural meanings of bodies onstage is also revealed in his tentative deconstruction of classical form. His chance structures could reproduce classical positions as often as they subverted them. Clearly subverting classical technique onstage and all the cultural meanings accumulated in those positions was never Cunningham’s priority. Instead his interest amounted to a surface examination of capabilities of bodies, and his work provides little evidence he ever considered social and political questions intrinsic to

²³⁷ Quoted Susan Leigh Foster, "Closets Full of Dances: Modern Dance's Performance of Masculinity and Sexuality," *Dancing Desires*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). 172-3.

²³⁸ Foster 175.

the dancing body onstage. Even as he opted for a randomly determined aesthetic, he never acknowledged that there were cultural meanings connected to a classical one.

Cunningham turned a blind eye to the social and cultural implications of bodies onstage because of a dehumanized, mechanistic understanding of the body and approach to choreography. Dancing bodies onstage were machines for performing movement, according to his chance structures they were all equally capable and interchangeable. His dances were produced by a structure designed to produce dances, in essence, a machine. From his perspective, this made him less responsible for any meaning that might be perceived in them; he had merely created the structure, not the dance. The culprit for this lack of consideration is Cunningham's staunch marriage of movement to meaning. His objectivist stance caused him to ignore implications of meaning. Cunningham felt random arrangement of external forms would "create a new continuity," leading spectators to construct their own meanings, since, after all, he himself was "not saying anything" in his dances. His lack of attention and refusal to take responsibility for any cultural meaning that might be read in bodies onstage amounts to a denial of the fact that they might have any. Any "new continuity" an audience member created would be informed by social and cultural biases, and most importantly, by the artist's own implicit structuring of these, but Cunningham ignored this.

Cunningham's mechanical understanding of the dancing body and the creative process was informed by contemporary artistic values of objectivism and indifference and the cultural project of constructing Americanness in terms of capitalism, democracy and technological advancements. He responded to the industrializing

world in an entirely opposite manner from Graham. In contrast to her priority towards expression of the human psyche onstage, he incorporated mechanical processes into the act of creation, expanding the definition of humanness to include the machine-like. Cunningham's mechanistic approach to choreography and the dancing body allowed the machine-like to absorb the human, denying the sensual experience of the dancing body.

The Dancing Body in the Work of Charles Olson

Charles Olson's Projective Verse was a poetics of the body. He wanted to compose from the breath of the poet. He saw the empirical experience of the world as a unique form of knowledge and fuel for composition. Like Cunningham he was drawn to an objectivist focus on external forms. Cunningham saw the human body not as an instrument for meaning but as an end and meaning itself and Olson saw the human body as "the first and simplest and most un-thought of fact of human life."²³⁹ Cunningham's work inspired a specific dancing body in Olson's work. Olson's dancing body connects empirical knowledge in dance to empirical knowledge in composition, defining the human experience by the sensations and perceptions of the world.

Central to his conception of meaning in the world was the idea of proprioception, one's sense of the body in space. This became a guiding force in many of his poems. Olson considered "the skin itself, the meeting edge of man and external reality," to be "where all that matters does happen (and) that man and

²³⁹ Quoted in Sherman Paul, Olson's Push (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Park University, 1978) 32.

external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one."²⁴⁰ An awareness of the body and the activity of the body was, for Olson, an awareness of everything else in the world.

Olson was interested in the dance the same way that Williams' was: as the origin of poetry. In *Projective Verse*, Olson seemed to pick up where Williams left off, discussing rhythms of breath as the essential poetry, the movement of syllables in contrast with lines as a tension necessary for revealing image.²⁴¹ Much like Cunningham's erosion of traditional dance narrative and grammar, Olson believed that "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line."²⁴² The poet should compose from sound and breath, tracing one "perception" to another. The unit of poetry was the "open field" in which the reader and poet could interact through rhythms revealing images.

In a letter to Cunningham, Olson explained how Cunningham's work gave him a specific perspective on time and image knit together as form and content. The lines he wrote to Cunningham after seeing a dance performance in 1952 (Cunningham's first summer at Black Mountain college) later appeared in the poem *Adamo Me*. He wrote:

Of rhythm is image
Of image is knowing
Of knowing there is

²⁴⁰ Quoted in Paul 86.

²⁴¹ Williams responded so strongly to *Projective Verse* that he included it in his autobiography.

²⁴² Olson, *Selected Writings*, *Selected Writings* 21.

A construct²⁴³

Like Cunningham's declaration that movement is meaning, Olson suggests that the knowledge revealed in a poem or dance is the image in motion. The idea that knowledge and meaning are constructed based on the rhythms of images in the open field of the page or the stage is perhaps exactly what Cunningham was thinking in his chance experiments.

In the vein of Mallarme, Olson wrote to Cunningham that he saw him "writing", without the writer's tools:

"last night, seeing transformation for the first time,
my eye brushed you there in the air in 3 to the 3rd
power, and saw out of it's corner your 1st italicized
sentence, but didn't see it for I had a bad headache
and was not reading."²⁴⁴

Olson watches the dance of the symbolist imagination, the poem with no words. The linguistic meaning of the movement is just out of reach, instead meaning is revealed in the movement itself. Mallarme believed that dance could provoke a "poet's gaze" in which the lens of perception is widened into the lens of the imagination. The goal of the theater, he believed, should be to develop the spectator's imagination this way.²⁴⁵ But Olson here is concerned with something different from Mallarme. Olson glimpses "the 1st italicized sentence" but "had a bad headache and was not reading". He does not "read" the dance as Mallarme might, but chooses instead to simply see

²⁴³ Olson, Selected Letters 173-4.

²⁴⁴ Olson, Selected Letters 173-4.

