

Learning anew from old dance books

What may we learn of new from old reprinted dance books? Counter-intuitively, how to think dance contemporarily. If modern dance is the art that most vividly expresses the corporeal consequences of the kinetic drive propelling aesthetic modernism and its ideologies, then dance books of the early 20th century offer crucial contributions to theories of how the aesthetic, the political, the affective, and the bodily intersect in live performance – including in contemporary ones.

Take for instance the writings of the German expressionist choreographer Mary Wigman. In 1963, at the age of 77, Wigman published in Germany *Die Sprache des Tanzens*, translated barely three years later into English and published by Wesleyan University Press as *The Language of Dance*. In the opening paragraph of the chapter titled “The Forms of Dance,” Wigman articulated what the contemporary reader will easily identify as a surprisingly up-to-date understanding of the ontology of dance. What were the elements of that ontology? Wigman described them with the analytical rigor only a practitioner has in regards her art. First, she placed dance in the general field of “live performance.” By doing so, Wigman defined dance not through specific movement styles or technique schools, but by the main constitutive traits of live performance: to be “limited in time and bound to movement.” Then, from live performance’s temporal-kinetic limitations and boundaries, Wigman derived three major non-kinetic compositional elements. First: once a dance is over, it “vanish[es].” Therefore, to make dances is always to create ephemerality. Second: by vanishing, dance “dissipate[s] and fade[s] from the eyes of the spectator” becoming “an image of memory.” Therefore, ephemerality bypasses visibility and invests in what, thirty years later, performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan, in her famous essay, “The Ontology of Performance: representation without reproduction” will call the non-economic, non-regulated realm of memory (Phelan 1993: 148). Third element: in the event a dance is filmed, photographed, or somehow registered, that documentation is but what Wigman called

the “weakened repetition” of merely “scenic sequences” (Wigman 1966 [1963]: 16). Wigman’s anticipation of Phelan’s terms provides today’s dance scholarship with a powerful theoretical insight: performance documents are but weak repetitions of the live event because they lack the political force that *disappearance as condition of futurity*, and *memory as condition of action*, bring to dance (and therefore to live performance).

Thus, all of a sudden, a book whose reprinting we might believe to be relevant only to specialized historiographical approaches; a book we might quickly dismiss as being an anachronistic document of a long gone choreographic sensibility, starts to perform otherwise: it provokes us, it addresses us, right here and now, face to face, contemporaneously. And provoke us to do what? To rewrite; to reconsider. Not only to rewrite dance history, but to reconsider the extemporaneous timing of modern dance’s constitutive theoretical drive. The off-hinged timing of danced-based theory turns the reprinting of old dance books from being a mere documental “weakened repetition” of a supposedly dead past, into the higher power that only strong repetition can offer: the affirmation of an eventful potentiality in what returns. Here, we would have to take Jorge Luis Borges’ tale “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” as exemplary method. In Borges’ short story, the fictional character Pierre Menard undertakes the task of re-writing the entirety of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. After decades of attempts, the goal is finally achieved: “The Cervantes text and the Menard text *are verbally identical*, but the second is almost infinitely richer” (Borges 1998 [1937]: 94, emphasis mine). This richness drips from every reprinted word in this collection.

What we learn from reading old dance books is how contemporary understandings of live performance have a long theoretical lineage. We learn that choreography names not only systems of movement notation and composition, but names a long literary tradition coming from dance itself. A tradition produced and sustained by generations

upon generations of dancers and choreographers who not only danced, and taught, and choreographed, but who also wrote profusely.

The whole genre of dance books written by dancers and choreographers undermines current narratives that insist that dance can only find its true aesthetic identity once it is able to sever itself from writing and language. This narrative is countered by an incontrovertible historical fact: there is no great choreographer, there is no great dancer, who is also not a great writer. Georges Noverre, Carlo Blasis, August Bournonville, to mention the classics. Isadora Duncan, Anna Sokolow, Rudolph von Laban, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, to mention the moderns. Closer to us, the extraordinary writings of Bill T. Jones, Simone Forti, Ralph Lemon, Ishmael Houston Jones, BB Miller, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, and so many others, are essential to consider how dance has many modes of existing – including as text.

Hence, the great choreographers and dancers whose writings helped invent and disseminate dance's modernism, and whose books are now being reprinted in this series: Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, Ted Shawn, Hanya Holm and Jane Sherman. Reading their books anew, one cannot but say: those great modern dancers and choreographers remain great theorists of dance's relation to, and participation in, the invention of aesthetic modernism. Their books, their thoughts, their words, continuously redefine choreography beyond the parameters choreography is usually confined to.

The reissuing of these firsthand accounts of the formation of the modernist sensibility in North American theatrical dance also reveals an unexpected paradox. One exquisitely described by Doris Humphrey in a text whose ironic clarity could not be more expressive of how modernism was always already escaping the confines of its putative self-containment. In a fragment titled "Significance in the Dance Versus Literature," Humphrey notes, with a certain irritation: "The thought of *significant* dancing perplexes

the modern mind” (Humphrey 1998 [1937]: 58). Impatient with those who will not expect from dance anything significant, anything that truly matters, and thus confine dance to “simple conceptions of the beautiful,” Humphrey proceeds to paradoxically *embrace literature* as model for the creation of a much needed *complex art*, while at the same time *rejecting literature* as thematic source for a desired *complex dance*.

Literature becomes a template for complex and significant art, including a complex and significant dance, but only if dance does not become illustrative of literary themes, but draws from literature a certain aesthetic force.

This double pull, this two way street, that Humphrey makes explicit in her writing, help us identify how dance’s modernism is built right at the crux of a generalized paradoxical movement: notions of kinetic autonomy, of the primacy of movement, are discursively constructed by Humphrey in and through *heteronomy*: i.e., by drawing from the complex and “significant” model of literature. Dance’s paradoxical relation to writing and literature implies one more factor, the irony of which could not escape the choreographer as writer: only through a rhetorically sophisticated (albeit always extremely clear and empirically bound) theoretical dance writing, only through a becoming-writer of the dancer, could dance advocate for its (extra-linguistic) modernist autonomy.

So, one last time: what can we learn of new from old dance books? Certainly, a kind of epistemic humility: an overdue acknowledgment of the intellectual, biographical, historical, testimonial, political, aesthetic, and theoretical work written down by generations of dancers and choreographers that preceded us and yet wrote *for us*. But also, a kind of artistic ambition: an overdue acknowledgement of dance’s constant desire to exist as dance beyond the ephemeral form, a drive to set movement elsewhere, on the body of books, those singular and fugitive partners in the virtual flights of choreographic imagination.

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