"Only the Dance is Sure": Dance and Constructions of Gender in Modernist Poetry

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Abstract:
This essay focuses on some of the central innovations in early 20th century dance in relation to their influence on Anglo-American modernist poetry. Arguing that dance is an important source of inspiration that shapes the imagery in many works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats, it is also tied to constructions of gender, which engage with modernist aesthetics and reflect the body politics of the late Victorian era. Striking is the complex use of dance as a metaphor which epitomizes the tension between abstractness – an androgynous "impersonality" – and physicality, i.e. a sexualized femininity or masculinity. Noticeable is an ambivalent split between celebrating the body and de-humanizing it, between affirming its sensuality and an emerging spiritual ideal. Whereas this is most obvious in Eliot's and Yeats's poetry, Crane and Williams illustrate the search for an "authentic" form of expression, a new freedom and realism which is also represented in a more dynamic, rhythmical language. Although the poets differ in their symbolic use of and attitude towards dance, they bear literary testimony to its power and portray it in joyful, celebratory, erotic, or more spiritual, agonized tones.

1 This essay focuses on some of the central innovations in early 20th century dance in relation to their influence on Anglo-American modernist poetry. Arguing that dance is an important source of inspiration that shapes the imagery in many works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats, it is also tied to constructions of gender, which engage with modernist aesthetics and reflect the body politics of the late Victorian era. Striking is the complex use of dance as a metaphor which epitomizes the tension between abstractness – an androgynous 'impersonality' – and physicality, i.e. a sexualized femininity or masculinity. Noticeable is an ambivalent split between celebrating the body and de-humanizing it, between affirming its sensuality and an emerging spiritual ideal. Whereas this is most obvious in Eliot's and Yeats' poetry, Crane and Williams illustrate the search for an 'authentic' form of expression, a new freedom and realism which is also represented in a more dynamic, rhythmical language. Although the poets differ in their symbolic use of and attitude towards dance, they bear literary testimony to its power and portray it in joyful, celebratory, erotic, or more spiritual, agonized tones.

2 The study of literature and dance is a slowly emerging interdisciplinary field.[1] As it presents a vast realm of inquiry, which could stretch across highly diverse styles, genres,

[1] Although the relationship between poetry and dance can be seen as a very old one, studies often tend to focus on 19th century European literature, especially French symbolism (e.g. Valéry, Mallarmé, Gautier). The 1970s and 1980s brought a temporary increase of interest in critical interdisciplinary readings which have recently broadened in scope and gained new momentum. An example is Cheryl A. Wilson's *Literature and Dance in*

temporalities and localities, the analysis is limited to the first two decades of the 20th century which can be seen as "the era when dancing started to play a new and more spectacular role in art and culture in general" (Nényei 27). Dance here refers to two distinct emerging traditions, the new European theatrical ballet and American modern dance, which were both the results of international, trans-Atlantic artistic collaborations. This excludes earlier and later developments of styles like folk dance, jazz, social dance, hip-hop, contemporary dance, or musical theatre. It also does not refer to the German modern dance ('Ausdruckstanz'), a movement which only reached its height well after WW I and is thus less significant in its coinciding with literary modernism. Furthermore, the decision to concentrate on Eliot, Crane, Williams, and Yeats, arguably some of the central representatives of Anglo-American modernism, confines the study of the construction of gender to a specific male perspective. Yet the works of these poets allows a complex engagement with images of masculinity/ femininity and even hetero/homosexuality. Before taking a look at the imagery in some of their poems, the relation between dance and gender as well as between dance and poetry and its cultural, political and aesthetic implications at the time will be outlined.

3 Dance, as an art form, is intrinsically physical and inseparable from visual representation – and thus also from the perpetuation or challenge of gender roles. Yet, considering the existing body of critical studies of the relation between sex and imagery in the visual arts, photography, or advertising, as well as the numerous books written on individual male and female dancers, the analysis of the cultural construction of gender in dance is neglected in comparison. As reasons for this, Judith Lynne Hanna, who draws attention to this phenomenon, names the persisting prudery in (American) society and the fact that dance continues to fight for its place as a 'proper' art form (xv). Particularly because dance is a hard to pin down, non-verbal form of expression, it remains, she argues, largely "out-of-awareness" (xvi). Nonetheless, it is hard to dispute that "dance, which requires the body for its realization, often attracts attention to the dancer her-/himself, but more often it calls attention to one of the two types of human bodies – male or female" (xiv). Generally, dance can be seen to exemplify the performative nature of gender in Judith Butler's sense. It is inevitably tied to the crucial question of perception. For the trained gazes of contemporary audiences of theatrical dance, costumes, musical themes, and, above all, movement, remain

Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman (2009). This study fills a scholarly gap, while also contributing to the fields of literary study, dance history, and gender studies. Yet, it is mainly concerned with investigating the interaction between the novel and social dance (e.g. waltz, quadrille), not with theatrical dance. A number of recent PhD theses also document the growing body of scholarship on literature and dance or music, see, for instance, Coulter (2004), Epstein (2008).

historically evolved and politically conditioned markers of gender roles, which are, of course, often consciously transgressed.

4 Whether or not one agrees with Hanna's generalizing description of dance as a major vessel through which people learn what it means to be stereotypically female ("usually more passive, gentle") or male ("more aggressive, bold, and energetic" (96)), it is interesting that she points out: "The contest and complementarity of the sexes, the power of women, and even aspects of androgyny are played out in performance. Men may pay homage to women even as they attempt to appropriate their powers" (ibid). The latter aspect is important to consider with regard to the works of the male poets under scrutiny here, in particular Yeats'. Moreover, it shows how dance can be a means of liberation and defy sexual norms. Stressing the trans-cultural dimension of dance as well as its intrinsic connection to sexuality (cf. also Ellis 1983), Hanna explains further:

> Around the world [...] Dance is embedded in divine sanction for sex and erotic fantasy, in sex role typecasting in rites of passage, in gender metaphors for movement, and in sexual instruction through dance. Thus dance parodies and appeases the powerful and powerless in different realms of life and even suggests the reversal of roles. (xvii)

Considering the argument above, it might seem surprising that the study of dance and gender is marginalized in criticism, as dance is arguably the 'purest' expression of the body. Puritan hang-ups might play a role, but more crucially it comes down to the problem of 'textual' evidence. Performance reviews, photographs, and videos are only a weak substitute for the dynamics of live-performance; the split between the study and its object remains a very wide one in dance studies. Therefore, shifting the focus onto the representation of dance in another medium, poetry, allows an analysis of the construction of images in a more durable form.