²⁴⁵ Mallarme's prose poem *Un Spectacle Interrompu* describes how the "poet's gaze" is different from the gaze of other spectators. Mallarme 276-277.

it.²⁴⁶ In contrast to the symbolist desire to transcend the sensations of the every day world and glimpse the elusive idee, Olson enjoys the empirical experience as a unique form of knowledge. He delights in the movement itself, the “flatness” of content and form, of movement and meaning.

Later that summer Olson saw Cunningham perform again and responded with a poem “Merce in Egypt.” In this poem Cunningham’s dance again reveals proprioception as a fundamental knowledge about the world. Olson demonstrates flatness between form and content by revealing image in sound and rhythm. Anaphora and repetitions of sounds and words contribute to a moving image in which knowledge of the body in space becomes knowledge of the body in the world and in history. The boundary of skin Olson describes is penetrated, as body knowledge becomes knowledge of everything else. Olson begins the poem with an anaphoric, three part portrait of the speaker, establishing this rhythm as the boundaries of the body:

I I sing the tree is a heron

I praise the long grass

I wear the lion skin

Over the long skirt

To the ankle. The ankle

Is a heron (1-6)

²⁴⁶ Mallarme wrote that “reading” the dance was central to the “unique training of the imagination” which “consists, in the regular hours of frequenting the sites of Dance without any preliminary aim, patiently and passively to wonder at each step, each strange attitude, on pointes or flat, allonge or jumping, ‘what can this mean’ or better, with inspiration, to read it.” Mallarme 307.

The speaker is revealed through a 3 part portrait, an almost cubist image, of 3 distinct parts connected by the same initial structure and rhythm. The movement flows out of the image of “I” as “long grass” becomes “lion skin” which becomes “long skirt”.

The repetition of ankle provides the boundaries of the body as a firm and stable knowledge, but in the next line, this stability is gently eroded as the ankle becomes a heron and the knowledge of body in space becomes knowledge of the whole world.

Proprioception becomes a guiding container for the poem as the boundaries of the body becomes a lens of experience:

I look straightly backward. Or I bend to the side straightly
to raise the sheaf
up the stick of the leg
as the bittern's leg, raised
as slow as
his neck grows
as the wheat. The presentation,
the representation,
is flat. (8-15)

The repetition of “straightly” in these two still frames suggests a limited sense of movement and this claustrophobia adds to the proprioceptive sense of the boundaries of the body. The rhythm is broken in the next short 5 lines as wheat becomes bird, which becomes wheat again. The repetition of "leg" and the assonance of "slow" and "grows," in the short lines create the sense of a stilted rhythm, a slow movement forward. This effect is continued with "the presentation,/the representation,/ is flat".

The sonic and visual proximity of "presentation" and "representation" blurs the two, a mixture of form and content. They are flat because the movement is occurring in a two-dimensional space but they are also flat in the sense that there is no distance between them, just as the "flatness" between form and content. The sensation of the body becoming the sensation of the bittern's leg and the wheat growing is a "flat" presentation and representation.

The flatness of the presentation, the representation, is also the flatness of movement on the page, and it becomes the "flat feet" of prose as Olson describes a procession in two lines of prose:

I am followed by women and a small boy in white carrying a duck,

all have flat feet and, foot before foot, the women with black wigs (16-17)

As Williams did, Olson enjoys the representational friction between the foot of the poem and the foot of the human body. The laying down of "foot before foot" is the movement of language forward, the rhythm that reveals image in both poetry and dance, here stable and continuous in prose form.

Olson uses the proprioceptive experience of body to understand vertical space in this poem as he does in others:

the sedge

As tall as I am, the rushes

As I am

As far as I am animal, antelope

with such's attendant carnivores (20-25)

The repetitive “I am” builds an uneven rhythm connecting body to nature and animal, not seamlessly, but with this sense of disunity, as though articulating the permeable boundary of the skin. The rhythm of “I am” evokes the rhythmic foot of poetry, the iamb. The next section continues this exploration of vertical distance moving downwards as opposed to upwards. Enjambment takes the reader downwards with more continuity than elsewhere in the poem:

I speak downfall, the ball of my foot
on the neck of the earth, the hardsong
of the rise of all trees, the jay
who uses the air. I am the recovered sickle
with the grass stains still on the flint of its teeth.
I am the six rowed barley
they cut down. (30-36)

The three syllables of the final line come as a short, sharp ending to the preceding strings of syllables linked by commas. The sharp rhythm of the last line reveals the sharpness of the barley being cut, the sharp edges of the body. In addition to experiencing vertical space proprioceptively, Olson locates rite and ritual in the bones, establishing the roots of civilization in the core of the body:

The new rites
are my bones

I built my first settlement
in groves (46-49)

The rhythmic and sonic repetition in these two couplets, the final long syllables of “bones” and “groves,” traces the roots of civilization to the structural core of the body. The final lines of the poem spiral outwards, locating seasonal currents on the extremities:

as they would flail crops
when the spring comes, the flood, the tassels
rise, as my head (50-52)

The roots of civilization, the changing of the seasons, the natural world are discovered in the body as proprioception is revealed as knowledge of the world.

Ironically, the way Olson locates ritual and the beginning of civilization in the bones seems more in tune with Graham’s sensibilities than Cunningham’s. Obsessed with ritual, Graham sought to return to a mysterious, primitive time through dance, carving out a uniquely human space of the psyche onstage. Cunningham, in breaking with Graham, was breaking with this idea, asserting instead that the importance of the dance was not in evoking the past but in the present action and performance of a movement. Olson’s exploration of wider knowledge through the body in space reveals a Graham-esque desire to understand something uniquely human and separate from the machine world in the dancing body.

Both Olson and Cunningham were committed to objectivity, or “objectivism” as Olson called it, privileging a “more universal” sensation over personal perspective. Their opinions on achieving objectivity, however, were opposite. Cunningham opted for a mechanical aesthetic, reducing the sensual experience of the human body to a scientific equation, in order to access “something more universal.” Olson by contrast

believed the sensual experience of the body in space as the only way of accessing anything universal.

