

Autobiography and the *Coulisses*: Narrator, Dancer, Spectator

JULIE TOWNSEND

When we approach the question of dance as a historical question, we necessarily rely on visual and textual artifacts. A perusal of journalistic, critical, and literary writing about *danseuses* in 19th century France reveals that images of dance, and specifically of *danseuses*, are embedded with highly charged narratives of desire. The figure of the *danseuse* and the trajectories of desire that frame her in this period have been studied quite extensively in both dance and literary studies (cf. Foster 1996; Townsend 2010). One of the difficulties of uncoupling the desire for the dancer from the desire that might be expressed by the dancer is the dearth of literature written by women dancers before the turn of the century. If the terms of the relationship between dance and desire in the 19th century are largely shaped by the literary, critical, and visual production of men, then how can we begin to approach the question of desire from the position of the dancer? By considering the structures of desire that framed the dancer, and then juxtaposing those structures with representations created by dancers in the early 20th century, we can use the artifacts created by dancers, that is, autobiographies to analyze dancers' own relationships to dance, the role of the dancer in her cultural context, and the relationship of the dancer to spectators. When the dancer, having been the object of desire for so long, takes up the narrative position, she re-configures the trajectories of desire that have come to characterize her.

COULISSES LITERATURE

The vast majority of 19th century publicly circulated documents about dancers, be they critical, journalistic, literary, or visual, are produced by men with limited

training in dance. In my research of the literature that characterized the figure of the *danseuse* in 19th century France, I found almost no documents by women – or women dancers – but did find a wealth of materials that presented the *danseuse* from the perspective of the desiring male spectator or reader. From fictional memoirs, to novels, to manuals and encyclopedias of the Opéra de Paris, this literature of the “coulisses” or the theatre wings and backstage constitutes a veritable genre of 19th century literature.¹

In his study of ballet under the Second Empire, Ivor Guest attributes the following quip to an 1859 article in *Le Figaro*:

“What a paltry opinion novelists have of the ballet girl’s virtue. There is not one Parisian novel which does not introduce a banker or a man of fashion who keeps a ballet girl of the Opéra. But the *Académie de Musique* barely contains thirty *danseuses*, so that even if the *rats* and supers were included, there would be at least a thousand happy admirers for each of them.” (Guest 1974: 20)

This quote appears, as well, as the opening passage of an 1887 text entitled *Les Coulisses*.² By the late 19th century, the mockery or critique of male desire of the *danseuse* became itself a pretext for representing such desire. Whether in Émile Zola’s critique of the bourgeois’s desire for Nana, Edgar Degas’s implicit critique of the male spectator of the dancer in his series, or Huysmans’s hyper-framed discussion of Gustave Moreau’s Salomé paintings in *A Rebours*, there appear to be layers upon layers of representations of the *danseuse* insofar as she functions as the object of desire for the male spectator. So, in fact, these representations might be read not as representations of dance or of the dancer but of, collectively, a representational landscape of masculine heterosexual desire for the *danseuse*.

If the voices of dancers, specifically female dancers, are largely absent in the 19th century literature, the contrasting proliferation of dancer’s autobiographies in the early 20th century points to a radical shift in women’s ability, through available artistic outlets, to circulate their visions as women, as dancers, and as artists. The period from the turn of the century and the decades that follow offer myriad representations of desire from the position of the dancer her-

1 A few examples of these popular *coulisses* publications include: Un Vieil Abonné: *Ces Demoiselles de l’Opéra* (1887), Joachim Duflot: *Les Secrets des coulisses des théâtres de Paris: Mystères, mœurs, usages, anecdotes* (1865), Aurélien Scholl: *Les Coulisses* (1887).

2 See footnote 1.

self. These examples arise in a variety of circumstances. We have autobiographical writing from a variety of early modern dancers, including Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, Josephine Baker, Maud Allen, and others. These accompany the choreography of these dancers and add an archival dimension to our ability to read and interpret their relationships to earlier representations of dance and of the dancer. Theorizing these autobiographical materials may not be an obvious critical task. It is often clear that the autobiography functions more as a form of self-promotion than as a thoughtful reflection on the work of the artist; however, the genre of autobiography, I argue, reconfigures the historically male narrator of the female dancer and thus does important ideological work with respect to gender, narrative authority, and the performer/spectator configuration.

