

# Ekphrastic Potential: Giving Voice to the Dance

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Paul Valéry's "Philosophy of the Dance" may have ekphrastic potential, but before suggesting that the author's words give voice to the dance, a strong association between word and the dancer's image must be formed. One way that Valéry solidifies this verbal/visual relationship is by comparing dancing to writing and poetry, which offers evidence for the word's ability to capture the expressive content of the dance. In this 1936 essay, written about the Spanish dancer Mme Argentina, there are several examples of clear connections between word and image where the visual art literally writes with the poetry of action. The author describes the dance between the Earth and the body of the artist in which the ground is "the prose of human movement" (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 61). What he means by this comparison to the written word is that the dancer expresses her art by composing her body movements onto her environment, literally creating the world on which she steps. Thus the flow of her toes across the stage writes the floor into the story. Valéry conveys the sense that if the dancer were to stop, she may fall through the emptiness as the prose of the Earth disappears. For the dancer "is in another world; no longer the world that takes color from our gaze, but one that she weaves with her steps and builds with her gestures" (61). The author suggests that dance seems to let the artist write the world where she exists, and furthermore, she expresses through her body "a poetry that encompasses the action of living creatures in its entirety" (64-65). "Philosophy of the Dance" also connects the written and performing arts from the reversed perspective of poetry having a movement like dancing: "To recite poetry is to enter into a verbal dance" (63). The speaker explains that a poem is also action because without being read it ceases to exist. These two media for artistic expression—dance and poetry—are similar because they are both an artist's performance of meaning through rhythm. Therefore, these connections are strong evidence for "Philosophy of the Dance" having the ability to give voice to the mute art object, the dance of Mme Argentina.

Though we have demonstrated the ability of the writer to give voice to dance's silent expressive content, there are some hindrances to proposing this form of ekphrasis. Writing about dance often gives description and analogy instead of feeling the art and bringing it to life in the mind of the reader. In Valéry's essay it is the speaker's detached tone and philosophical rhetoric that block the ability for the reader to deeply connect to the art of the dancer. For example, when Valéry compares the dancer to

a flame or a sphere of energy his images are captivating, but they may pull the reader away from the dance with distanced philosophical rhetoric and distracting images: "Our philosopher may just as well compare the dancer to a flame or, for that matter, to any phenomenon that is visibly sustained by the intense consumption of a superior energy" (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 60). These words create an interesting and beautiful image, but the reader may notice rhetorical devices that deflate the importance of the dance (Townsend-2005, 137). Valéry continuously refers to his own internal philosopher, which focuses his writing on himself and his own thoughts. He says the words "may just as well" as if the dance could be loosely compared "to any phenomenon" (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 60). And following the use of these images he states, "Forgive me that outrageously bold expression" (60). Valéry's interjections pull us back down to earth from his images he paints in the air. The distance between the writer and dancer does not allow the voice of the dance to be heard.

Another example of a hindrance to ekphrasis is in the overuse of analogy, which the French philosopher Jacques Derrida criticized of Valéry. "Derrida suggests that philosophical rhetoric employs metaphor as a kind of detour that seeks, finally, to obliterate the metaphorical figure in order to render abstract language concrete" (Townsend-2005, 137). These bold words argue that the use of analogical metaphor loosely suggests a comparison to another image, and this analogy focuses attention on the associated image and the ideas it portrays, not the object of figuration. The usage of philosophical methodology exemplified by Valéry is designed for understanding purposes. It is a form of dissection of the figure in order to compare it to a representation in philosophy. Derrida states that art involves a transformation or a change in the onlooker, and this cannot be accomplished by the pursuit of philosophical systemization, which deconstructs the metaphorical figure (Townsend 138). Hence, the analogical metaphors in Valéry's work are part of a general writing style that serves to distance the poet from the dancer. Julie Townsend analyzes this rhetoric in "Synaesthetics: Symbolism, Dance, and the Failure of Metaphor," an essay comparing the dance writings of Valéry with those of Stéphane Mallarmé. According to Townsend, "Valéry takes a removed philosophical stance," attending to the advancement of philosophy and its connection to poetry rather than attempting to understand the essence, or the integral meaning, of the dance (138). Valéry himself states

that he "approaches the matter from far off, in the hope that distance will dispel the difficulties" (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 58). This distance may limit understanding the dance, as the writer himself admits to the loops and tangents it creates: "I admit that I've given you rather too much [philosophy]" (58). Therefore, "Valéry's voyeuristic approach . . . is not an adequate condition to provoke artistic revelation, which requires, instead, a movement that leaps out of the self and co-mingles with art" (Townsend-2005, 141).