Olson's view of the creative process was also fundamentally opposed to Cunningham. His composition methods depended on sensation and perception. He wrote in *Projective Verse*:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY
LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION...get on with it, keep
moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions,
theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep
moving as fast as you can, citizen.²⁴⁷

He trusted sensuality as a marker of humanness in both the creative process in and the body. His writing about the dancing body inspired by Cunningham presents an entirely opposite conceptualization of the dancing body from Cunningham's. Olson privileges the sensual where Cunningham privileges the mechanistic.

The Dancing Body in the Work of Robert Duncan

While Cunningham's dancing body privileges the mechanistic and Olson's is defined by proprioception, Robert Duncan's poetry about the dancing body exposes a forbidden eroticism at the root of the dance. Dance is a consistent theme and source of imagery in Duncan's work, but its source is different from Olson's. There's little evidence that Duncan was inspired by Cunningham or any other form of concert

²⁴⁷ Olson *Selected Writings* 16.

dance.²⁴⁸ He and Cunningham did not cross paths at Black Mountain College but they were acquainted later in their careers. Instead dance in Duncan's poetry is based on social dancing, and the dancing body in his poems is connected to Eros and seduction.²⁴⁹

Duncan was especially inspired by Olson's interest in proprioception. He wrote that "Charles Olson has made us aware that not only heart and brain and sensory skin but all the internal organs, the totality of the body, is involved in the act of a poem, so that the organization of words, an invisible body, bears the imprint of the physical man."²⁵⁰ Duncan conceives of the poem itself as a living body and sometimes a dancing body. Like Olson and Williams, Duncan was inspired by the idea of poetry coming from dance. In "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," Duncan uses the ancient idea of poetry as dance to trace an erotic pull of desire for the body of a poem. Poetry is an alluring dancing body in the margins of the page, spatially opposed to a national body. By tracing a forbidden desire for the dancing body of the poem, Duncan reveals forbidden desire as a form of resistance to the project of building a national identity. He also reveals a desire at the root of the dance that is common to both of them.

Form is connected to forbidden desire, in particular desire for an erotic dancing body. Duncan begins with a line from one of Pindar's odes and follows a stream of associations. From Pindar's line, Duncan traces the myth of Cupid and

²⁴⁸ Duncan does have one poem titled *On the Presentation of the Dance* based on a dance performance by his friend Norman Austin, a classics scholar studying dance at Berkeley. Lisa Jarnot, Email Interview Feb. 12-26 2008.

²⁴⁹ Jarnot.

²⁵⁰ Robert Duncan "Towards and Open Universe" *A Selected Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1944) 11.

Psyche, discovering fragments of national mythology. Nearing the end of the poem, we learn that Pindar's writing was "not a statue but a mosaic, an accumulation of metaphor." This information gestures back towards the accumulation of metaphor over the course of the poem, a mosaic of myth. The discovery of this mosaic by reader and poet reflects Psyche's discovery of Cupid's body by disobeying his wishes, surrendering to her desire and lighting a candle. Duncan illuminates the body of the poem that has emerged, as Psyche glimpses Cupid's body. Form is revealed by trusting forbidden desire.

Pindar's line evokes poetry as a dance, drawing poetry from the rhythms of the body and discovering an erotic impulse. From Pindar's line, Duncan uncovers the poet in the margins, and a quiet pull of desire:

The light foot hears you and the brightness begins

god-step at the margins of thought,

quick adulterous tread at the heart.

Who is it that goes there?

Where I see your quick face

Notes of an old music pace the air,

Torso-reverberations of a Grecian lyre. (1-7)

The two indented lines connect the ancient erotic pull of poetry to a specific source of erotic "your quick face," transgressive in its indented marginality. The moving impulse in the head, the 'light feet' of poetry is sensual and dangerous, a "quick adulterous tread of the heart."

Light and sight become dangerous and erotic when Psyche breaks with blind faith, shedding light on Cupid's body against his wishes:

The copper light
Falling upon the brown boy's slight body
Is carnal fate that sends the soul wailing
Up from blind innocence, ensared

By dimness

Into the deprivations of desiring sight. (10-14)

The visual and sonic proximity of "boy" and "body" reveals the sensual danger in the act of seeing. The "d" from "dimness" slides into "deprivations of desiring sight," a pull from innocent darkness towards the temptations of visual pleasure. Language slips toward desire. Poetry, as an erotic dancing body leads us to the moment when Psyche's gaze becomes transgressive. She breaks her promise and desire begins. Poetry is pushing at blind faith, indulging in forbidden light, following the impulse of desire "at the margins of thought."

The poetry in the margins pulls toward older voices. Psyche's longing for Cupid becomes longing and admiration for older poets:

In time we see a tragedy, a loss of beauty
the glittering youth
of the god retains—but from this threshold
it is age
that is beautiful. It is toward the old poets

we go, to their faltering,

their unaltering wrongness that has style (43-49)

The “glittering youth” and “age” appear indented, marginalized, as does the suggestion that “we go, to their faltering.” The lineage of old poet to young takes place in the margin, and it is a lineage that involves “faltering” or transgression. The rhyme linking “faltering” to “unaltering wrongness” reveals intentional transgression, an acknowledgement of forbidden desires. Psyche links “unaltering wrongness that has style,” to the “adulterous” pull of poetry. Erotic longing for bodies extends into violations and innovations of earlier poets. The “faltering” of older poets opposes poetry to nation; poetry is the alluring dancing body in the margins of the page.

Language fails when it comes time to praise the nation. Duncan connects Whitman’s faltering in language as a result of his stroke to faltering in the voice of the poet speaking a dangerous truth or declaring a forbidden desire:

Damerging a nuv. A nerb.

The Present dented of the U

Knighthed stayd. States. The heavy clod?

