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Author: Marina Ragachewskaya

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REVIEW ESSAY

# D. H. LAWRENCE AND DANCE

MARINA RAGACHEWSKAYA

**Rishona Zimring, *Social Dance and the Modernist Imagination in Interwar Britain.***
**Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013.**
**Pp. 234. £60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 1 4094 5576 9**

**Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism and Dance.***
**Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.**
**Pp. 360. £55.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 1995 6532 0**

Academic interest in dance as an art form and, specifically, as a medium of modernism has been reinvigorated in recent years by a growing recognition of dance as an ekphrastic device and literary subject that urgently demands a more precise methodology. The theme of D. H. Lawrence's relationship to dance was pioneered by Mark Kinkead-Weekes in his 1992 article 'D. H. Lawrence and the Dance', then reinforced by Elgin W. Mellown's 'Music and Dance in D. H. Lawrence' (1997), but no significant publications followed until the 2010s.[1] The appearance of recent new studies of dance that include Lawrence testifies, if not to a gap in scholarship, then to an opportunity to pave a fresh approach to Lawrence's textual richness, particularly in its use of other art forms.

The recent monographs by Rishona Zimring and Susan Jones reviewed here capture dance and modernist writing in broad terms, and, like Carrie Preston's earlier *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (2011), they do so extensively, generously and passionately.[2] Preston's most recent contribution – as the guest editor of a special issue of the journal *Modernist*

*Cultures* on 'Modernism and Dance' (2014) – provides further proof of current academic enthusiasm about interdisciplinary approaches to modernist literature and dance.[3] Diaghilev's riotous staging of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, as Preston aims to show, stands as a cornerstone of the notion of transcendence in modernist aesthetics, blending the "primitive" and "pristine" with the highly skilled and modernised. *The Rite* in this context is presented as "emblematic for the new modernist studies"; accordingly, it receives much attention in Jones's study, although, as we will see, staged performances like this one are not central to Zimring's innovative exploration of "social dance".[4]

Both Zimring and Jones offer focused, thorough and methodologically consistent approaches to dance as a complex phenomenon that encapsulates the modernist spirit of transition, movement and flux, pivotal for the understanding of the post-war spirit of depression and revival, and concurrent with the "globalisation" of many artistic phenomena, such as the Ballet Russes, jazz, and eurythmics. The central thesis of Zimring's study is the ambiguous yet decisively progressive role of social dance in interwar Britain for the advance of modernism, albeit understood very broadly. It is not only dance itself as a social entertainment form which is the focus of the study, but its redefinition, reconsideration and problematisation by such authors as Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and T. S. Eliot. However, the book looks beyond literary texts (novels, short stories and poems) to a much wider array of materials: paintings, films, memoirs, a ballet production and documentary texts.

Each chapter looks at a different facet of social dance, moving "chronologically from the middle of the Great War … [to] the early years of World War II' (22). Though the characteristics of social dance in interwar Britain are diverse and at times eschew exactitude, a key definition given by Zimring in her introduction is of "everyday, non-theatrical dancing in couples and groups: participatory social dance as opposed to performed art dance" (5).

She therefore aims to redirect attention from the Ballet Russes and female soloists like Isadora Duncan towards the ubiquitous dancing "at parties in private homes, in commercial spaces such as dance halls and nightclubs, in non-commercial public spaces such as streets, parks, and greens, and in institutional spaces such as schools, clubs, and hospitals" (1). A whole range of characteristics and attributes is attached to the phenomenon of social dance, together with an exhaustive cultural and historical background, beginning with the nation's re-emergence from the spiritual wounds inflicted by World War I, when dancing is simultaneously "a form of celebration, a symptom of trauma, and an expression of longing, an activity bound up with desires for stability, coherence, group identity, erotic excitement, and renewed vigor and vitality" (4).