5In general, the influence of the developments of early modern dance on the literary imagination is also underrepresented in academic criticism.[2] Yet Terri A. Mester argues that

> dance did contribute to the character of literary modernism, whether it was through ritualized communal dancing or attending theatrical performances. The latter included those of the Ballets Russes, which heralded as a new confluence of the arts […] as well as the art dances of Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and Isadora Duncan, the precursors of a radically new language of movement form. (25)

[2] An important early essay is Frank Kermode's "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev" (1963). Excellent and detailed studies of the relationship between dance and modernist poetry, which deepened my own interest in the subject, are Terri A. Mester's *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth Century Dance* (1997); and Audrey T. Rodgers' *The Universal Drum. Dance Imagery in the Poetry of Eliot, Crane, Roethke, and Williams* (1979). For adding a particular focus on gender to the discussion see Alexandra Kolb's *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (2009), although she is more concerned with the German scene, and Amy Koritz's *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (1995). For a broader context see, for instance, Louis Horst's and Carroll Russell's *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts* (1961).

The innovations in the dance referred to here, e.g. the unusual rhythms and angular movements in Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Duncan's uninhibited femininity, or the spectacular stage machinery of Fuller's solo dances, mesmerized the contemporary audience. The performances and performers of the time, as Frank Kermode claims, also captured a whole generation of poets, "[who] regularly fell in love with them" (4). Close thematic links and stylistic convergences between dance and poetry can be found in the return to archaic myths and primitive rituals, the image of the *femme fatale* or *fragile*, the interest in non-Western (e.g. Asian, Indian, Egyptian) art forms, as well as in the search for a new, symbolic language which, in analogy to the break with the formal restrictions of classical ballet, meant a turn away from the lyrical dictum of the 19th century. This coincides with a rebellion against Victorian morality and an affirmation of sensuality and the human body. Generally, many poets perceived dance as a "mirror for their own preoccupations" (Mester 3). In the new modern ballet of Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes*, Eliot found the realization of an artistic ideal, which combined tradition and experimental change, technical perfection and ascetic discipline. Meanwhile Crane and Williams saw in Modern Dance a more natural form of movement and the expression of an authentic, American experience. All in all, one can observe the emergence of a poetical-political aesthetics in which dance played a central role: "They saw that the substance of dance, its primitive wholeness, harked back to a simpler, less fragmented time than their own. Yet they also saw that the form of the dance, its impersonality, was modern" (Mester 156). Furthermore, the rhythmic representation of images offered a means of expressing the quest for a unity beyond intellectual logic. While the image of dance as "the most primitive, non-discursive art, […], an intuitive truth" (Kermode 4) manifests itself already during the era of Romanticism, in Modernism dance becomes the emblem of an ideal poetic image (Mester 20; Kermode 24). In addition, dance presented a means of escape, of getting "as far as possible from the intolerable reality of the world" (Symons cited in Ellis 170). As a metaphor, dance is often employed to convey cosmic harmony, the balance between polarities such as order/chaos and reality/ideal. Appearing as a connection to the divine and as a mediating force between intellect/emotion, nature/art, and death/life, it reflects both cyclical change and a desire to return to (mythical) origins; thus, it unites the search for tradition and change, for continuity and rebellion, which preoccupied dancers and poets alike.

6 To some extent dance has been a vehicle of liberation from its beginnings, yet it has also been an established tool - especially with regard to social and theatrical dance - to uphold gender politics (e.g. male dominancy) and social norms (e.g. the rule of the aristocracy). For

instance, in classical ballet we traditionally find an all-female *corps de ballet*, surrounding the principal couple, "a strong man supporting and manipulating the woman on her pedestal on pointe" (Hanna xiv). The beginning of the 20th century now saw a two-fold break away from this order. On the one hand, the male dancer emancipated himself from thDuncan did this quite literally by dancing barefoot and discarding gravity-defying techniques such as dancing en pointe. Cf. especially Duncan's lecture "The Dance of the Future" (1903), and her study "The Art of the Dance" (1928); see also André Levinson's "The Art and Meaning of Isadora Duncan" (1917). For a more personal view of Duncan's life see, for instance, Carola Stern's Isadora Duncan und Sergej Jessenin. Der Dichter und die Tänzerin (2002). e supporting part and acquired a larger spectrum of roles, including those which were previously associated with embodiments of beauty and femininity (e.g. flowers, animals, mythological figures, puppets). Nijinsky was perhaps the most important innovator and male counterpart to the female pioneers of modern dance. He can be seen as the central dancer who triggered a renegotiation of masculinity and contributed to the evolvement of an androgynous sexuality on stage. Furthermore, Diaghilev's company with dancers/choreographers like Nijinsky, Leonide Massine and Michael Fokine was "revolutionizing the traditional plot of ballet" (Lee 8). The new dramatic one-act ballets like *Le Spectre de la Rose, Narcisse, Petrushka*, or *Sacre* are examples for pieces which "made the male dancer the equal of the ballerina and established equality between the male and the female elements of the ballet" (Lieven 87). They challenged the persisting view of dance as a "frivolous 'women's' art" (Mester 1); at the same time female solo dancers like Fuller, St. Denis, and Duncan were rising to "meteoric success" (Lee 8). The rebellious impetus inspired other marginalized groups, especially homosexual men, who moved on to create "onstage new visions of themselves and their interpersonal relationship" (Hanna xv), a development which has been taken up and pushed further by many choreographers such as Bill T. Jones in the course of the 20th century.[3]

7 The female modern dancers not only rid themselves of the physical-formal restraints of classical ballet but also started to take charge of the whole creative process, i.e. choreography and management. Thus, "[w]omen were not only taking center stage; they were taking all of the stage – without any support from men" (Gamson cited in Lee 8-9). This escape from male control on and off stage marked the contribution of the early modern