Cloud. Invades the brain. What

if lilacs. last in this dooryard bloomd? (50-63)

The broken spelling of “president” and “United States” suggests the failure to translate empire into poetry. Duncan fails to praise a President as Whitman praised Lincoln. While language slipped towards desire for cupid’s body, it breaks trying to praise the president. Duncan searches for the erotic pull of poetry, in the praising of presidents, but instead finds the presidential power violating the body of the nation:

Where among these did the power reside
The moves the heart? What flower of the nation
Bride-sweet broke to the whole rapture (65-67)

The presidents do not stir poetry in the desiring heart but rather are the “root of the heart’s rancor.” A nineteen line lamenting presidential ode follows, aligned with the far left margin. The block form suggests the centrality of the historical narrative; this is not a marginalized story. The contrast in form and tone to the rest of the poem opposes national mythology to the erotic, marginalized pull of poetry.

When Psyche surrenders to desire to look at Cupid’s body it suddenly becomes difficult to translate desire into language:

she saw him fair

whom Apollo’s mouthpiece said spread

pain

beyond cure to those

wounded by his arrows.

Rilke torn by a rose thorn

blackend toward Eros. Cupidinous Death!

that will not take no for an answer. (112-119)

The secure direction in “toward” is thwarted as it becomes “torn” and “thorn.” The precise aim of “arrows” are clouded by “a rose” and “Eros.” Attempts to translate desire into language suddenly bring confusion and pain, sharp “thorns and “arrows.”

grass releases into the sea, “blade after blade dancing in waves.” The children dance a repetitive circle dance:

There the children turn the ring to the left.

There the children turn the ring to the right.

Dancing . . . Dancing . . . (186-188)

The reading of the sentences requires engaging in a repetitive rhythm, altered only slightly by the last word. The rhythm is balanced and even, the children’s dance providing a calm unity like the dance of the grass in the sea. Moving from the repetition in the dance of the children to the repetition of history, this harmony and passivity is complicated by the falling of empires which echoes the children’s circle game: “Round and round the children turn./London Bridge that is a kingdom falls.” (191-2) The second line is indented, the empire falling in the margins. Nation and ideology are pushed from the center to the margin over the course of the poem.

At the end of the poem Duncan circles back to Pindar, reminding us that his “art was not a statue but an accumulation of metaphor.” The description articulates the form of the poem. The desiring pull of poetry stretches from Pindar into Duncan’s poem, pulling myth and metaphor around it. Language was pulled toward forbidden desire but was thwarted when desire was realized; it failed when called upon to praise the empire. The forbidden erotic poetry and the mythology of nation-building are summarized side by side, revealing their proximity in visual possession, the desire for a body. Love is politicized in the image of the dancing body in the margins, and the corruption in politics without love is exposed. Sensual desire is opposed to desire for

power. The end of the poem exposes resistance in the push/pull relationship between these two forces: a counter-clockwise turning in the dance.

Duncan's dancing body, driven by an erotic pull towards marginalized desire, echoes Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. Duncan and Wilde both focused on the dangerous potential for sight to paint the body sensual when watching dance. They noticed the influence of imperialist histories that cause the spectator to look with a gaze of entitlement, the proximity of visually possessing empire to visually possessing the body of the dancer. They both trusted forbidden desire to discover form and opposed sensual desire to the desire for power.

Duncan's thoughts on form are less externally motivated than those of Cunningham and Olson. He saw form as simply an order discovered from chaos. He wrote that "the order man may contrive or impose on the things about him or upon his language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them."²⁵¹ Unlike Cunningham, who sought to erase human organization of chaos in his chance structures, Duncan consciously noticed it. He wrote that:

In the turn and return, the strophe and antistrophe, the prose and versus of the choral mode, are remembered the alterations of day and night and the systole and diastole of the heart, and in the exchange of opposites, the indwelling of one and the other, dance and poetry emerge as ways of knowing.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Duncan, *A Selected Prose* 6.

²⁵² Duncan, *A Selected Prose* 6.

The discovery of form reveals humanness. The rhythms in the body are already a form distinguishable from other movements in the world. Discovering forms from chaos is human and inevitable. Like Olson, Cunningham and his contemporary “objectivist” artists, he rejects the idea of imposing a form, but acknowledges that forms are inevitably discovered.

The Postmodern Dancing Body

The dialogue on the dancing body at Black Mountain College reveals a desire to redefine humanness by linking the body to the creative process. Cunningham’s dancing body incorporates the machine-like into the human. Olson’s dancing body reveals a specific human knowledge in proprioception. Duncan’s dancing body reveals the erotic desire at the root of the dance that provides the space for resistance.

Is there space for a dancing body to be mechanistic, erotic and driven by perception all at once? Is there space for an artist to be all these things? The shift from modernity to post modernity was influenced by disillusionment, by a shift away from symbolic, internal expression, toward external forms. It seems that the artists I have examined were looking for a stable definition of humanness in both the body and the creative process; something more “objective” and reliable than their individual perspective. Cunningham found the mechanism of chance stabilizing, Olson trusted the sensations of his body in space, Duncan trusted sensual desire.

Attempts to separate form from content only reestablish them as separate terrains. In the work of male post-modern artists, these separate terrains were gendered. Michael Davidson has shown how, by rejecting internally motivated

poetry, Charles Olson and other poets of Projective Verse, were rejecting a feminized space of the mind.²⁵³ Susan Foster has shown how Merce Cunningham, in rejecting the idea of internal emotions was rejecting the feminized concerns of the founders of modern dance.²⁵⁴ Their retreat to “male” concerns of external form reconstitutes this separation and further reinforces the gendering of interior and exterior. Because form and content are identified, reconstituted and gendered, a unity between them can’t be realized. Davidson has shown how this choice to focus on external forms was part of a larger national project of constructing masculinity and homogeneity during the Cold War.²⁵⁵

Opposition to this national project, Duncan reveals, can be discovered in the erotic potential in the dancing body. Building a national identity for war requires sacrificing individuals’ experience to focus on the common experience. It sacrifices the lived, sensual experience of each body for shared ideology. Recognizing the individual sensual experience of the dancing body recognizes sensual desire as opposed to desire for power. The postmodern dancing body must negotiate the mechanization of external form, the boundaries of proprioception and the sensual experience and desire.

