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Literature, Modernism, and Dance

by Susan Jones. 2013. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. x + 346 pp., 22 illustrations, bibliography, index. $89.00 cloth.
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In her richly researched and theoretically sophisticated study, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*, Susan Jones seeks to redress a still-surprising lacuna in modernist studies. The burgeoning scholarship on modernism across the arts, which has experienced an exciting methodological boom in the past two decades, has nevertheless only begun to research in a concerted way the multidirectional interactions of modernist writing with the aesthetics, performance history, and major figures of modern dance. Reflecting—among other factors—the relatively recent development of dance studies as an institutionalized academic discipline, the gnarly problems of the archive of historical dance performance, and the difficulties for non-dance-practitioners to acquire a critical "vocabulary" for writing about dance, the new modernist studies, otherwise intrepid in its reach, has left the relations of literature and dance in a distinctly subordinate place in its ever-widening field of inquiry.

Jones's timely book should challenge modernist scholars to take a new look at this important topic. Her wide-ranging treatment moves from dance in the proto-modernist aesthetics and poetics of Nietzsche and Mallarmé and their reciprocal influence on early modernist dance practitioners, through the influence of dance on major modernist writers such as W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, to modernist literary strains in later twentieth-century choreography and choreographic tendencies in the theatrical works of Samuel Beckett, with an impressive catalogue of lesser-known characters, encounters, and exchanges in between. Any one of her twelve main chapters might represent an ambitious topical bite into the literary and dance history and aesthetic theory of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That she has taken on such an encompassing scope of topics between the covers of a single book makes it a daring, field-opening study indeed.

As is befitting such a rich body of material, Jones's approach to her subject matter is similarly multidimensional. First, she offers throughout a thick literary and dance historical account of a number of direct, documentable relations between modernist literary figures (or works) and those of modern dance. These include a plethora of biographical and what we might call, in a very broad construal of the term, "intertextual" relations between modernist writing and dance spanning several decades: dance criticism by modernist writers, references to dance works or dancers in literary or theoretical work, writers' contributions of libretti for dance pieces, meetings and friendships between literary and dance artists, attendance by modernist writers at particular dance performances, quotation of modernist literary works in choreographers' notebooks and diaries, and choreographers' adaptation of modernist writing for dance works.

A second dimension of Jones's approach steps back from the need to establish positive factual documentation of direct "influence" in favor of a looser, but still relatively close, parallelism between the aesthetics of modernist writers and those explicitly formulated or implicitly exemplified by modern dancers, choreographers, and their works. Her critical methodology here is to propose a set of suggestive analogies between the imagery, structure, embodied movement, relation to narrative, and so on, in modern dance and the innovative stylistic and formal approaches of modernist writers. Though not fully formulated in the book, Jones deploys an implicit notion of a generalized milieu of modernity operating as the background for these analogies and resonances, motivating as meaningful a variety of seemingly fortuitous sharing of features across artistic media or between figures (who may or may not have had direct contact) and offering inter-artistic hermeneutic tools for illuminating fresh aspects of works of both literary and dance modernism.

Situated somewhere in between these two dimensions is a third approach that focuses on the special status of modern dance for

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modernist writers and intellectuals, which derives from the shared centrality of issues of embodiment, the limits of language, non-verbal expression, and movement, both in the practice of modern dance and in the concerns of modernist writers. Here, Jones's evidentiary basis is no longer either the archival fact demonstrating direct connection nor the critical analogy illuminating new aspects of the two media, but rather an identification of topical spaces within modernist discourse where dance possessed status as an *exemplum.* Modern dance, Jones suggests, seems to carry for modernist writers a special capacity for exemplarity—a unique power to capture in its moving images a broad span of modernist interests, from philosophical and theoretical ideas, to ideologies and social views, to formal and aesthetic conceptions with innovative implications when translated across artistic media. As Jones writes, "I present dance as possessing a structural dynamic, a quality that not so much *illustrates* the aesthetic concerns of the writers of this period, but rather offers them a way of thinking about their practice, about forms of creativity and the troubling issue of creative authority" (11).

In any given chapter, and between her major chapters, Jones shifts between these approaches in a prismatic fashion that encompasses both crisply defined relations between literary and dance modernism and softer, more blurry zones of overlap as well (as if taking inspiration from Virginia Woolf's splendid image of her character Sara Pargiter "netted with floating lights from between the leaves"). In fact, one cannot help feeling that Woolf might have provided the compositional model for the choreographic patterning of Jones's book, in which argumentative motifs emerge, disappear, and reappear across the chapters in complex ways. Reflexively, with respect to her overall argument, Jones argues that the possibility of deploying concrete, embodied, rhythmic logics as a way of organizing a text was one of the key lessons that modern dance offered to writers of the period. She appears to have taken this lesson to heart and have sought to apply it to the articulation of her critical history as well, echoing Woolf's challenge to conventional historiography in a number of instances: in narrating the multifaceted and changing role of the Ballet Russes throughout several chapters of the book; in tracing the shifting allegiances of various Bloomsbury writers; in mapping the movement of modernist writing and choreographers in a reversible transatlantic space of cultural and artistic translation; and in accounting for the nodal status of figures such as Martha Graham, Léonide Massine, and Marie Rambert in the network of modernist dance/literature relations. Admittedly, such a multivalent organization of the material may also pose challenges for the more casual or instrumental reader, who might find the progress of the argument or treatment of any given topic from time to time disorienting. Though individual chapters of Jones's book might be dipped into separately by a reader mostly interested in, for instance, Yeats, Pound, or Beckett, or, alternatively, in Massine or post–World War II British choreographers, in many cases one chapter's arguments refer backward and forward to material and topics treated elsewhere in the book, limiting the autonomy of the individual chapter. Jones has given us a book genuinely intended to be read as a whole; as such, it amply rewards the effort.