The dancer's autobiography or memoir, which, in the early 20th century, became a mainstay of major dancers' careers might then be read as a sub-genre of *coulisses* literature.³ As such, we can interpret them both as self-representation and as a voice contributing to a larger cultural and aesthetic discussion about dance. The move to add writing to choreography and performance is one regularly taken up by 20th century dancers. My reading will consider the ways in which dancers deliver certain expected moves even while they supplement, transgress, or deviate from the conventions of the theatre literature. That is, these choreographer-dancer-writers function within the category of *coulisses* literature while they engage in polemics about the aesthetics of dance; and, through their aesthetics, they reach outside the world of performance and into broader socio-cultural and aesthetic arenas. As such, writing by dancers often developed a critical standpoint by which to reconfigure the relationship of performer to spectator. These works, to a greater or lesser degree, comprise some genre standards: early experiences of dance, the discovery of oneself as a dancer, an articulation of one's aesthetic principles, and anecdotes of famous persons and venues. What lies beneath the surface, however, is a desire to represent oneself and one's art, especially insofar as female dancers had been represented – and often idealized or degraded – in such an over-determined way by male artists and writers in the previous decades. The autobiography offers dancers the opportunity to articulate their own stories, to define the aesthetic terms of their art form, and to theorize the relevance of their art in the world. The role of dance critic being largely the

3 Better known autobiographies by early 20th century dancers include: Loïe Fuller: *Quinze ans de ma vie* (1908), Isadora Duncan: *My Life* (1927), Ruth St. Denis: *An Unfinished Life* (1939), Josephine Baker's two co-written autobiographies with Marcel Sauvage: *Les Mémoires de Joséphine Baker* (1927) and *Voyages et Aventures* (1931).

purview of men, women found ways of engaging in aesthetic debates through popular memoirs, autobiographies, or novels. My examples suggest that these texts put forth aesthetic arguments about dance and that they reach out to a broader cultural or artistic landscape in order to articulate sociological, cultural, and political critiques.

SUBVERTING THE GENRE

Amidst the personal anecdotes of Loïe Fuller's autobiography, *Quinze ans de ma vie* (1908) or *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (1913), the reader finds a narrator who apologizes, sincerely or not, for writing about matters of aesthetics. Fuller's autobiography first appeared at a time of crisis in her career, and its publication was most certainly motivated by the economic pressures of starting a dance school as well as her own transition from performer to teacher. But among the anecdotes of childhood struggles, hard won theatrical successes, and encounters with famous personages from intellectual and artistic milieus, Fuller inserts *Light and the Dance*, a chapter on her aesthetics, which she prefaces with the following:

"Since it is generally agreed that I have created something new, something composed of light, colour, music, and the dance, more especially of light and the dance, it seems to me that it would perhaps be appropriate, after having considered my creation from the anecdotal and picturesque standpoint, to explain, in more serious terms, just what my ideas are relative to my art, and how I conceive it both independently and in its relationship to the other arts. If I appear to be to serious, I apologise in advance." (Fuller 1908: 62)

Most striking in this passage, is of course the extent to which Fuller either is uncomfortable writing as an authority on her own artistic practice or takes the rhetorical position of being uncomfortable with such a treatise on aesthetics. This also tells us something about Fuller's expectations of her readership who might be less interested in her theories of dance than in anecdotes of celebrity. Fuller delivers titillating anecdotes, but by embedding a chapter on her aesthetics and artistic process, she proposes a different performer-spectator relationship through her narration, which feigns an apology only to present an authoritative discourse on her theory of art. What is most interesting to me, though, is that way in which Fuller critiques, albeit subtly, the 'anecdotal' and 'picturesque' aspects of the autobiographical genre in favor of a more 'serious' treatment of the subject of in-

novation in dance, light, and color as well as the ways in which this innovation engages a relationship to the other arts. Later in this chapter, she offers a broad critique of cultural knowledge of motion:

“Our knowledge of motion is nearly as primitive as our knowledge of colour. We say ‘prostrated by grief’, but, in reality, we pay attention only to the grief; ‘transported by joy’, but we observe only the joy; ‘weighted down by chagrin’, but we consider only the chagrin. Throughout, we place no value on the movement that expresses the thought. We are not taught to do so, and we never think of it. Who of us has not been pained by a movement of impatience, a lifting of the eyebrows, a shaking of the head, the sudden withdrawal of a hand. We are far from knowing that there is as much harmony in motion as in music and colour. We do not grasp the facts of motion.” (Id. 1908: 67)

Fuller’s critique of our lack of attention to motion, via a linguistic example, signals not only a limit in the general study of motion, but also a more specific problem in terms of the ability to theorize dance. Without a body of knowledge from which to draw, she presents herself, throughout the autobiography, as a kind of experimenter who discovers hitherto unknown relationships between motion, color, and light. Her aesthetic theories, then, emerge out of a kind of scientific-spiritual journey of discovery; and Fuller measures the aesthetic value of her work by evaluating the audience reactions. Fuller characterizes her artistic intention and its relationship to the spectator:

“To impress an idea I endeavour, by my motions, to *cause its birth* in the spectator’s mind, to *awaken his imagination*, that it may be prepared to *receive the image*. Thus we are able, I do not say to understand, but to feel within ourselves as an impulse an indefinable and wavering force, which urges and dominates us. Well, I can express this force which is indefinable but certain in its impact. I have motion.” (Id. 1908: 71)

Fuller presents her art as an impregnation of the spectator’s mind and then interprets the impact of her dance through a reading – a spectatorship – of her motion’s domination over the spectator. Fuller, in a sense, turns the tables on the gendered relationship of the spectator to the performer and presents herself as the wielder of a dominating aesthetic power. Her authorship, apologetic as it may seem in the beginning of the chapter, presents the spectator-performer relationship from the authorial position of the dancer.

Fuller’s narration challenges a century of writing on *danseuses* that situates the spectator as the authority on the dancer, and in the later-19th century, situates the male narrator as arbiter of the dancer-spectator relationship. In the 19th cen-

tury, to deploy the figure of the *danseuse* in literature or the visual arts constituted a kind of culturally and aesthetically elite position. The poetics of dance, as it is expressed by novelists, poets, painters and filmmakers, often employed narrative and perspectival strategies that rendered the dancer's body an available commodity to the artist who then seems to withhold or deliver the body to the reader or spectator. Fuller's writing resists the narrative power of the spectator, especially the male spectator, with an aesthetic that draws upon her experimentation rather than an existing body of knowledge. She thus opens up a variety of positions from which the dancer might engage in discourse about her art, sexuality, and gender. The narrative position, when taken up by the performer – particularly by a female dancer – disturbs the performer-spectator dynamic and the desires implicit in that relationship.

RECOVERING THE *DANSEUSE*

While the autobiographies of better known and studied dancers such as Fuller are in wide circulation (though often out of print), I'll turn now to two autobiographical novels that have had little or no critical attention. Both are written by women dancers of the early 20th century, and both use the genre of the dancer's autobiography as a platform by which to address broader sociological issues, hence situating dance, and representations of the *danseuse*, as part of a broader cultural discussion. By recovering narratives written by dancers, we gain access to a part of the conversation about dance that is frequently absent from critical or theoretical work. Like Fuller's autobiography, these two novels, one by an Armenian dancer who performed in Paris in the 1910s and 1920s and another by a French dancer who was quite popular in the music halls in the 20s and 30s, offer dancers' viewpoints on the representation of dance and on the role of the dancer-choreographer in a broader artistic and cultural landscape.

The first example is Armenian dancer Armen Ohanian's *La Danseuse de Shamakha* (1918). The novel begins with an account of Ohanian's childhood in Armenia, the displacement of her family due to an earthquake, and her arranged – and failed – marriage to a Persian Christian. After the dissolution of her marriage, Ohanian lives with a group of Muslim women and learns to dance. She becomes a celebrated performer. Through her travels, and as a dancer, she develops a comparative perspective that allows her the role of diplomat in certain instances. In others though, Ohanian is pointed in her criticism, especially in her comments on European spectators of the Orient. As the book comes to a close, and Ohanian gets closer to Europe, she sharpens her critical voice vis-à-vis colonialism and tourism. As she travels to Egypt, her sense of a clash of cultures be-

gins to magnify. Not only is she critical of the new Cairo and of its European inhabitants and visitors, but she similarly clashes with Middle Eastern men who take her for a prostitute. In a sense, Egypt becomes a site of conflict where she must do more than dance; she must make a political stand through her dance.

Visiting the sites in Egypt, Ohanian is struck by the lack of gravity with which the tourists travel – the English, in tennis outfits, climbing to the summit of the pyramids and the American tourists calmly savoring their sandwiches. Dance, for Ohanian, becomes a complex figure of negotiation between Europe and Asia:

“Far from my Persia and my Caucasus, I was drawn more closely to them by a profound nostalgia. And having set aside my pride and my prejudices against the dancers, I clung more and more to Asiatic dances. When with half-closed eyes, to the sound of the stringed instruments, I drew with my naked feet the arabesques of our dances upon the Persian carpets, I would forget that I was very far from the dear walls of our gardens. My dancing was also a mute but eloquent language by which I said to those who treated us with contempt that, although humble in our inferiority to Europeans, we nevertheless have a little grace and tenderness, and that even in our dreaminess there is the strange splendor of hurricanes. In my illusion I thought that the watching demi-gods would mingle with their disdain for us also a little understanding and respect. But the more I knew of these gods and their Europe, the more I withdrew within myself, burying jealously in my secret depths all that was sensitive and poetic. Thus I was wounded less. But ... it's difficult to run away from all that you love, to struggle against your own heart and to exhaust yourself in vain attempts to resemble others.” (Ohanian 1918: 336-337)⁴