²⁵³ Davidson 47.

²⁵⁴ Foster 169.

²⁵⁵ Davidson 47-48.

4. The Mechanical and The Erotic in the Dancing Body: My Experiments in Choreography

The previous three investigations reveal a tension between the mechanical and the erotic in the dancing body. The image of the dancer was appealing to modernist poets because of the need for a new relationship between the physical and the creative and the need to confront sexual desire in the body, connecting expressive power to erotic potential. Dance was appealing to audiences and poets because dancing bodies resisted the mechanization of the material world, providing an embodied form of opposition. When symbolist poets took an interest in the female dancing body as an image, their writing revealed a fear of female sexualities that led to the erasure of the female dancing body's agency. The fear of the female dancing body was instead mapped onto an Oriental body.

Whereas at the turn of the century dance provided an appealing resistance to mechanization and return to a utopian past, during the American depression and World War II, artists used dance as an embodied way to protest the war. The mechanization of bodies for war provoked questions of how much structures of the industrialized world could enter into the creative process without dehumanizing the artist and the process of art-making. During the Cold War, the mechanization of the body was informed by the cultural project of defining American-ness in terms of mass production and homogenization. The erotic potential in the dance was constructed in opposition to nation building.

Dance provides an opposition to the mechanization of bodies for projects of industrialization, war, and nation-building. The dancer image reveals subversive and erotic potential for resisting this mechanization. In my investigations in choreography I discovered a very fine line between the mechanistic and the erotic. I discovered that a mechanistic quality in choreography led to strong collective coordination among my dancers whereas shifting to an erotic quality highlighted tensions between them.

My research on movement and language started my sophomore year when I choreographed a solo called Passage. At the time I was interested in the idea of talking and dancing onstage simultaneously. I had discovered that it was hard for me to do both- I couldn't speak loudly while I was dancing; I couldn't commit to movement while I was talking. I wanted to study the incompatibility of these languages. I remember realizing that syntax felt restricting while I was moving. I had to consciously resist the impulse to stop at the end of a sentence, to pause at a comma. My body conformed to grammatical rules automatically.

I was already aware of the rules of syntax in a classical ballet vocabulary. Ballet phrases were organized, oriented and punctuated by a precise set of rules. I knew that ballet audiences, unlike an audience at a modern dance concert, rarely arrive at the end of a performance and turn to the person next to them to ask, "what did that mean?" The synopsis is always in the program, but no one is likely to miss the meaning of the nutcracker defeating the Mouse King or Romeo and Juliet falling in love. Even more metaphysical themes, such as Giselle dancing herself to death over impossible love are not difficult to deduce within context. Why do even non-

narrative ballets, I wondered, rarely leave the audience feeling like they missed something? Was it because of a consistent language of steps, syntax and grammar that made a literate audience confident enough to enjoy the dance without wondering- what does this mean?

I wanted to do an experiment. I set out to make a consistent, comprehensible modern dance language that an audience could legitimately learn in the space of a performance. How could I make a phrase of movement into a question? What was the rhythmic and energetic difference between an adjective and a gerund? I started by translating sentences into dance word for word. My dance became a series of equivalents. With one movement for each word I was like a robot. I figured out how to teach the audience the language by pairing the same movement with a word often enough that I could repeat the movement without speaking and they would remember.

This was the beginning of a solo titled Passage. This part was funny. The audience laughed a lot. I made the language as precise as I could, finding ways of expressing grammar, punctuation and individual words in layers of rhythms. Questions, for instance, always ended in a repetition. I opened the piece with enough sentences to give the audience an idea of what I was doing and then I broke the rules. I said one word with a long series of movements and whole sentences with stillness. I mixed up the rhythms and the movements I had established, and my sentences didn't make sense. The first audiences who saw the piece, my fellow composition students, were confused. They said it was difficult to watch; they were "in and out" of the performance, thinking about their own thinking processes. I needed to figure out a way to disrupt the established rules in a way that would slowly disorient the audience

without alienating them.

I learned that it is very easy to establish rules and difficult to deconstruct them. Audiences are eager to learn new languages, however they can be alienated by the deconstruction of languages. Most of all, I learned how many possibilities there are for making movement from words. I could use rhythms, flow, speed, syntax, organization of words on the page, the shapes of letters, meanings, synonyms, and associations all as tools for making movement. Even within these parameters there were more options. For instance, if I was interested in the shape of a letter I could use the outline of the letter or the negative space inside it. It could become a pathway on the floor or a shape in the air for my body to trace. I would translate a sentence into movement using what seemed like arbitrary tools and then realize the movement phrase had given the sentence a new meaning. There was a lot more research to be done.

By the time I decided to do this project I had choreographed several more dances from words. Now I was thinking about rhythm. Could there be something comforting about the predictability of structures in the language of ballet? Could the appeal be in the predictable framework the form provided? There is definitely a certain security in repetitive rhythms. The structures of narrative and syntax in ballet give the audience a sense of security in knowing what's coming next and knowing, because of this repetition, that it has a meaning. I knew that poems could break the rules of grammar and syntax and still provide the security of a repetitive rhythm. I wanted to study this effect in dance. How did I come to accept a rhythm through the sounds of words or lengths of lines, through rhyme, assonance, alliteration or

anaphora and what would these rhythms look like on my body? If I had to learn to overcome an embodied grammatical impulse when I talked and danced, what responses to the sounds and rhythms of words did my body already have?