[3] In particular the second half of the 20th century shows a rising dominance and self-expression of homosexual artists, prominent examples are Rudolph Nureyev or Matthew Bourne's choreographies for *AMP* which literally reverse male and female roles by having, for instance, a corps de ballet of male swans in *Swan Lake*, or a group of male mechanics in overalls instead of a female gypsy choir in *CarMen*. Especially George Balanchine's neo-classical ballet perpetuated the formation of an androgynous ideal and the celebration of an abstract dance art, while the negotiation of traditional gender roles is taken up explicitly in Pina Bausch's dance-theatre from the 1970s onwards.

dancers to women's movements of the time and prepared the way for subsequent "unisex and sex role reversal" (Hanna xv) in dance. Politically, dancers like Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, who were seen to rebel against gender codes and conventions, came to be representatives of the "New Woman" linking dance to early feminism and the gender controversies of the late Victorian era. Yet while the success of the performances of the female solo dancers was clearly implicated in social politics, both dancers and audience demonstrated conflicting, or even paradoxical attitudes towards the portrayal of femininity on stage. Deng-Huei Lee explains how they were

> perceived with anxiety and ambivalence: some viewed them as sexual commodities with questionable moral standard; some praised and worshiped them as goddesses and artists with ingenious talents. The dancers, while reacting against stereotypical assumptions about their femininity and reflecting changes in attitudes about marriage and sexuality, were at times ambiguous and capricious about their views of gender and the images of women they projected. (8)

Prominent examples for this ambiguity are Duncan and Fuller. It is significant that the latter mesmerized audiences in particular "with dances of fire, lilies, and serpents created by wielding several-feet-long draperies on a darkened stage partly illuminated by multi-color lights" (Lee 87). Animals, plants, and abstract shapes all possess a distinct sensual appeal, but do not stage the female body or sexuality explicitly. Above all, Fuller's focus was a formal, technological one. She reformed stage machinery and theatrical effects, whereas Duncan's rebellion was primarily directed against the artificiality and sterility of movement and the repression of the female body in classical ballet.

8 Returning to ancient Greek dancing as the model for her new modern art, Duncan sought to liberate the body by retrieving its connection to nature.[4] Envisioning her "Dance of the Future", she describes the new dancing woman in a way which also highlights the spiritual component of her artistic agenda: "She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman's body and the holiness of all its parts. She will dance the changing life of nature, showing how each part is transformed into the other" (Duncan 41). While she became a heralding figure of feminism because of her mission to "dance the freedom of woman" (42),

[4] Duncan did this quite literally by dancing barefoot and discarding gravity-defying techniques such as dancing *en pointe*. Cf. especially Duncan's lecture "The Dance of the Future" (1903), and her study "The Art of the Dance" (1928); see also André Levinson's "The Art and Meaning of Isadora Duncan" (1917). For a more personal view of Duncan's life see, for instance, Carola Stern's *Isadora Duncan und Sergej Jessenin. Der Dichter und die Tänzerin* (2002). This also meant the rediscovery of an uninhibited, "essential" femininity. For a more detailed discussion of the (rightfully) contested idea about the existence of any kind of core femininity (or masculinity) which can be lived out through dance (as many, especially German modern dancers believed) and a potential criticism of the modern dance movement as one towards essentialist notions of body and "authentic" feminism, see, for instance, Kolb (47ff).

she sought to achieve this via a lyrical, impersonal, style of movement which discarded concrete images. The liberation of the woman dancing meant for her to move in harmony with nature, yet not in the sense of imitating it, but as avoiding a repression of the body into an 'unnatural' state. This was reflected in her earth-bound movements and her free-flowing hair and costumes, which exposed the body more than containing it. Partially, this image of femininity appeared as in her revival of the ancient Greek aesthetic ideal of nudity, "which only censorship prevented Duncan from achieving" (Levinson 439).[5] It was met with rejection, but also scandal, excitement and fascination by a whole generation of artists in Europe and the US. Hence, Gordon Craig describes her moving "as no one has ever seen anyone move before" (cited in Hargrove 62), whereas George Whitworths emphasizes "the liberating force which sprang from the art of Isadora Duncan, whose heroic practice has done far more than any precept of philosophy to widen our ideas as to the intellectual and spiritual possibilities of the dance" (ibid 65). Many critics, among them André Levinson, stress this aspect and argue against an overtly pornographic appeal of Duncan's art, which he instead describes as almost innocently playful and being of a versatile ambiguity. He writes: "There is no tragedy. No eroticism. There is no real femininity in her essence. In her there is a simple grace, strength, the joy of youth. And this is why this artist-androgyne can be at once Orpheus and Eurydice, Narcissus and Daphne, Pan and Echo, and L'Ange avec Violon" (444). Conversely, others viewed her physicality as distinctly sexual (cf. Heppenstall 1983), which reflects the reception politics of the time as well as the distinct contrast to female ballet dancers who were traditionally de-sexualized into images of chaste, virginal purity. Considering this controversy, part of the new femininity promoted by Duncan seems to be precisely the freedom to dance between these two opposing "poles of dangerous sexuality (as temptress) and inspiring spirituality (as goddess)" (Lee 8). Actively fighting for women's rights, exposing her body and dancing "personal ecstasy" (Heppenstall 274), she pursued an artistic as well as political-educational vision of democratizing dance and its gender hierarchies.

9 Duncan's case illustrates the tensions of the time and the interconnectedness of art and politics in a nutshell: "The impulse to label women dancers' performances as either chaste or erotic was ubiquitous among critics and audiences who, conditioned by tensions between Victorian womanhood and the suffragist movement, inevitably translated the dancers' corporeal movements into political statements" (Lee 87). This also finds reflection particularly in Yeats' poems. On the other side, the modern dancers' preoccupation with

[5] An example is Duncan's performance of her solo "La Marseillaise" in Boston which caused a particular scandal; the exposure of one of her breasts on stage resulted in the cancellation of the show.

archaic ritual and the achievement of a trance-like state – the defiance of control and logic – was, as Alexandra Kolb (46) points out, actually counter-productive to the feminist agenda because it affirmed a link between femininity and irrationality. The notion of dance as pure "affect" also facilitated the charge of a, in fact, apolitical, reduction to physicality and ignored the intellectual dimensions of the female dancers. Nonetheless, the dance stage of the time was an arena for destabilizing gender identities, although it remains difficult to judge in some instances whether this had a predominantly subversive or an aesthetic function.