It is well argued by Zimring that Lawrence's consciousness underwent a massive transformation in the war years. Drawing mainly on his letters she relates his wartime experiences in Cornwall to his reluctance to integrate into social groups, as exemplified by his escapist project of Rananim and his passionate response to Mark Gertler's *Merry-Go-Round* (1916). Zimring emblematizes Gertler's painting as a metaphoric representation of social leisure and dance as loathed pastimes during the war and post-war years that accords with Lawrence's own loathing, contempt and suspicion of groups gathering in purpose-built halls and houses for dancing at parties (and that was shared, to some extent, by Katherine Mansfield, who briefly joined the Lawrences in Cornwall and makes for an interesting comparison with Lawrence in the chapter 'Couples and Flirts: Dance After War in Lawrence and Mansfield'). Lawrence proposes instead that couples should break free from social conventions and group constrictions to dance in self-absorbed, defiant and contented opposition to the group; an ideal that he asserts primarily in his novels *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover.*

Zimring reads *Women in Love* as a novel that "leans heavily on scenes of social dance to give it structure", going so far as to assert the overriding importance of a "triptych" of such scenes in the

text's architectonics (68). In the first of these scenes, at the house party at Breadalby, Gudrun, Ursula and the Contessa perform a Ballet-Russes-like version of the Biblical story of Ruth, Naomi and Orpah. In the second, Gudrun dances naked in front of a herd of cattle, which is interpreted metaphorically as a group, and the interruption of Birkin's grotesque form of step-dance adds, perhaps, the participatory component from Zimring's broad definition of social dance. Finally, the scene at the Alpine hotel is rightly interpreted as a traditional folk dance to follow the previous two scenes of "fashionable ballet and Dalcroze eurythmics" (72). Zimring's commentary on these scenes asserts the symbolic power of a couple breaking away from a controlling group. Hermione's "desire to control the proceedings" (69) by staging a fashionable ballet is subverted by the fragmentation of the group into couples who take up different styles of dancing. The second scene, though stretching the definition of what can be considered as social dancing, is analysed by Zimring as Lawrence's ironical treatment of social courtship rituals and "herd mentality" (72). Finally, Birkin and Ursula emerge as "a victorious couple" from the "confusion" and "boisterous turmoil" of Tyrolese dance (72), a "crisis" that liberates them while catalysing "the disintegration of Gudrun's and Gerald's pairing" (73).

Zimring reinforces her argument about the triumph of the dancing couple with an analysis of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which posits Lawrence's preoccupation with social dance as a clear-cut binary opposition between group entertainment and the "intimate dancing of the couple" (76). Overall, however, this line of argument serves an internal purpose of the book, since although Lawrence's challenges to participatory group dancing are judiciously targeted and substantiated within the limits necessary to make a single point, no account is given of Lawrence's much greater "obsession" with ritualistic dance in works like *The White Peacock*, *The Plumed Serpent* and *The Woman Who Rode Away*. And, indeed, the latter

finds a place in a different argument in the other book reviewed here.

Susan Jones's study of "the reciprocal relationship between literature and dance … [as] one of the most striking but understudied features of modernism" sets out to explore the remarkable "scale of interaction between the two art forms during this period" (1). Accordingly, its focus turns to the aesthetic rather than the social aspects of dance and how in a "climate of anxiety about language the figure of the dancer emerged as a provocative and suggestive emblem" (3). The Introduction richly presents the close interweaving of such figures as Loïe Fuller and Stéphane Mallarmé, W. B. Yeats, Friedrich Nietzsche and Isadora Duncan, Diaghilev and Cocteau, Nijinsky and Woolf and Lawrence. These associations and influences are reciprocal, which Jones proves through references to literary texts. The major concerns of the book group around Diaghilev's controversial but influential production *The Rite of Spring* (1913, 1920 and onwards). Thus three chapters out of twelve focus on *The Rite*, supported by the necessary preliminary discussion of the philosophical background to the dichotomy of the elegant and aggressive, sublime and primitive raging through the performance and extending into such movements as Expressionism and Futurism.