First I set out to translate poetry into dance. I looked up a definition of translation and found that many of the parts of the definition had real meaning for dance. To translate was to physically move something from place to place, to put into simpler terms, to convert into another state, to enrapture. Would translating a poem into dance convert it to simpler terms? Would the rhythm I drew out of the poem and put on my body be “simpler” than a rhythm in words? Does translating a line or word into a movement on a body close space between meaning and the form it takes? Some of the poets I was writing about seemed to think so. Mallarme thought dance could reveal the ideal nothing, whereas words were tied to associations in the physical world. Charles Olson thought dance provided a “flatness” between form and content.

I went alone into the studio. I took a poem by Adrienne Rich. It was a poem I had read many times. Could I dance this poem without re-reading it, I wondered. What did I already know about it before I opened the book? Was there a sense of movement, of rhythm I had absorbed from reading that poem over and over again, something that my body already knew before I even looked at it on the page? I danced the poem before looking at it. Then I read it a few times. I started to dance it again, but suddenly it was difficult. I didn’t want to dance it. I knew all the tools I had for making movement from words, I had used them so many times, but suddenly I didn’t want to. Every movement I made felt like a reduction, and I didn’t want to reduce the words to their shape, sound or rhythm.

I found myself wanting my body to function in the way that words, syllables, and line breaks functioned in Adrienne Rich's work. When I went into the studio with five dancers to make a group piece, I wanted to explore different ways of embodying these elements of poetry. In effect I wanted to find ways of making my dancers become elements of poetry.

My first impulse was to study the mechanization of the body. I couldn't stop thinking of William Carlos Williams' definition of a poem as a "machine of words," and I kept wondering what about mechanization was appealing to Williams. What about mechanization of the body amounted to dehumanization, and what could we take from machines that could be useful for art-making? What would it look like to embody Williams' mechanized definition of art?

First I needed to research what qualities in movement read as "machine-like." I asked my dancers to make machines in groups. They chose to dance up-right and used choppy, repetitive movements. I tried challenging them by asking them to find positions that were off-center, involved going down to the ground, or necessitated weight sharing. I wanted to know what else made a body machine-like. I found that even when I subverted their ideas of "machine-like" movement, their ability to move as a coordinated group consistently read as machine-like.

They made machines out of specific images such as a flower machine, an air machine and a snow machine. I found was that the basic structure had many, many options. Because the dancers were all moving as a unit with a similar quality and coordinated rhythms, their ability to express imagery collectively was very strong. I

felt that I had, in a way, taught my dancers to be instruments of poetry, to express imagery collectively as a machine of bodies rather than a machine of words.

Next I wanted to borrow specific structures from poetry. I wanted to translate the idea of a line-break into dance. How could I take the breath and pause of a speaker, the physical space on the page and put it into movement on the body? I made a simple structure. I had my dancers make phrases by “writing” their names in the air with their bodies. Then dancers learned each other’s phrases. Their phrases moved across space. We experimented with having some dancers start the phrase and some end it, or having some take over for others half-way through. One dancer danced one line and the moment between when she stopped and the next dancer began was the line-break. We could wait there for as long as we wanted to. The dancers could be as far apart or as close together as we wanted.

We spent a whole day studying different ways of breaking lines on our bodies. We tried classical lines with the leg extended in arabesque, and pedestrian lines with the body standing upright. We practiced breaking lines suddenly as opposed to slowly. What was accomplished by having one dancer break quickly while another broke slowly? What if one dancer was allowed a greater amount of time to transition between two lines? What were some ways of easing into a new line? I realized that this was a powerful way of visually and spatially representing rhythm.

I turned to another form of “line.” I decided to make a mini-dance, a dance-within-a-dance, based on the fixed poetic form of a sonnet. At the time I had been experimenting with this form as a writer. I chose to use the structure of an English or Shakespearean sonnet. First, I taught my dancers the rhythm of iambic pentameter.

We learned it as a rhythm for improvising. I asked the dancers to improvise to this very specific rhythm, but with a specific idea of shape in mind. The down-beat required some sort of contraction and the upbeat required some sort of expansion. That is to say, the “I” of the “iamb” was a contraction and the “amb” was an expansion. Since there are five iambs in iambic pentameter the rhythm entailed five sets of “contract-expand” except that the last two beats were “expand-expand.” I thought each dancer could dance two lines of a quatrain, so I asked them to make movement for a specific length of that rhythm, like a musical score. The dancers worked in pairs and each pair made a quatrain.

If a rhyme could be thought of as two lines dancing with each other, we had successfully followed the rhyme scheme. The rules of form required an ABAB rhyme pattern. There were other options for rhyming, too. We could transpose movements onto a different part of the body for a rhyme, or reverse the direction of a movement or vary the speed. I thought of how, in my experiments with writing sonnets that rhymed, finding a rhyme was usually a way of discovering the path of a poem through sound. Finding a rhyme would lead me from one idea to another accidentally. In our dance this happened spatially. The rhythm and rhyme scheme propelled us through space.

Four dancers performed the four quatrains, so they each had to dance two. English sonnets end with a rhyming couplet and for this I had one dancer make a short solo phrase using classical ballet vocabulary. To me, rhyming couplets sounded cloying and saccharine, so I felt the light, sweet quality of *petit allegro* would be appropriate. Ultimately, however, the classical vocabulary stood out from the rest of

the sonnet as too different. Instead we substituted a basic walk. When the four dancers had finished their quatrains, the dancer performing the couplet followed the path in space through which the quatrains had moved, walking as she would in her every day life.

So that was our sonnet dance. The dancers had to keep the internal count of the rhythm, the iambic pentameter, even while music was playing. It was a Cunningham structure, I realized, unintentionally. Cunningham believed in the autonomy of the dance and the music so that the dance should maintain the integrity of its original timing no matter what happens in the music. It made sense that my experiments with fixed form had led me to a Cunningham structure, given his allegiances to structures.