10 The latter is important to consider with regard to the conception of the dancer as the visual-spiritual incarnation of a new poetic ideal centred on the notion of 'impersonality'. Eliot, for instance, admired "the vital flame, that impersonal, and if you like, inhuman force" (1950, 95) in Leonide Massine, which resembles the artistic credo implicated in Yeats' perception of the female dancer as "dead, yet flesh and bone" or in Mallarmé's description of Loie Fuller as "not a woman dancing but an idea of form" (114; cf. Kermode 19). In this sense, the female dancer was often conceptualized as "*not a girl dancing*", but as a complex metaphor, "writing with her body, she *suggests* things which the written work could *express* only in several paragraphs of dialogue or descriptive prose" (Mallarmé 112; original emphasis). This abstract, detached and de-gendered perception of the dancer reflects a new aesthetics and furthermore signals a transition in dance's status as an art form. It becomes clear thatdance concentrated "in itself a good deal of the modern ideal in matters of artistic expression and the dancer, with her gesture, all pure symbol, evokes, from her mere beautiful motion, idea, sensation, all that one need ever know of event" (Symons 348). Hence, many poets perceived dance as an immediate experience and a – in comparison to verbal utterance – superior form of expression. While the body of the dancer is attributed with a symbolic power transcending its sensuality, these conceptions reverberate with the Romanticist notion of the dance as merging with nature, as "an art derived from life itself, since it is nothing more or less than the action of the whole human body; but an action transposed into a world, into a kind of *space-time*" (Valéry 55; original emphasis). Thus, the dancer appears both physically powerful and impersonally detached, as if being "from another world" (ibid 61).

11 A striking example for this perception is Nijinsky's memorable performance in *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911). In this short ballet, choreographed by Michael Fokine and itself based on a poem by Théophile Gautier, a young girl is visited in her sleep by the ghost of the rose she received at a ball that night. Nijinsky, in the role of the rose, enters the stage with a spectacular jump through the bedroom window. The mix of distinctly male virtuosity with his

costume of pale pink rose petals, evoking female beauty and softness, mesmerized the audience to such an extent that Richard Buckle claims that "[n]obody who saw Nijinsky as the rose ever got over it" (192); Nancy D. Hargrove emphasizes that it was this "aura of strangeness created by the unusual costume, in which Nijinsky appeared sexless, combined with his stunning leaps, his physical strength, and his delicacy of interpretation [which] make his performance unforgettable" (72). Generally, his performance was seen as the transfiguration, or rather, almost annihilation, of physicality and (gendered) sexuality, as his "body literally disappears in its own dance" (Rivière 118). A direct allusion to this piece, which the poet also confirms in a letter, can be found in Eliot's "Little Gidding": "It is not to ring the bell backward/ Nor is it an incantation/ To summon the spectre of a Rose." In fact, both dance imagery and the rose recur (cf. Hargrove 74) throughout the *Four Quartets*; as does the analogy between the dance(r) and a flame.[6] Quartets, can best be illustrated with a quote from "Burnt Norton". Here, we find dance at the centre of the modern, de-centred world: "At the still point of the turning world. […] there the dance is,/ […] And do not call it fixity, […] Neither movement from nor towards,/ Neither ascent nor decline. […] There would be no dance, and there is only the dance" (II, ll. 62-71).[7]

12 Generally, one can agree with Nancy D. Hargrove who argues that, "Eliot's knowledge of the dance, which seems to have begun in Paris in 1911, influenced his poetry, drama, and critical ideas far more heavily than has been generally realized" (62). In particular, Eliot's letters and performance reviews from the 1910s-20s bear testimony to his love and knowledge of dance. Although he was married to a dancer, he seemed to detest the erotic component of dance, which fascinated Yeats and Williams. Consequently, his poems do not celebrate the beauty of female dancers and their bodies, instead we find, for instance, flames (as above), dancing moths ("The Burnt Dancer") or bears ("Portrait of a Lady"), while "Whispers of Immortality" criticizes the vulgar-artificiality of the Russian ballerina "Grishkin", who exuberates the "rank feline smell" of a "brazilian jaguar", and only promises "pneumatic bliss". Yet, the poet was apparently deeply impressed by the male dancers of the *Ballets Russes*. Many images in Eliot's poems seem inspired by ballets, which are often used as synonyms for Nijinsky and his genius. While *Le Spectre de la Rose* was already one example, another are the marionettes in *Petrushka* (1911) which Valerie Eliot identifies as models for Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (cf. Epstein 273ff, Hargrove 1997, Coulter 2004). The

[6] This imagery can also be found in Paul Valéry's "*L'âme* et la danse" (1923) and Yeat's poems, e.g. in "Byzantium".

[7] Susan Jones gives an insightful in-depth analysis in her essay "'At the Still Point': T. S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism" (2009), which cannot be repeated her for reasons of space. Cf. also David Bernstein's essay "Dance in the Four Quartets" (1981) and Rodgers (1979).

ballet, which is based on a Russian folk tale telling the story of the unhappy love-triangle between a ballerina, a moor and the pierrot-puppet Petrushka (danced by Nijinsky), is the first dance piece in which an angular, mechanical movement vocabulary is introduced, and in which the male dancer appears de-humanised. Like in *The Hollow Men*, the failure of the individual to achieve any kind of existential freedom is presented in dark, haunting images (Mester 80). Similar motifs can also be found in Eliot's most famous work. In the summer of 1921, prior to completing the work on *The Waste Land*, Eliot saw the re-staged version of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. In his "London Letter", Eliot comments on the performance and expresses his hope that this piece might trigger an artistic transformation "of current life into something rich and strange" (214), which he himself achieved shortly after with *The Waste Land*.[8]