The bitter irony of this passage marks a radical change from the narration up until this point in the autobiographical novel. Having presented the reader with a portrait of an educated, worldly performer, Ohanian mock-humbles herself in front of the European spectators and readers. Thus, she illustrates the exploitative nature of colonial tourism and suggests a complex inter-cultural communication between performer and spectator as well as between writer and reader. Through her encounters with colonialism, she goes from cultural diplomat to cultural critic. This passage functions as a double allegory: first, for the voice of the colonized body in the face of colonial power; and, second, it represents the silence of the dancer in the face of so much male narration of her body. Cairo is, for Ohanian, a revelation of the commodification and manipulation of history,

4 Translations are adapted from: Ohanian, Armen (1923): *The Dancer of Shamahka*, trans. by Rose Wilder Lane, New York: Dutton, pp. 260-61.

culture, and art. Dance becomes a mode of narration and of translation across seemingly un-navigable straits. She ends the novel embarking to Europe to dance in the music-hall. Ohanian's autobiography ends early – she has, in fact, not yet acquired the language in which she will write. It is not until *Les Griffes de la Civilisation*, published three years later, that we hear of her experiences in London and Paris. *La Danseuse de Shamakha* does not reveal any of her European exploits; it allows the reader to speculate on how Ohanian will encounter Europe, just as we are familiar with how so many Europeans have encountered the Orient. Finally, *La Danseuse de Shamakha* elaborates, through its narrative, a perspective on the position of dance in a broader socio-cultural context.

Ohanian's text is largely about travelling to different contexts and observing how to engage in her new reality but it is also an Orientalist text that critiques Orientalism. She learns throughout the novel how to be errant, how to be home when one cannot be home. In her autobiography, Ohanian becomes both a performer and critical spectator of cultural difference. The conventionality of her writing is contrasted by her exceptional story and the development of a critical voice that engages in broad cultural commentary. The figure of dance as an expression of emotion, a narrative, a religious ritual, or an ambassador across cultures becomes an eloquent language with which to challenge authority. Desire, in this text, finally resides in the notion that dance might speak; or, perhaps provide an alternative representational discourse to European Orientalism.

Though her cultural and artistic position is entirely different from Ohanian, Colette Andris also formulates cultural critique through the *coulisses* genre, and she seeks to reconfigure the trajectories of desire between dancer and spectator through a layered, multiple narration that persistently undercuts the notion of authenticity even while it claims to be the voice of lived experience. Andris has a geographic center, but her movement like Ohanian's involves coming into a new world – that of music-hall –, seeing how it works, and then effecting change through the development of her aesthetic. Her second novel, *Une Danseuse Nue* (1933), begins with a disclaimer about the fictional nature of the novel. Based on my research of press clippings, it appears that the story of Miss Nocturne is at least loosely based on Colette Andris's own life (cf. Andris 1933/1). However, Andris insists that:

“Miss Nocturne, *danseuse nue*, is, you may well suspect, a fictional character. Nevertheless, as to the facts of her career, I've invented nothing: why then? I gathered so many secrets, witnessed so many little dramas, and I myself have so many personal memories! I could have simply given you the autobiography of a *danseuse nue*? But, then I would have told you that which I was and not that which I would have liked to be, and it seemed to me

that my modest personality was of less interest than the character of whom I wanted to draw a type: that of the ideal *danseuse nue*.” (Andris 1933/2: 4)

Just as she disavows the autobiographical nature of the novel, she reinforces the authenticity of her own experience and thus secures herself both the authority of an autobiography and the freedom of a novel. Andris breaks away from the convention of dancers’ autobiographies and opens up a space for literary experimentation through complex narrative approaches and the blending of autobiography and fiction. Through her hybrid narration, she sets up a viewpoint that both reproduces and critiques the standards of *coulisses* literature: make-up and costuming, dramatic scenes between performers backstage, lesbian love scenes, Orientalist motifs, and more.