I gave my dancers period costumes from the turn of the century. I was interested in the idea of a “new woman” revealed in modern dance and I wanted to understand a little bit more about the Victorian prejudices that the “new woman” was breaking away from. I met with a costume designer to discuss early modern dance costumes and what women typically wore at the time. I made my dancers wear blouses tucked into long skirts with slips underneath. I was interested in the idea of layers of costumes because I was thinking of Mallarme and his ideas about the dancer’s body as an invisible structure from which image extends. I was interested in the idea of taking on and off these costumes to reveal the body as the hidden structure. We practiced taking them on and off in different ways and new choreography possibilities became apparent. The dancers could hide each other’s bodies in their large billowing costumes, they could disrupt the skirts’ meaning by

using them as something different, we could use costume pieces they were not wearing to organize the space by arranging them in lines. The lines in space that the costumes created became another way to study line and line-break.

We made short phrases about getting undressed and practiced them to a recording of Gertrude Stein reading “Portrait of Picasso.” The dance involved the skirt becoming a hat and a scarf and a mask and a wheel. The skirt became a way of organizing space in even lines and disorganizing space when they were all thrown up in the air and came down in different places. Dancers could hide under each other’s skirts or build a tent out of them.

I watched my dancers destabilize the meaning of a skirt and listened to Gertrude Stein destabilize the meanings of words. I thought of Williams talking about how “our verse comes from the dance” and remembered how in Greek choral dances the “foot” of the meter was the literal foot of the dancer. Were they still in unison?

Another student who watched my dance several times told me she liked the “sonnet” best. She picked out that section without being told that it was a “dance-within-a-dance,” or a piece set apart to a different rhythm. After the performance, other people told me they liked that specific section a lot as well. This was very interesting. We had captured something about the self-contained form that really translated. I think this is because of two things: first of all my approach to see the structure as a closed, fixed form, rather than a structure that could be subverted or reorganized. Second, I think it is because of my dancers’ rehearsed mechanical quality. The machine-like quality in their movement amounted to a strong collective

coordination that allowed them to effectively absorb the rhythm of iambic pentameter as a group. As I watched the dance I was struck by how difficult it was to disrupt the dancer's collective unity and produce tension between them. Even when they were doing totally different things on different parts of the stage there was still a sense of united coordination. It was as though the exercises of being a machine and performing a sonnet had given them an overall collective awareness that was so strong it obscured tensions between them. How could we use this mechanical quality without losing the tension between dancers?

In the second piece I made I wanted to preserve dancers' individuality from the start to see if this could complicate mechanization. One dancer in both pieces told me that in the first dance she felt like a word, whereas in the second one she felt like herself. I had been thinking of my dancers this way too. In the first piece they were instruments for making poetry, words, syllables, and lines. But in the second piece, I wanted them to be dancing bodies.

I wanted to keep experimenting with the rhythms of words but instead of fixed poetic form I wanted free verse. I turned to the rhythms of our own names. We hear them so much, I thought. Did our bodies already have the rhythms of our names ingrained inside them in some way? First we danced our full names. We took a moment to write about them in order to recall where each part of our name came from. Then we danced them. Dancers could take inspiration from the rhythm of their name or the shape of the letters or the origin of the name for inspiration.

Interestingly, we all chose to use the rhythm for our first names but imagery for our

last names. Was it because we were so used to hearing the rhythms of our first names? I asked my dancers to write about this experience. One dancer wrote:

It was curious to dance my full name which includes my Chinese name (which has different inflection and intonation and pronunciation). It was interesting to realize the different rhythms I inhabit depending on what language I am immersed in. Different languages bring out different rhythms and energy frequencies so perhaps when people call me by my Chinese name they are invoking a different life rhythm in me.

Dancing their names brought out complex histories of rhythms. Each name had so many different rhythms that evoked specific moments or sensations from the dancers' lives.

I put the dancers in pairs. They had to fill a rhythmic score like in the sonnet dance, but this time the rhythm they had to fill was their names. I wondered if this structure of collective movement to the same rhythm would produce some of the mechanical quality it had in the first dance I made. Filling the beats of their names, the dancers made very nuanced rhythms with interesting and specific weight and energy. We arrived at very specific, uneven rhythms and the dancers' commitment to these rhythms, however unusual, resulted in movement that felt dangerous and risky. The dancers were clearly not machines but people and I could see their unique, experiences of these rhythms and tensions between them. The more we rehearsed these phrases, the more they revealed a sense of the erotic.

I wanted to study their unique perspectives. I was interested in how Graham split Emily Dickinson's character in two to show different perspectives of an artist. I

wanted to have different dancers “dance” different perspectives on the same canvas. I started by choreographing a dance for two characters played by five dancers. Two dancers played character number one and the other three dancers played character number two. The idea was that they would dance different perspectives of the same character, like the two Emily Dickinsons.

I wanted to build a rhythm out of, as Williams puts it, the tension between “the motion up and down and the motion forward.” I decided I could create “up and down” rhythm that traveled “forward” across time and space in the dance. I could create the up and down rhythm from flight and fall. How many rhythms could we build from the tension between flying and falling moving across the stage? Could we repeat these rhythms on a small scale in individual phrases and on a larger scale in the overall narrative of the piece? We studied flight as of a release from gravity and fall as a release back into gravity. Dancers had to make phrases and duets with a specific length of “flights” and “falls” so that I could see the narrative possibilities. We used two long duets as our basic template. We practiced performing the duets with different partners, or with a group of three, with two people dancing one part. We practiced having them substitute each other in and out of the dance. Dancers reported feeling either intimately connected or extremely disjointed, depending on whether or not they had a partner playing the opposite role. I could see this onstage with an interesting effect. Sometimes two dancers performed the two parts of a duet but on opposite parts of the stage. I was pleased with the interesting tensions between them.

I am not sure how I got to this quality. I know I was thinking about Mallarme dissolving the dancer’s agency into the unity of form and content and thinking about

how I wanted to preserve the individualities of my dancers. I also know that I was thinking about the fragmentation posed by cinema and cubism and the theory of relativity. I was also thinking about rhyming and repetition and the question of whether a dancer mirroring another was a better rhyme than two dancers dancing together.