Jones elaborates on the possibility of the "inward expression of transcendence" that new developments in European dance offered to the audience and also to writers, contributing to their "post-romantic expressions of a modernist sublime" (3). But more than this, each chapter separately explores the "intimations of conflict, dissonance, physical abandonment", and the overlapping of the primitive and choreographic, as variously represented in literature, philosophy and dance itself. As regards the choreographic, the book thoroughly explores the important influence of Léonide Massine, while Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are notable for their restructuring of the "mechanistic" in the dance. A further merit of this study is to take the exploration of the dance beyond the 1930s and to extend it to dramatic dance, for example in the plays of Samuel Beckett.

The chapter which includes Lawrence's relationship to dance – 'Two Modern Classics: *The Rite of Spring* and *Les Noces*' – pays much more attention to the ballet productions themselves than to literary texts, which is justifiable, perhaps, given the book's firm focus on dance as a driving force of modernist aesthetics. However, the literary parallels with the astonishingly innovative ballet performance of ancient Russian folklore – "the archetypal modernist rewriting of the primitive" (110) – deserve the attention that Jones begins to map out here. For Jones what unites Diaghilev's disturbing version of the sacrificial rite and Lawrence's novella *The Woman Who Rode Away*, for instance, is the sacrificial ritual involving a young woman given by the tribe to gods as a pledge of the community's safeguarded well-being. Though there is no evidence that Lawrence attended this ballet production in any of the versions choreographed by either Nijinsky or Massine, Jones insists on the narrative of *The Woman Who Rode Away* "echoing" the anthropological themes of primitivism in *The Rite*. The only circumstantial hints of Lawrence's familiarity with the Russian ballet occur in two texts that Jones refers to (112–3): in *Women in Love* Hermione endeavours to stage a dance in the style of Pavlova and Nijinsky (as also discussed in Zimring's study) and in the essay 'The Hopi Snake Dance', where Lawrence compares dance as a spectacle and dance as an individual expression of the body's liberation. Jones enthusiastically takes up Lawrence's comparison as an impetus for drawing parallels between *The Rite* and *The Woman Who Rode Away*.

However suggestive or "unconscious" the parallels may seem, Jones asserts the similarity of the visual and dramatic structures in the two works as a shared choreographic emphasis on "blocks" of colour, setting and mood that shape a series of scenes rather than a coherent plot narrative. Other perceived similarities concern the impersonal state of the "Chosen One" (in both cases), the triumphant dance of the group and the "pulsating rhythms" of the ballet and the novella. But Jones's otherwise interesting and

insightful interdisciplinary study sounds a false note in deeming that the "message" in Lawrence's novella is "clear" and stating that: "In order to show the bankruptcy of Western culture and imperialist values his story overtly sacrifices a Western woman for the sins of an over-civilized patriarchy" (117). The introduction of post-colonial discourse seems glib here and also "primitivising" of the complexities and psychological nuances of Lawrence's writing, though the author of the study does briefly acknowledge these. This reductive verdict strips Lawrence's text of its subtleties, rather as the outraged and scandalized audiences at the London and Paris premieres of *The Rite of Spring* drowned out its music and deeper psychological meanings. Nevertheless, Jones's short exploration of Lawrence's text in an otherwise extensive study of dance and modernism is a worthy contribution in its own right that should also inspire further investigations.

The two books reviewed here make a serious interdisciplinary contribution towards a more liberal and mutually informing study of aspects of modernism not widely discussed by critics to date. Moreover, the chapters concerning Lawrence's association with dance are concurrent with a welcome broadening interest in Lawrence within modernist studies worldwide.

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[1] Mark Kinkead-Weekes, 'D. H. Lawrence and the Dance', in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, vol. 10.1 (1992), 59–77; Elgin W. Mellown, 'Music and Dance in D. H. Lawrence', in *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 21.1 (1997), 49–60; Magali Roux, *Lawrence et les cinq soleils: voyage d'un écrivain anglais en terres mexicaines* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toulouse, 2009), which has a section dedicated to dance; Marina Ragachewskaya, 'No Dancing Matter: The Language of Dance and Sublimation in D. H. Lawrence', in *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, vol. 44 (2013), 187–204.

[2] Carrie Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).

[3] Carrie Preston, 'Introduction: Modernism and Dance', in *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 9.1 (2014), 1–6.

[4] Ibid., 2.