Townsend contrasts the distanced, philosophical approach of Valéry with a literary emphasis on metaphor, which is paramount in Mallarmé's ability to identify with the performer (137-138). This identification with the dancer and the dance is necessary for a truly ekphrastic piece of writing because when attempting to comprehend the voice of a mute art piece one cannot hear from afar. By forming connections among the reader, the writer, and the dancer, Mallarmé's "Ballets" brings to life the scene of watching the dance:

Oh, stranger to me and yet a Friend, as you sit hidden some evening in the theater: if, at that sorceress' feet (she! All unaware of sorcery), you will but humbly place the Flower of your poetic instinct (like those roses which are thrown off and up into visible higher worlds by a flick of her pale and dizzying satin slippers), drawing from this alone the true light and revelation of your numberless secret imaginings, then (in an exchange which seems to be the secret and revelation of her smile), through her always ultimate veil, she will give you back your concepts in all their nakedness, and silently inscribe your vision as would a symbol—which she is. (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 115)

Mallarmé starts by identifying strongly with another spectator by capitalizing the word "Friend." He presupposes the connection between attentive spectators and dancer that will later be demonstrated through psychology and the mirror neuron system. Unlike Valéry's essay, "Ballets" weaves metaphors that keep the imagination and focus on the dancer while we see, once again, a connection of dance to poetry. This connection is ubiquitous throughout this piece as Mallarmé likens the dancer to a poet by seeing her "lunges and abbreviations" as being written with her

body: "Her poem is written without the writer's tools" (112). She reaches across the barrier between separate subjectivities, an "ultimate veil," to mirror the spectator's own ideas. But now she reveals to the observer the "true light and revelation" of those ideas, stripped of individuality—"in all their nakedness." Thus according to symbolist aesthetics, ideas evoked by a true symbol will be universal. In one reading, the dancer burns onto his eye the symbol of her movement, and inscribes onto his inner vision the symbol of her dance. Townsend suggests that where Valéry failed to follow symbolist notions of aesthetic experience, Mallarmé understood this symbolist imperative, since his speaker observes the art form and is lifted from his normal state of being so that he may return to himself changed by the dance (Townsend-2005, 139).

Difficulties still exist in giving voice to the dance because symbolist aesthetics of the dancer's movements produce subtle and ever-changing significations. In one essay, Mallarmé depicts the dance as an unstable symbol: "The moment when this philosophical construction appears to crystallize, the dancer undoes and reforms the model of [our beliefs]" (Townsend-2005, 134). Thus, is it possible to understand each gesture or must the observer suspend judgment until the end of the dance when the piece is understood as a whole? Mallarmé's view is that to understand the dance "will mean living entirely in the world of reverie" (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 115). Though these symbolist gestures seem to contain the voice of the dance, the speed and subtlety of the symbology creates difficulties in interpretation. Therefore, further evidence of language existing within these gestures is necessary to show that dance writing can include ekphrasis.

Modern linguists are exploring a new set of theories that examine the possibility of gesture being as integral to language as speech. In an article appearing in *Anthropological Linguistics*, Brenda Farnell discusses the findings of a collaborative research effort. Farnell states that current research considers gesture to include hand and arm movements, posture, and facial expression. However, she suggests that this view may be limiting when considering dance and other human practices incorporating body movement to convey meaning. One researcher she presents, Adam Kendon, uses video recordings of natural conversations between Italian people to establish a "convincing case" that both speech and gesture are

"modes of symbolic representation that achieve meaning" (Farnell-2000, 246). Kendon also shows that the language of gesture is formed differently than spoken phrases when they are used in conjunction; however, as the spoken language is removed, gesture begins to take on a structure similar to spoken language (Farnell-2000, 246). In other words, gesture has meaning, but it is supplemental when used with speech. However, as spoken language is removed, the gestures literally form abbreviations, pauses, punctuations, and many other expressions found in language. Thus, growing scientific research is giving evidence for gestures having a voice of their own.

Research in cognitive psychology can also shed light on how the gestures of dancers on the stage can have such a powerful influence on the spectators. According to Susan Goldin-Meadow and Sian Beilock in their article "Action's Influence on Thought: The Case of Gesture," recent findings in psychology are changing traditional views of how thoughts are formed: psychologists are moving from a theory of encoding symbols in the brain to a new theory of "embodied cognition" (664). What this means is that body movement and the senses are integral to thought processes through activation of the sensorimotor systems (Goldin-Meadow and Beilock-2010, 664). The experimenters had adults complete a puzzle that involved stacking blocks and then explaining how they did it to a researcher. The participants' gestures reflected the movements of the blocks. They set up another experiment with two puzzles that were slightly different from each other. Participants who did both puzzles in a row solved them both easily. However, when participants were made to speak about how they solved it the first time and were also allowed to gesture, they had trouble with the slightly different second puzzle. Only when the person was given a chance to gesture did it hinder their ability to adapt to the changed puzzle. However, if the puzzle didn't change, those that gestured completed the puzzle more quickly and effectively. By manipulating the conditions of the study, the experimenters demonstrated that gestures strengthen the "mental representation" of an action (670). Furthermore, they showed that observers watching the gestures of a fellow participant would be highly influenced by the way the person gestured (669). Indeed, making gestures not match the puzzle slowed down the speed of completing the puzzle more than changing the puzzle itself. Goldin-Meadow and Beilock suggest that gestures about an action have a greater affect on thought