The complex and erotic tensions between the dancers made some moments stand out as very performative and protected while others felt accidental and vulnerable. I thought it was interesting that the rhythms of our names brought out these opposing qualities. In order to emphasize them, I chose costumes that looked performative. The dancers wore black and white striped shirts with red suspenders and bloomers. The costumes evoked clowns. Now performative moments became funny and non-performative, accidental moments became unsettling. We hadn't been using sound in the piece but we chose a few moments to use accompaniment- a combination of found sounds that felt accidental and an Appalachian melody that felt performative.

Audiences read queer and feminist themes in this piece that I did not anticipate. Audiences interpreted the dance as being specifically "about women," "women's anxieties," or "women partners." Initially I was annoyed. I was thinking about rhythm, fragmentation, perspective, tension between rhythms and dancers, between performativity and spontaneity. What was feminine about the dance except for the fact that all the dancers were women? They were even wearing bloomers and suspenders! In the first piece I made the dancers wore long Victorian skirts and no one told me that dance was "about women."

In last semester's dance, however, the dancers had become parts of a machine. In this dance they were people. The tensions between them guided the unfolding of the piece. I looked again at their moments of interaction and intimacy. I realized that I had established the dancers as themselves onstage, which meant, as women, and so their movements and interactions were necessarily gendered. Last semester I had established the dancers more as devices than people. Onstage they were lines and syllables and parts of a machine. Their interactions didn't immediately read as gendered.

In particular, the moments of performativity paired with clown costumes made this dance seem like it was about growing up. I hadn't intended this. It gave moments a feeling of happy nostalgia that bothered me by making the specificity of qualities and rhythms distant and vague. It looked like it was trying to be accessible. Apparently it was. People told me they enjoyed the costumes because it gave them permission to laugh during performative or "goofy" moments. If I had more time I would have spent time studying the effects of the sounds and costumes, trying to find a way to keep their interesting qualities without evoking this sense of vagueness.

My two dances managed to effectively separate two qualities of the modern dancing body. My first dance studied the mechanization of the body. My second dance studied rhythms that took us to a place of eroticism. I had studied the tension between the mechanistic and the erotic in two separate parts. I was struck by the fine line between them. The mechanical quality developed from emphasizing collective unity whereas the erotic arose from emphasizing personal difference, and it did not take very much to evoke either. So much was determined about the nature of the

group and how their roles in the piece and relationships to each other were established during the first few rehearsals.

My own choreography projects revealed how an erotic quality can emerge in direct opposition to mechanization of the body. It depends upon recognizing the dancer's unique sensual experience whereas in the machine-like aesthetic the sensual experience of the dancer is oriented toward the collective project of the machine. Recognizing the sensual experience of my dancer's made them immediately read as gendered. I realized the fine line between the two of these qualities that depends upon the extent to which the dancer's unique sensual experience is taken into account. The machine-like characteristic had made my dancers read like abstract shapes, whereas the moment I treated them as people, their gender read loudly. Finally, I realized the potential for opposing the mechanization of bodies with our own sensual experiences of the dance.

Epilogue

The preceding four investigations reveal a tension between the mechanical and the erotic in the modern dancing body. In the first three investigations I discovered how the dance resists national projects such as war, industrialization or colonization. The sensual experience of dance resists the mechanization of the body; embodied expression resists the disembodiment strategies of mechanization. In my own choreography I discovered the potential for focusing on individual sensation to produce interesting tensions between my dancers and the potential for a machine like coordination to reduce tensions between them.

Translating the dancing body onto the page can mean a variety of things for the sensual experience of dance. Mallarme erased the sensual experience of the dancing body by translating her into poetry. Charles Olson accentuated it. William Carlos Williams locates the poet at the intersection of the physical and non-physical dance, mediating between the two. Oscar Wilde and Robert Duncan traced the sensual experience of the dance to revealing forbidden desires.

What is required in order to write about the dancing body without diminishing it's sensual experience? Both Williams and Duncan conceived as the poem itself as a body, and the act of writing a poem was discovering its body or shape. The poem embodied rhythm and form just as the dancer did. Williams and Mallarme took opposite approaches to the physical and non-physical dance. Williams wanted to root the non-physical flow of ideas in the physical world of embodied expression.

Mallarme wanted language to be released from the physical world instead revealing the world of ideas. Both of them caught on to the dance in poetry as a space for negotiating this boundary.

Writing about the dance depends on how you see it. Duncan and Wilde were aware of the potential for the spectator to claim visual ownership of the dancer's body. For Mallarme, this resulted in a disembodied dance on the page. By contrast, Duncan and Wilde were also aware of the potential for the dance to make the spectator aware of her desires. I think this sensual awareness while watching the dance allows one to write about dance without disembodiment. Olson chose not to "read" the dance, to experience it empirically, while Mallarme considered watching the dance "training" for the imagination, aspiring to transcend the empirical experience. At the beginning of this project I wondered what it meant for poetry to document dance. I think it depends on the gaze of the spectator.

At the beginning of the project I wondered what constituted unity of form and content. Now, I think that asking the question makes it impossible to answer. Separating form from content even discursively, establishes them as separate terrains. Even choosing to focus only on external form reestablishes it as a separate terrain. A unity between form and content would require refusing to designate any part of the piece of art as either but rather accepting it as a whole.

At the beginning of this project I also wondered why poets took an interest in dance during the modern era, during the same period when modern dance was developing. Now I think it is because of the need for a new relationship between the

physical and the creative and the permission to confront the sexual desire in the body and connect expressive power to erotic potential.

I think that achieving a unity between form and content means discovering a rhythm in movements of the world that makes you aware of your sensual experience and desires. A rhythm like this opposes the mechanization of bodies in projects of war, industrialization and imperialism. I happen to be interested in discovering this rhythm through my body and my words.

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