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Crossing into Otherness—Outlanding Woolf

Comptes rendus/Reviews

Susan JONES, *Literature, Modernism & Dance*

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Texte intégral

- 1 In a ground-breaking analysis, Susan Jones studies the impact of dance on modernist writers, an understudied field. Dance itself has been relatively neglected in modernist studies as the 2014 issue of *Modernist Cultures* edited by Carrie Preston has recently shown¹ and the relations between dance and modernist literature have only begun to be explored. In her work, Jones gratifies the reader with an insider's point of view and shows how crucial the role of dance has been in the early twentieth-century; far from being a mere peripheral art, dance, through its radical innovations and the bodily movement and freedom it promoted, offered modernist writers "a way of thinking about their practice" (11).
- 2 Jones first establishes the literary and philosophical genealogy of the innovations introduced by choreographers and dancers in the pre-war period. She points out how much they were indebted to literature, especially to Mallarmé's poetry, which was itself inspired by Loïe Fuller's dancing. The philosophy of Nietzsche, which is often said to have found its way in modernist writing, is also shown here to have deeply influenced dance, Isadora Duncan's Greek style, her quest for Dionysian ecstasy and more generally, the dissonance of modern (music and) dance. A whole range of expressionist



practices (physical health programmes, Greek dance, nude dancing and non-balletic methods of dance) developed, amongst them, Dalcroze's Eurythmics, which had an extraordinary impact on literature and first of all, on D. H. Lawrence's fiction, as well as Rudolf Laban's theories, which also reached Britain through Kurt Joos's *Tanztheater* or Ninette de Valois's dance teaching and choreography in the 1930s.

3 Jones addresses the impact the Ballets Russes had in London. From 1911 onwards, most London artists attended Diaghilev's Ballets which came to them as a 'revelation', in Leonard Woolf's own words: Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Rupert Brooke as well as Dorothy Richardson, Aldous Huxley, Richard Aldington, the Sitwells, Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot or Arnold Bennett went to see them and wrote about them in their diaries, autobiographies or letters. They admired the performance, its physical exuberance and sensuality which came to them as 'the apotheosis of the Body Beautiful' (Jones 98).

4 The impact dance had on modernist literature is then examined as well as the role dance plays in modernist fiction. Jones shows how familiar Woolf was with dance, following Diaghilev's work from 1911 to his death and later supporting the Camargo Company. It is therefore not surprising that dance should have found its way in her work, not only through open or submerged references to Nijinsky's performances (in *The Years*, for example) and other contemporary ballets but also as a model for creation. Jones focuses especially on the text as choreography in *The Waves* and traces the motif of dance in *The Voyage Out*, its syncopated effects, the bodily experience it permits. Although the parallels between dance and writing are sometimes a little far-fetched, this chapter is often enlightening.

5 Jones then turns to Conrad and Garnett. Moving away from accounts of primitivism in dance that refer exclusively to the *Sacre* and Ballets Russes, she shows what primitivism in dance owes to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visions of the body. Focusing on the vibrant movement of the African woman and expatiating on the 'discordant concordance' of the narrative, she gives an enlightening reading of *Heart of Darkness*. Jones also analyses Andrée Howard's ballet *The Sailor's Return* (1947), an adaptation of David Garnett's 1925 novel of the same name, based on Richard Burton's 1864 anthropological account of Dahomey and descriptions of African dance, pointing at the ambiguities of modernist literature and dance as regards race and gender, both Conrad and Garnett 'gesturing to recent anthropological accounts but [...] falling back on conventional tropes that reflected Western anxieties about "the other" and, in particular, the female "other"' (178).

6 A reevaluation of Leonide Massine's role in modernist dance follows. Because accounts of twentieth-century dance tend to sever modernist dance from its predecessors, Massine's transitional role between nineteenth- and twentieth-century dance has often been undervalued. Massine was also a relentless innovator who collaborated with Cocteau, Picasso and Satie for *Parade* (1917), who was invited to succeed Nijinsky and went on creating new ballets for companies in Monaco, the United States and South America after Diaghilev's death.

7 Jones also explores Ezra Pound's little-known reviews of the Russian Ballet in *New Age* in 1919, which reveal his sensitivity to their aesthetics, especially to the impersonality of their movement and their 'mechanical' representation of puppets (in Massine's choreography for mechanical dolls) in keeping with his later appreciation of the 'machine art' of George Antheil's music. Pound's interest in movement, dance, and (mechanical) rhythm thus meets his interest in the energy of poetic language and form, which in turn echoes some of Dalcroze's and Laban's concerns. Pound's work unexpectedly appears to be closely connected with the world of modern dance.

8 Jones reveals how important the Russian dancer and choreographer Leonide Massine and his ability to symbolize emotion through abstract gesture, together with the British choreographer Antony Tudor in the 1930s have been for T.S. Eliot and how in turn, Eliot's work crossed the Atlantic and merged into choreographic experimentation in the United States, from Martha Graham's work to May O'Donnell's *Suspension* and even, Todd Bolender's later *The Still Point* (1955). Eliot's depiction of dance in *Burnt*

Norton (1936) as 'a still point', an active stillness that is a fine equilibrium of physical and intellectual states, is understood as gesturing towards the modernist sublime and connecting poetry and dance.

9 Jones finally broaches the relation between dance and drama. Arguing that critics have often missed the significance of choreography in Samuel Beckett's work, she shows that Beckett's interest in movement in his late work may well stem from modern dance forms of the early twentieth century, the choreography of Fokine and Schlemmer, the dramaturgy of the puppet and the mechanical figure; it may have in turn contributed to the later debate about mechanical, technological and human movement in Robert Wilson or Merce Cunningham's work.

10 On the whole, this book combines a wide knowledge of the history of dance in the twentieth century with a very fine grasp of the literature of the time and offers new perspectives on dance, modernism and modernist literature. The author uses her own experience of dance and draws both on new material and the criticism that already examined the links between some writers like Eliot and dance while revising some conclusions, pointing out, for instance, how innovative dance was in the early twentieth century and what it owed to *fin-de-siècle* tradition. Most challenging are the geographical transmissions the history of dance reveals as well as the multiple connections dance developed with the other arts. This extremely rich, well-documented work provides scholars with most valuable information and opens a whole field of research which is far from being fully explored.

Notes

1 Carrie J. Preston, ed., *Modernist Cultures*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014.

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Articles du même auteur

Catherine Bernard commente *Mrs Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 31 | 2006

Image as Text in Leonard Woolf's 'Quack, Quack in Politics' [Texte intégral]

L'image comme texte dans 'Quack, Quack in Politics' (1935) de Leonard Woolf

Paru dans *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 31 | 2006

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Virginia Woolf's Dischronic Art of Fiction in her Essays [Texte intégral]

Les Essais de Virginia Woolf: un art dischronique de la fiction.

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Paru dans *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 33 | 2008

ROSENBAUM S.P. (edited and introduced by), *Virginia Woolf. The Platform of Time* [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 33 | 2008

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