Before launching into the story of her protagonist, Andris takes time to define a *danseuse nue* for readers:

“What we call a *danseuse nue* is an already protected body, defended, dressed, by a layer of grease and by a layer of powder; and then, some flowers, a jewel or a bit of lace come to constitute the [...] obligatory triangle, which must be superimposed over that of Mother Nature; finally, accessories, sandals, wig, necklaces, an immense veil, an immense fan, who knows what other immense items! And so, just as you might think, the ‘costume’ of a *danseuse nue* does not fit in a handbag.” (Id. 1933/2: 8)

According to Andris, to name the dancer, is to mistake her for something other than she is; the name misrepresents her because it fails to take into account her performance. Andris presents the dancer as a series of layers. While nude may imply the absence of clothing, this *danseuse nue* is not only made-up, as it were, and adorned with any number of accoutrements, but she is “protected” and “defended” from an implied audience – and from the implied narrator, the namer, writer. The ‘triangle obligatoire’, the *cache-sexe*, which is a double costume in that it re-covers what Mother Nature has already covered is the costume that constitutes the thing just as the make-up and accessories constitute the *danseuse nue*. The costume, like the name, lead the audience and the reader entirely astray, or so argues Colette Andris.

DESIRE AND THE DANCER’S VOICE

The literature of the *coulisses* in some sense suggests a narrative striptease; it tantalizes readers with a promise of access to a backstage or an interiority that

goes beyond the performance. Of course these narratives, written by spectators, gossips, or performers are an extension of the performance into a narrative realm. While the representation of dancers was largely the purview of men during the 19th century, women – especially women dancers – wrote the most compelling *coulisses* literature of the early 20th century. These dancers turn the reader's desires away from the established trajectory from spectator to dancer and instead complicate the dancer-spectator relationship by introducing a dancer-narrator.

Women's *coulisses* literature participated in a whole variety of cultural, sociological, and aesthetic discourses, the terms of which had been established in the previous century. The conventions of *coulisses* literature and of the performer's autobiography offered women choreographer-dancers an opportunity not only for publicity but for contributing to the discussion of dance aesthetics. The popularity of the dancer's autobiography comes out of the 19th century fascination with the dancer's life, her association with prostitution, and the extent to which access to the dancer's body was a literary and visual trope for masculine artistic prowess. The audience provoked by this less than artistic interest in the dancer opened up the space for the dancer's memoir and, as such, many dancer-choreographers engaged this genre.

As we continue to develop ways of theorizing dance, especially historical dance, we are often dependent on representations, be they visual or literary that take a particular ideological position vis-à-vis the dancer. These works give us insight into the reception of dance, the cultural fascination with dancers, and the role that dancers play in the representational landscape of the period. The importance of the figure of the *danseuse* in 19th and early 20th century literary and visual arts suggests that we ought to take seriously dancers' own representations of their aesthetics, practices, and the implications of their work. Although these might be available only through autobiography or memoir – genres often looked upon with suspicion in academic circles. We ought to read against the grain and allow these choreographer-dancer-writers to help us think through the relationship of dance to writing, of performer to spectator, and to acknowledge the historical development of the complex desires that circulate between the text and the body – language and motion.

REFERENCES

- Andris, Colette (1933/1): *Une Danseuse Nue*, Paris: Flammerion (= Press Clippings from the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Collection Rondel, 11859).
- _____ (1933/2): *Une Danseuse Nue*, roman, Paris: Flammerion.
- Baker, Josephine (1927): *Les Mémoires de Joséphine Baker*, Vol. I, Paris: Kra.
- _____ (1931): *Voyages et Aventures de Joséphine Baker* (with Marcel Sauvage), Vol. II, Paris: M. Seheur.
- Dufлот, Joachim (1865): *Les Secrets des coulisses des théâtres de Paris: Mystères, mœurs, usages, anecdotes*, Paris: Lévy.
- Duncan, Isadora (1927): *My Life*, New York: Boni and Liveright.
- Foster, Susan Leigh (1996): *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fuller, Loïe (1908): *Quinze ans de ma vie*, Paris: Librairie Félix Juven.
- _____ (1913): *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life: With Some Account of Her Distinguished Friends*, Boston: Small.
- Guest, Ivor (1974): *The Ballet of the Second Empire*, London: Pitman Publishing.
- Townsend, Julie (2010): *The Choreography of Modernism in France: La Danseuse, 1830-1930*, Oxford: Legenda Press.
- Ohanian, Armen (1918): *La Danseuse de Shamakha*, Paris: Grasset.
- _____ (1923): *The Dancer of Shamahka*, trans. by Rose Wilder Lane, New York: Dutton.
- Scholl, Aurélien (1887): *Les Coulisses*, Paris: Victor-Harvard.
- St. Denis, Ruth (1939): *An Unfinished Life*, New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Un Vieil Abonné (1887): *Ces Demoiselles de l'Opéra*, Paris: Tresse.