13 One can see a shared artistic vision considering the aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic parallels existing between Eliot's *Waste Land* and Nijinsky's *Sacre*. The dance piece is marked by the rhythms of Stravinsky's cruel, dissonant representation of spring and the mix between archaic sacrifice ritual and a powerful, modern movement vocabulary. Nijinsky's greatest achievement in *Sacre* lies, perhaps, in the creation of a visualizing of the "cacophonic" (Symons 122), of a new aesthetics, which fuses grace and ugliness, symmetry and distorted images and rhythms. Terri A. Mester claims that "there is an uncanny resemblance between the ballet's atavistic, dehumanized masses and *The Waste Land*'s hordes of automatons wandering aimlessly through debased rituals" (68). While it is difficult to prove or measure the exact degree of influence, *Sacre* appears, in any case, to have shown Eliot a new direction for his art. Especially the beginning of the poem employs imagery which pays homage to the ballet; the virginal victim, dancing to her death on an empty stage, surrounded by the grey masses of moving bodies, a wasteland vision which is only pierced by

> the colour of the blood-red scarf she is wearing.
> Come in under the shadow of this gray rock,
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or
> Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock:
> And I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs
> And the gray shadow on his lips. (*WL* ll. 25-30)

Apart from allusions to the setting and the virgin ("bloody cloth and limbs", "gray rock"), we also find a vocabulary inspired by movement ("sprawling", "leaping"). The lines quoted above actually stem from the opening of one of Eliot's early, unpublished, poems, "The Death

[8] *The Waste Land* was to achieve a similarly iconic status for literary history as *Sacre* did for modern choreography. It is worth to note that few modern ballets have seen so many re-stagings and new versions (for instance by Maurice Béjart, Heinz Spoerli, Pina Bausch, or John Neumeier) as *Le Sacre du Printemps.*

of St. Narcissus" (1914),[9] which was originally planned as a supplement to *The Waste Land* manuscript, but then fell under the radical editing cuts made by Ezra Pound. Still, with slight modifications, theses first seven lines found entry into Eliot's famous poem.

14 It is also interesting to consider a parallel between Elliot's use of the characters of Narcissus/Teresias in both poems and the influence of Nijinsky's genius and his tragic life-story, i.e. his decay into mental illness shortly after his marriage with Romola Nijinsky and the subsequent final break of his relationship with Diaghilev. David Bernstein, who has analyzed this in detail[10], raises the question if, "Given the uncanny thematic resemblance between the poem and the tragic story of the Russian dancer, […] are the two simply more or less contemporaneous expressions of the same devastated wasteland vision […] or was Eliot directly inspired by the Nijinsky story?" (Bernstein 197). While critics name various biblical and mythological sources for the character, it is documented that Eliot saw Nijinsky dance the title role of Fokine's ballet *Narcisse* (1911); Valerie Eliot affirms the influence of the ballet in the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*. Considering the themes and imagery in Eliot's subtle erotic poem, it seems plausible to argue that the performance inspired it (cf. Hargrove 70). In "Death of St. Narcissus" a male martyr dances a masochistic *danse macabre* in a desert, tormented by his religious guilt, fighting for abstinence against an overwhelming narcissistic love of his own shadow and physical desire. Finally he dies pierced by burning arrows, thus becoming the "dancer before God"/"He could not live men's ways". Besides the obvious religious references, significant are the masochistic-sexual connotations of the dance of the protagonist Eliot almost seems to identify with: "Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows/ He danced on the hot sand/ Until the arrows came". Vicki Mahaffey stresses that the poem expresses a "specific emotional experience" (605), telling the story of a man torn between self-eroticism and self-sacrifice, between a love of God and his love and "knowledge of his own beauty", which leads to a frantic dance culminating in death. Eliot's poem thus dramatizes "the frenzied death-wish of a tortured, sexually androgynous and narcissistic man − his desire for release, self-extinction, climax, salvation, and apotheosis" (608). The tension between sensual experience, physical lust and ascetic discipline, which characterizes the art of ballet, creates a parallel between Nijinsky's and Eliot's' artistic

[9] In 1950, 14 early poems of Eliot were published for the first time, one of which was "The Death of St. Narcissus". The facsimile version of *The Waste Land* manuscript included the full draft of this poem. Apart from Jones (2009) and Bernstein (1981), another essay which discusses the relation between dance and Eliot's poetry in great detail is Nancy D. Hargrove's "T.S. Eliot and the Dance" (1997).

[10] Cf. Bernstein, David. "The Story of Vaslav Nijinsky as a Source for T. S. Eliot's 'The Death of Saint Narcissus'" (1976); see also the essays by Vicki Mahaffey "'The Death of Saint Narcissus' and 'Ode': Two Suppressed Poems by T. S. Eliot" (1979) and Nancy R. Comley "From Narcissus to Tiresias: T. S. Eliot's Use of Metamorphosis" (1979).

visions. For both artists, religion was a shaping force and a counterbalance against the growing awareness of the horrors of the modern world and a motivation for the striving for perfection and "purity". David Bernstein goes as far as to note direct references to Nijinsky's physicality in the description of "the pointed corners" and the "almond-shaped eyes" of Narcissus and in the awareness of his own physical beauty, "his limbs smoothly passing each other", finding "his own rhythm" (85) in his dance. Although his analysis runs the risk of overstressing biographical parallels between Eliot and Nijinsky, plausible is Bernstein's argument for the poet's deep interest in Nijinsky's life and art and the suggestion to see "the tragic story of the Russian dancer as a potentially important gloss on central themes in *The Waste Land* " (104). Nijinsky, who describes himself as the "dancer before God"[11] in his diaries, spent the years from 1917-1921 in a Swiss mental institution. No longer able to cope with reality, tortured by childhood memories of the 1905 Russian Revolution, the reality of war and the break with Diaghilev, which also meant the end of his dancing career (93), he retreated permanently into schizophrenia. The sexually ambivalent protagonist of the *Narcissus* poem seems to evoke Nijinsky's tormented spirit and masculinity and his destructive, traumatic homosexual relationship with the much older Diaghilev. The figure of Narcissus/Tiresias, Bernstein argues, illustrates the sexual tension between horror and admiration, which shaped the dancer's relationship to his impresario. Whether or not one wants to follow Bernstein as far as claiming that it was composed with Nijinsky clearly in mind (79),[12] striking is, in any case, the similarity of the wasteland vision in Nijinsky's *Sacre* and Eliot's poem which both capture the contrast between the horror and ugliness of the modern world, physical beauty and spiritual transcendence.