than the action itself (670). To understand the ramifications of this idea in regard to dance, one can imagine a ballet full of action: tragedy, war, and happy occasions. Yet, picture the dancers all having counterintuitive dancing movements, like fast and bouncy during a tragic scene. The action of the ballet means little without attention to the expressions of the dancer. Therefore, research in cognitive psychology is exhibiting how the ballerina's gestures contain meaning that strongly affects the thoughts of spectators.

Research in neuroscience indicates that this expression of meaning between the dancer and observer is conveyed through the mirror neuron system. In 1996 neuroscientists discovered a class of neurons in the brain that they called mirror neurons because they were stimulated both in an individual performing an action and in a person who "simply witnesses" that action (Berrol-2006, 302). These neurons were also stimulated during body movements or when expressing an emotion (303). But as scientists have demonstrated, when the witness observes the event it is the sensorimotor system, "not intellect or reasoning" that activates the mirror neurons. The stimulation is "experience-based" in that the witness must have experienced something similar in themselves (303). This research constitutes an argument against Valéry's method of using philosophy and reasoning to try to understand the dance, since he states that he is not a dancer (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 55). Furthermore, mirror neurons are certainly being activated when observing the dance, and this mirror connection and vicarious experience of what the dancer is doing and feeling may be integral to voicing the mute art object, the dance. Berrol suggests that the mirror neuron system is essential to empathic understanding between individuals, naming this understanding "intersubjectivity or subpersonal transfer of meaning" (Berrol-2006, 308-309). To synthesize the scientific research presented in this essay, a connection is created between word and image in writings about dance through the mirroring effects between the two artforms. Together the writer and dancer perform an action, feel the same emotion, and express it in language. The spectator quite literally experiences what the dancer feels within the mind. Thus it is empathy not intellectual understanding that may allow the writer to connect word and image in dance.

These scientific findings may show that specific aspects of dance, namely the connection between writer and dancer as well as the interpretability of the art form, demonstrate how

dance writing may give voice to the art. When Mallarmé suggests that the dancer “silently inscribe[s] your vision as would a symbol” (Copeland and Cohen-1983, 115), this can be interpreted ambiguously. The statement could mean either that the movements of the dance are etched onto the eye like a memory (After Images n.p.), or the dancer literally writes your worldview. The latter interpretation means that the ballerina has drawn the spectators into her world until her views are mirrored in the witnesses minds. This is a key concept in the writer’s ability to give voice to the image and is a common theme with other dance writers. A similar perception is expressed by Arlene Croce, a prominent writer for *The New Yorker* in the 1970s. She writes in the preface of one of her collections, “Afterimage is defined as ‘the impression retained by the retina of the eye, or by any other organ of sense, of a vivid sensation, after the external cause has been removed.’ . . . Dancing leaves nothing else behind—no record, no text—and so the afterimage becomes the subject of dance criticism” (Croce-1977, n.p.).

This passage once again highlights the difficulty of describing dance, by pointing out the fleeting existence of the art. Croce further concedes this point: “The dance critic resigns himself to doing a fool’s job as best he can” (Croce-1977, n.p.) But despite this negative outlook, the occasional gleaming ekphrastic passage shines through the pages of the works of Croce and her mentor Edwin Denby. In the essay “Theatre is Truth” from her collection *Sight Lines*, Croce develops a picture of the ballet *Sunset*:

Whatever the piece “says”—about women as a part-time need of men, or about the fatuity of male assumptions in regard to women, or about love versus duty, honor, and country—is inconsequential beside the shimmering ambiguity of the vision it holds before us. Emotionally, no moment is unmixed, and the continuing delicacy and subtlety of the piece trains us as we watch it. A simple response is impossible. The short way of saying this is that *Sunset* invents a new realism in the theatre (Croce-1987, 110).