The material scope of *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* is too broad for a chapter-by-chapter discussion here in the space of a review. In what remains, therefore, I would like to highlight just one topical thread of Jones's argument, woven through several chapters, which seems to me particularly important to tease out further. Jones's basic argument is emblemized by one of her chapter titles, "From Dance to Movement" (which focuses specifically on Eurhythmics and *Ausdrucktanz*). As she explains, in the early decades of the twentieth century,

> A whole range of movement forms and practices became a frequent hallmark of modernist expression. ... A Dionysian impulse, expressing both physical freedom and struggle, helped to deconstruct the boundaries of what might be called exclusively "dance," and to give rise instead to a far broader category of "movement," irrespective on any performative quality associated with it. ... The umbrella term of *Körperkultur*, or body culture, demonstrating in all its forms a new perception of the physical, emerged simultaneously with developments in anthropology,

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> psychology, and psychoanalysis, and aimed to release from repression various unconscious and formerly unexpressed drives and desires. The privileging of atavistic qualities of movement also uncovered the latent connection between physical movement and ancient ritual. (75–6)

This is, of course, hardly a surprising historical claim for scholars of modern dance, performance, or body culture, who have studied how in the twentieth century the relevant field of "choreographed" movement vastly expands, reaching far beyond dance into such areas as rituals, health and fitness practices, sport, corporal-spiritual disciplines such as yoga, erotic spectacles and practices, choral recitations, revue culture, and much more. But the implications of the emergence of a broad concept of "movement" for modernist *aesthetics* are highly significant, because this development helps to account for the potential that dance possessed to function as an *exemplary* model art form for other modernist arts, especially including, perhaps, literature.

This point is most easily grasped by reference to the parallel role of the visual arts, which are universally acknowledged to have catalyzed broader modernist and avant-garde transformations within the arts in the twentieth century. If we grant Jones's argument, dance may have possessed an analogous potential to inspire innovation across the other arts during the modernist moment. In *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry De Duve suggests in the first decades of the twentieth century that Marcel Duchamp announced, with his provocative readymades, an emergence out of the visual arts that would only come to full fruition later, in the 1960s: the positing and practical realization of a notion of "art in general" or "art at large," in which a vast, open set of objects and practices could now potentially be nominated as art, and also, by virtue of this expansion of the domain of potential artworks, the recognition that "art" was no longer necessarily coterminous with a special, limited sort of experience thought to be "aesthetic" (for instance, the experience of beauty) (De Duve 1966). The lines between art and general "culture," between "aesthetic" and everyday experience, had grown blurrier and more complicated, once the readymade had been introduced and accepted into the art world. Indeed, "after Duchamp," De Duve suggests, even a term such as "visual arts," much less the *beaux-arts* differentiation according to media and genre, becomes increasingly untenable. He writes, "It had become legitimate to be an artist without being either a painter, or poet, or a musician, or a sculptor, novelist, architect, photographer, choreographer, filmmaker, etc. A new 'category' of art appeared—art in general, or art at large—that was no longer absorbed in the traditional disciplines." (De Duve 1966, 375)

Although Jones does not make this association completely explicit, in referencing the shift from dance to "movement," she is describing an analogous process of artistic generalization of choreographed performance across the course of the twentieth century. Just as Duchamp represents for De Duve the genealogical starting point of the development of "art in general" in the 1960s, so too, her account of modernist dance's reach towards a sort of "movement in general" or "movement at large" inaugurates a longer, twentieth-century development, which, in fact, she argues culminates in the late work of Samuel Beckett. Accordingly, in Beckett's unclassifiable "choreographed" works of the 1960s onward, such as *Quad*, *Not I*, *Breath*, *Footfalls*, and *What Where*—as well, one might add, in his late prose works in which the body functions in analogous ways, such as *The Lost Ones*, *Worstward Ho*, and *Ill Seen Ill Said*—the message sent decades earlier by Fuller, Diaghilev, and Graham on one side and Mallarmé, Yeats, Woolf, and Pound on the other finally arrives, to be read out loud. In the late works of Beckett, we might conclude, the epoch of modernist "graphy"-at-large, and artistic writing-in-general, whether of the programmed dance of the body, hand, voice, or mind, now takes on its fully achieved form.

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