15 As was the case for Eliot, dance formed an important medium of expression for Hart Crane. The poet had a close friendship with a *Ballets Russes* dancer, to whom he also

[11] In January 1919, Nijinsky's last public dance performance took place in a hotel in St. Moritz; already delusional, he danced the image of the crucified Christ in the bizarre solo "Marriage avec Dieu". The incident, after which he is said to have retreated permanently into schizophrenia, finally dying in a London mental institution in 1950, is described in Romola Nijinsky's book *Nijinsky. Der Gott des Tanzes* (1934). The book also partially reproduces Nijinsky's original diaries from the time.

[12] Bernstein argues polemically: "Reduced to its basic essentials, the poem is quite clearly about a dancer who because he could not live men's ways was struck mad and ended up green, dry and stained under the shadow of a gray rock. Who could this dancer have been if not Vaslav Nijinsky?" (102). He emphasizes that Eliot was well acquainted with and intrigued by Nijinsky's story which was "known to every schoolboy at the time" (ibid). As striking biographical evidence he sees Eliot's own stay for psychiatric treatment in St. Moritz, two years after Nijinsky's lapse into insanity, and the poet's homosexual affair with Jean Verdenal. According to Bernstein, these events deepened Eliot interest and insight into Nijinsky's relationship with Diaghilev, while the tragic death of his own lover also inspired the *Waste Land*. However, a draw-back of Bernstein's argument remains the lack of historical proof and, most crucially, the exact dating of the poem. Whereas Eliot could not remember when he wrote it, Ezra Pound's letters about the *Waste Land* manuscript only suggest that it was written sometime between 1919 and 1922. See also Ted Hughes' book *Dancer to God: Tributes to T.S. Eliot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993).

dedicated the poem “To Portapovitch”. A dancer and a homosexual himself, Crane rebelled against the repression of sexuality and the body in Puritan American. Hence, in his poetry dance often becomes the symbol of subversion and appears as a possibility to defy death, e.g. like the “kitten in the wilderness” in “Chaplinesque”. In “The Dance” section of *The Bridge*, Crane describes the legend of the beautiful Pocahontas against the spectacular nature backdrop of the Appalachian Mountains. The climax of the poem is the violent murder of Pocahontas’s husband, the Indian tribal chief Maquoketa, with whom Crane’s lyrical I identifies. In an ambivalent expression of his own dream of masculinity and vulnerability, the scene culminates in the scream: “Dance, Maquoketa!” Staging the cathartic experience of native American tribal dance, dance is here a symbol for a courageous battle, for ritualistic sexual union as well as for ‘being one’ with nature.

16 Significantly, as an epigraph to the subsequent section “Quaker Hill” Crane chooses the words of Isadora Duncan: “I see only the ideal. But no ideals have ever been fully successful on this earth”. The poem is full of ironic mockery of the suburban citizens who fail to perceive the world around them and who react to reality with the passivity of “cows that see no other thing”. The social criticism is intertwined with a nostalgic quest for harmony with nature; the closing image is the dance of falling autumn leaves, while the lyrical I hopes to retrieve that authentic experience and imaginative insight of “what Isadora knew”. With Duncan, who described herself as Walt Whitman’s spiritual daughter, Crane shared a rejection of the ugliness of the immediate past and present which lead him to a visionary quest for ‘new’, mythological origins and ways to express the modern experience. Throughout *The Bridge*, whose central symbolism is tied to the search for the “synthesis of America and its structural identity” (Crane in Breach 78), he aims to construct an American myth, a theme which also concerned Duncan in her dances. The creation of this myth clusters around a recurring imagery of dance and movement. Dance is employed to externalize a broad spectrum of experiences, but, above all, as apotheosis, as a means to "bridge" the (spiritual) void and to reflect and reconcile polarities, joining natural and the supernatural. In Crane’s poetry, thus, movement often assumes a liberating, almost mythical quality. The glorification of kinetic energy and Dionysian power and ecstasy, realized through dancing, is a frequent motif, which can also be found, for example, in his poem “Marriage of Faustus and Helen”.

17 It needs to be stressed that while the reciprocate inspiration between dance and poetry has a longer tradition in Europe, it is Modernism that sees a similar phenomenon in America. This is not only due to the fact that Modern dance was, in fact, the first internationally significant dance movement originating in the US. Moreover, the vision and ideas of the

pioneers of modern dance such as Duncan converge with the poets' search for a new order and an imaginative reshaping of reality. The attempt to synthesize past and present is characteristically connected to a shift away from the presentation of temporal sequence to spatial perception (e.g. images like Crane's "bridge", or railways as in Williams' "Ouverture to a Dance of Locomotives" or sea journeys as in "January Morning"). Apart from employing movement metaphors to celebrate often erotically charged 'rites of passage', the poets utilize representations of the body, space and gravity to express, 'literally', a return to earth and nature. Eager to explore dance metaphors as the non-verbal equivalent for otherwise inexpressible states, one also finds linguistic experiments, which parallel the search for a new (movement) vocabulary in Modern dance. An example is Williams' poem "Rumba! Rumba!" which ironically seeks to capture the rhythms of social dances ("Cha cha, chacha cha!", "Dance, Baby, dance/ the Cuban Rumba!"), while also criticizing the wish for the Western World's "downfall/ in an idiot mind".