Thus far we have been discussing ekphrastic potential of a single dancer’s art, but an entire ballet is just as much a mute art object. In the first line of this excerpt the word “says” certainly gives voice to the ballet, and after the dash the words are like a qualification for what the dance was

previously expressing. These words move toward what appears to be the fundamental expression of the visual art. What the speaker says of the “ambiguity” and mixed emotions is that throughout the ballet no situation is cliché or goes according to plan. Some characters are excluded from merriment, the soldiers fail to get the girl, and nothing happens perfectly or simply (109-111). Thus the ballet *Sunset* speaks of realism in “human nature.” (111).

Despite the difficulty of expressing the meaning of dance through ekphrasis, this art form seems to clearly speak through Croce’s work. Another example of ekphrasis, excerpted from Croce’s essay “The Fire This Time,” is strong, simple, and abrupt in its voicing of the dance. The ballet is about a Prince capturing what may be a firebird or a woman, Croce states: “The step that does it best, for me, is the lunge on point braced by him from behind. This pose, with the legs in profile and the torso turned front, seems to say ‘strength and cunning’” (Croce-1987, 269). The power of this phrase changes the perspective of the entire piece by giving voice to the struggling emotions and the fighting will of the bird. It truly makes the reader feel the intensity of the female part and creates a sense of excitement in the situation. The bird is fluttering and darting only to be grabbed by the prince (268). “She pits her strength and cunning against the man’s” (269). The lines of ekphrasis can be analyzed according to the symbology and gestural linguistics of the physical movements: facing forward towards the audience is a gesture of strength and “legs in profile” are tactically moving sideways, which symbolizes cunning. Therefore, this mute art object, the dance of a bird, is a symbolist aesthetic and a linguistic representation that speaks through the writer.

Croce learned to critique dance from her mentor and friend Edwin Denby (Croce-1987, 335-337). In an essay tribute to Denby she writes of his method of analysis as simply seeing and believing (337). This lack of philosophical judgment allows the writer to be a good listener in terms of ekphrastic voice. Denby also believed in the interconnected subjective experience of watching the dance (337). And this “intersubjectivity” transfers meaning to his words. In the essay “Bolshoi at the Met” from a collection entitled *Dance Writings* Denby helps the reader develop a subjective feeling of Ulanova’s movements in *Romeo and Juliet* by suggesting that the reader attempt her dance movements. Ulanova is Juliet and, in this moment, she rushes away from marriage to

the County Paris, then rushes back home from the apothecary. Denby places the reader in a heightened state of empathy and physical limits where the chest is stretched open near bursting (Denby-1986, 395). He then tells the reader to “push the neck forward as hard as you can, and lift your head until you feel ‘desperately resolved’ . . . and now, keeping the stance unchanged, rush about the room with an incredible lightness and rapidity.” He concludes that “when Ulanova does it, you feel it means “here is my heart” (395) The symbolism of the open heart is a common theme, but it is the deeper linguistic interpretation of the movement that is most important to the ekphrastic interpretation. The arched chest alone has a sense of pride, but with the neck stretched up and forward, the shape of the silhouette in profile remains concave. Thus, the symbol depicts a hollow sadness, yet it is drawn and stretched forward toward love, open-hearted, yet ready to pierce that very heart. Thus, the dance of Juliet gives voice to the tragedy (Denby-1986, 395). Furthermore the words “desperately resolved” (395) are another example of ekphrasis because the posture of Ulanova is giving voice to the moment in the dance. “Resolved” ambiguously contains the double meanings of the two repeated movements: her fling and rush away from marriage where it could mean she is determined, and the second fling and rush returning from the apothecary where she feels desperate relief, like when a dissonant chord is finally resolved. Giving voice to the dance on more than one level allows readers to connect to the expressive meaning of the art and is a sign of great ekphrasis.

Thus, the ekphrastic potential of dance writing appears fully realized in the New York dance scene—and despite the hindrances and resistances to this mode of writing—an art of giving voice to the silent may expand into a new sphere of literature. Word and image in dance have a strong relationship because of similarities between dance and poetry, highlighted by 19th century poets. Yet the challenge for ekphrastic writing about dance is to capture a meaning that is expressed in the body and that exists only in the moment. Through scientific research we may understand the language of gesture, the effect of body movements on our thoughts, and the mirrored subjectivities of the performer and observer reflected all the way down to the neuron. When spectators observe the dance, research suggests that a unison of bodies and minds occurs, so that the observer feels the action being performed by the dancer. Amazingly, Arlene Croce understood this reflection and embodiment of

shared experience in her 1987 essay on Denby, almost a decade before the mirror neuron system was discovered. Croce notes that "it seemed that kinetic excitement was what made viewing dancing" a subjective pleasure (Croce-1987, 557). This subjectivity and reflected feeling leads to empathic understanding of the dance. Thus, we must only be human and write down our personal observations of watching a dancer's performance to give voice to the dance.

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