18 Williams, who was also fascinated by Isadora Duncan, had a long work relationship with Martha Graham, one of the founding figures of American Modern dance. Like Crane, Williams searched in Modern dance for a 'natural' form of expression, which sprang from American soil, and which, "[l]ess elusive than ballet, […] descended deep into the unconscious to express movement which was pedestrian and plain, rather than beautiful and sublime" (Mester 128). Nonetheless, it seems that it was Nijinsky's performance of *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, which Williams saw in Paris in 1916, which inspired the figure of the satyr, dancing "naked, grotesquely" in front of the mirror in his poem "Danse Russe". While the lyrical I narcissistically admires its own body, − "shoulders, flanks, [and] buttocks" −, the view in the mirror creates a unity of artistic and spectator and an immediate link between life and art. Yet in stark contrast to the morbid dancer-martyr in Eliot's poem, Williams' satyr is "the happy genius of my household", celebrating the harmonious union with its own sensuality. Again, the satyr figure, like the rose, appears androgynous and removed from any clear male/female gendering. Regarding this scene, it is interesting to consider Heppenstall's description of the relationship between a dancer and his/her body as an analogy to the artist's (Williams') attitude towards his own process of 'creating' his object:

> The Dancer is hermaphrodite, in this. […]. His material is the field of his creative experience, is his own muscular and nervous being. And his fulfillment is in the externalized joy of movement, the release, the building up of inherent tensions into a powerful system of release. This is only true freedom. It is the kind of joy and freedom we call dancing. (Heppenstall 288)

Although the poem's title refers to the Russian ballet, its style and form are closer to Modern dance. With regard to the discarding of technical convention and expressive mode, one can see it as a reduced, "barefoot" (Mester 130) version of the English sonnet. Similarly, Mr. T. in his "soiled undershirt" in Williams' "The Artist" is an autodidactic, earth-bound dancer, far removed from the grace and the technical perfection of the dancers of the *Ballet Russes*. Generally, like Crane, Williams emphasizes the Dionysian aspect of dance, its power to induce a trance-like state, its joy and celebration of life, rather than its ethereal quality and elusive beauty. Another example is the young doctor, who is "dancing with happiness" on deck during his boat journey in "January Morning". Typically, dance is perceived as the outward expression of an inner experience. Furthermore, Williams again literally choreographs words and images; the dynamics of dance are reflected in the rhythms of the poems as well as in the visual arrangement of the words 'dancing' across the page. Another example for this technique of merging form and content is the poem "Ballet", which refers to the cyclical process of nature, i.e. the changing of the seasons, while formally imitating the whirling motion of a pirouette.

19 In fact, the distinct visual-rhythmical representation of dance characterizes Williams' poetry more than the other poets' works. A typical case in point is the following excerpt from *Kora in Hell* (1920): "Hey you, the dance! Squat. Leap. Hips to the left. Chin — ha! — sideways! […] So again! – and so forth till we are sweat soaked". Here, the syntax goes again beyond a symmetrical verse measure and alludes to the never-stopping, fluent lines of ballet as well as the cyclical power of ritual dances. The whole epic Kora poem is marked by the repetitive use of the word "dance", which becomes the expression for liberation and (personal, sexual) fulfilment. Like Crane, Williams evokes the ritualistic fertility and death dances of the Native Americans. Moreover, he explicitly connects dance, femininity, and sexuality. As Mester argues, it appears that "[w]omen and dance are dissolubly mixed in the poet's mind with the imagination" (137). Although *Kora* employs, to some extent, dance and sex as the archetypal, female principle, the imagery is varied and shows different degrees of physicality and gendered sexualization, e.g. we find naked striptease dancers alongside dancing flowers. Transcending these rather stereotypical portrayals of femininity, other poems utilize more abstract, yet personalized dance metaphors, for instance, "The Dance" where Williams employs falling snowflakes as a reflection on human relationships: "When the snow falls the flakes spin upon the long axis/ that concerns them most intimately/ two and two make a dance/". Williams frequently creates an analogy between poetry and dance as "form/ of motion". Furthermore, like in "Danse Russe", dance is often the symbol of an artistic

process which merges fragments into a, however fleeting, unity. Recurrently, Williams associates dance with the ordering of chaos and the measuring of experience into a visual-rhythmical structure. This almost cosmic dimension of dance becomes most obvious in "Heel and Toe to the End" which deals with the experience of space discovery. Referring to Einstein's 'measure' of the universe, Williams imagines Yuri Gagarin's emotions: "from all that division and/ subtraction a measure/ toe and heel/ heel and toe he felt/ as if he had/ been dancing".[13]

20 In comparison to the other poets, W. B. Yeats' fascination with dance and the pervasive use of dance imagery in his works has found more critical attention. Yeats, who was interested in all kinds of dance (e.g. Irish folk dances, ballet and modern dance), cherished dance because of its physicality, but it also became the abstract visual incarnation of his ideal "unity of being". What unites those facets is the use of dance as a symbol, which "said things which could not be said so perfectly in any other way" (Mester 32). Frank Kermode describes the dancer as "one of Yeats' great reconciling images, containing life-in-death, death-in-life, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, body and soul" (48, cf. Mester 27). While this central aspect has already been discussed with regard to the other poets, significant in this context is that Yeats creates, perhaps, the clearest link between dance and eroticism or sexual desire. The focus is often placed on the beauty of the female body, its grace and balanced proportions. Hence, his oeuvre is populated by dancing women, many of them modelled on real-life women like the Irish actress and feminist Maud Gonne. Several poems pay direct tributes to female dancers of the time. For instance, as Frank Kermode notes (11ff), we find a description of the illuminated body of Loie Fuller in her "Fire Dance" in "Byzantium", where a female dancer is "Dying into a dance/ an agony of trance/ An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve". "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" presents references to Fuller's "Chinese dancers" and to Ruth St. Denis' "Indian charm" in her solo *Radha* (1906). "His Phoenix" contains a whole catalogue of beautiful women, both real and fictional, e.g. the ballerina Anna Pavlova who from "nineteen hundred nine or ten …had the cry". Expressing a distanced uneasiness about the fleeting popularity of the female dancers − "I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day" −, Yeats' acknowledges their aesthetic achievements, their symbolic power of survival and spiritual renewal and captures the fascination of the solitary female dancer and her success. The poem combines a reflection on the passing of

[13] Terri A. Mester argues that in many of his works Williams uses an aesthetic, imaginative "measure" based on "ancient, divisions' of dance" (154) for imposing order onto the sensual world. In a letter from 1955, Williams himself explains: "Poetry began with measure, it began with the dance, whose divisions we have all but forgotten but are still known as measures. Measures they were and we still speak of their minuter elements as feet" (cited in Mester 147).

time and the evanescence of beauty with personal memories of his lover, rising like a Phoenix from the ashes in his imagination. While this poem generally contains "affirmative statement[s] about the body" (Lee 1), despite focussing on its temporariness, this contrasts directly with the rejection of human flesh in "Sailing to Byzantium" or the agonized, raped female body in "Leda and the Swan".

21 Various critics (cf. Lee, Mester, Nényei) who have traced the development of the dance emblem throughout Yeats' oeuvre see simpler meanings in his earlier and later poems compared to the more complex middle poems. Initially, Yeats' interest in dance appears motivated by patriotism as well as by a search for mythic origins. The Celtic fairies and innocent children, dancing blissfully on the Irish coast in his earlier poems (e.g. "To a Child Dancing in the Wind"), seem to fulfil a similar function as Crane's and Williams' Native American dances. These enticing females, drawing the spectator into a vortex of movement in mythical settings, give way to the sphinx-like enigmatic women of the middle poetry (e.g. "Michael Robartes and the Dancer"), often modelled on female solo dancers and political activists, like the Canadian dancer Maud Allan, who are typically presented as a cross-over between idealized *femmes fatales* and androgynous figures who have achieved the desired balance between body and mind. Arguing that the dancer undergoes a noticeable sexualisation and emancipation in his poetry, Yeats' fascination with the dancing female body is obvious from the early works. Like Eliot, he expresses a kind of "spiritual hatred embedded in sexual love" (Nényei 66) towards the dancers. Their beauty is generally perceived as dangerous and inspiring at the same time, resulting in "interlocked threads of spiritual revelation and sexual danger" (Lee 101) in his imagery. Thus, the mysterious females also acquire dynamics and power. Although the poet later assumes an increasingly bitter tone <fn>Many critics have commented on Yeats' personal struggle with old age, i.e. the loss of his youth and 'man-power', which finds repeatedly reflection in his later works. The poet, who embarked on an affair with the young actress Margot Ruddock when he was 69, also underwent the contested Steinbach operation for sexual re-juvenescence in the 1930s.</fn>, e.g. in the mocking of bodily decline in "Those Dancing are Gone" or "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers", he undeniably assigns them greater agency, beyond the admired fragility, tantalizing beauty and sexual allure.

22 Although a detailed analysis is beyond scope here, Yeats' dance imagery characteristically has political and aesthetic components. Deng-Huei Lee argues that Yeats' conceptions of body and gender where influenced by his collaborations with early modern dancers (such as Fuller, Duncan, St. Denis, or Allan) and reflect an innovative femininity,

resembling the changes initiated by the pioneers of modern dance. Hence, Yeats' dancers liberate themselves from being mere (desired, admired) objects and achieve autonomy via an assertion of presence and control comparable to "early modern dancers' assertion of independence from male dancers and choreographers" (Lee 100). To give just a few brief illustrations, in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" Yeats' alter ego Robartes encounters a beautiful dancer who challenges his masculinity with an ironic tone; she is enticing like a stereotypical femme fatale, but no longer waiting to be 'rescued' or 'possessed' by him. In "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes", the dancer expresses her self-sufficient female subjectivity even more clearly; no longer posing (like an object), she 'moves' and thus achieves the ultimate goal: "So she had outdanced thought./ Body perfection brought". Finally, in "The Phases of the Moon", the perfect, ethereal body of the dancer transforms into "a beautiful man's or woman's body". Despite the fact that the dancer is often constructed as an ambivalent, androgynous, and thus 'universal', image, many of the poems are concerned with an underlying opposition between dancer vs. intellectual (woman), between body vs. mind. So in this context Lee rightly draws attention to feminist debates concerning "the dancing body and images of women" which "are usually heated. It is especially so when they involve a male author like Yeats whose gender politics have been subject to early criticism [...] as well as to recent reconsideration and acknowledgement of their complexity" (2). Generally, Yeats' use of dance emblems both reveals and complicates ideas of gender. If one traces the evolution of his representation of dancers – from fairy child, to "androgynous, solitary bird-woman-witch dancer", to old crazy woman – one can agree with Lee that this shift "reveals a gradual dismissal of conventional male authored sylphs and fairies in favour of more innovative female roles partly resembling those created by the trailblazers of early modern dance" (153). Still, with regard to the artistic dictum of impersonality described above, this raises the question if the female dancers, are to some extent denied subjectivity. Especially if their symbolic power is (over)emphasized by (male) artistic imagination, this potentially risks leading to a suppression of the female body which is "simultaneously elevated and relegated to a moving sign that occupies an uneasy and problematic territory in between the physical, symbolical, and male fantasy worlds" (Lee 4). Another problem, at a first glance, is the association of dance as a state of perfection, both physical and spiritual, which appears removed from political agency or 'realistic' expression. Nonetheless, one does not do Yeats (or any of the other poets) justice by rejecting their use of dance metaphors as a de-individualization of the female dancer as "a silent spectacle for male consumption" (ibid). The constant focus on the female body leads to a physical presence which signals a paradigm

change. Seeing that the female body dominates many of the poems and, literally, strives to take centre stage, one can indeed argue that poets like Yeats aided the pioneering agenda "to debunk the Victorian mindset of chastising the (female) body and relegating it to marginal cultural space" (ibid 4-5).

23 In "Among School Children", only the dancer escapes the fate of turning into an "old scarecrow", as she has achieved the balance of body and thought. Yeats' lyrical I, reflecting again on the passing of time and the evanescence of beauty utters the famous ambiguous ending lines: "Oh body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?" While dance itself appears as a recurring metaphor for beauty, spirituality, artistic ideal, or immortality, it is also connected to ambivalent and complex constructions of gender. Possible closure is offered by Eliot, for whom "there is only the dance", while Williams claims: "only the dance is sure!/ make it your own". Without arguing that dance is the key to the interpretation of modernist poetry, it seems, indeed, that "our understanding of these works would be poorer if we ignored it" (Nényei 10). Additionally, to borrow Lee's words again, as they hold true for the dance imagery in the works of all four poets discussed above: "Spinning and moving in between the realms of masculine and feminine, sexual and spiritual, life and death, [...] [these] dancers challenge our interpretations of the body and gender" (100).

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