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MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE, A REVIEW OF *DANCE AND MODERNISM IN IRISH AND GERMAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE: CONNECTIONS IN MOTION*

Sabine Egger, Catherine E. Foley, and Margaret Mills Harper, eds. *Dance and Modernism in Irish and German Literature and Culture: Connections in Motion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), hardcover and eBook, pp. 261, ISBN 978-1-4985-9426-4.

Reviewed by Melinda Szűts

The collection *Dance and Modernism in Irish and German Literature and Culture: Connections in Motion* is a delightful endeavor to make the “impossible possible”: it provides a panoramic overview on the influence of dance on its sister arts and on the creative processes of artists of Irish and German cultural heritage from the 1920s to the present (158). The challenges of the project lie first and foremost in its far-reaching, international, and interdisciplinary scope—integrating new research from the fields of dance, literature, drama, ethnochoreology, and architecture—and in the acknowledged difficulty in the definition and interpretation of its main subject. As most authors in the volume point out, dance in all of its manifestations is on the “periphery of comprehensibility,” which is a quality that derives from its essential dynamism and ability for constant change (176). What positions dance at the forefront of critical attention today is exactly its changeability and self-renewing energy, which make it not only a subject but also a prevailing agent of transformation and discovery. It is this creative power of movement, corporeality, and choreographic expression that provided the main theme of the interdisciplinary conference held at the University of Limerick in 2016, from which the present volume of essays emerged. The collection, edited by Sabine Egger, Catherine E. Foley, and Margaret Mills Harper, includes essays by academics and researcher-practitioners alike, which provides an illuminating double perspective on its chosen subject. The volume is divided into two main sections. In the first group of essays, contributors discuss dance as a tool for cultural exchange and national identification, by presenting significant “connections in motion” through artistic engagements between Ireland and the German-speaking world in the past century (2). The second part of the volume comprises studies of Modernist and contemporary literature, drama, and architecture, focusing on works both by German and Irish authors and

practitioners, in the light of their “intermedial encounters” with dance (2). The shared aim of these discussions is to illuminate the importance of corporeality and physical expression in all means of artistic creation, and to highlight the validity and vital need of its inclusion into the fields of academic research and education.

The volume opens with discourses on cross-cultural exchanges and important transformations in the Irish cultural scene through dance and art education. In her study on Modernism, migration, and Irish-German connections in the 1930s and 1940s, Gisela Holfter discusses the life and work of three German-speaking dance artists (Erina Brady, Kurt Jooss, and Helen Lewis) and how dance education and performance stimulated important changes in twentieth-century Irish society and in the nation’s cultural aesthetics. All three artists lived or performed in Ireland as political refugees, and brought new performance styles and training techniques of Modernist dance from the Continent, which were welcomed with “considerable interest” by Irish audiences and practitioners (11). In contrast to the common presentations of Ireland in the interwar period as an isolated territory resistant to change and the influences of Modernism, Holfter’s examples provide evidence for the claim that the country was, in fact, a “safe haven” for refugee artists, and became a fertile ground for the forward-looking ideas introduced by “the agents of change” (10). Similar views are presented by Deirdre Mulrooney and Ruth Fleischmann, who elaborate on the foundational contributions of European artist-educators of mixed cultural heritage to the Irish artistic scene, focusing on the life achievements of modern dance pioneer Erina Brady, dancer-choreographer and classical ballet teacher Joan Moriarty, and composer-scholar Aloys Fleischmann. Brady laid the groundwork for teaching modern dance on the island in an attempt to transplant the techniques of the German *Ausdruckstanz*, while Moriarty and Fleischmann introduced and developed structured training for professional ballet and classical music in the country, respectively. All three authors emphasize the fact that the significant contributions of these renowned artist-educators to Irish cultural heritage were, in all cases, attempts for personal and collective self-definition and identity-creation. The background to this is that the artists in question either moved or returned to Ireland because of their interest in the country’s cultural traditions as a result of their Irish ancestry, or settled down in Éire to rediscover their national identities, away from their home countries. The personal journeys of these artists thus not only helped them reformulate their relationship to the traditions of their nations, but also stimulated the Irish cultural scene to shape, to express, and to redefine its very own national values.

(Re)definitions and representations of national identity and cultural belonging are recurring themes in subsequent chapters as well, many of which

present these most complex issues from a more personal perspective. From the thirteen contributors, three (Catherine E. Foley, Marguerite Donlon, and Finola Cronin) elaborate exclusively on their own embodied experiences of identity formation through dance, which could be considered as keys to the reception and appropriation of the volume, for at least two important reasons. Firstly, they serve as justifications and authentic examples for Lucia Ruprecht's argument, in which she claims that contemporary writings on movement and dance (let it be creative or academic) predominantly derive from the authors' own experience, which leads to a more "subjective, biographical focus" in discourses on dance in performance and in literature (175). Secondly, they provide an important toolkit for the reader to obtain a deeper understanding of the artistic processes described and analyzed in the other chapters of the collection, in which authors apply more objective approaches.

In their personal accounts, Irish dancer-choreographers Donlon and Cronin present how they "found" Ireland in their own creative processes while working on international projects away from home, and how the outcomes of these projects were received as cultural signifiers of Irishness by foreign audiences (112). Donlon's narrative begins with the recollection of her training in Irish step-dance, in which she emphasizes her disappointment in not being able to use her arms (85). The partial restriction of the body's movement led to Donlon's growing interest in classical ballet, which later brought her international fame and acknowledgement. The focus of the analysis is on her creative process in adapting a poem by the Irish poet Brendan Kennelly to the stage of the Stuttgart Ballet, in which Donlon was seeking to reach back to her Irish roots. By incorporating elements of traditional Irish step-dance into the stylistic frames of modern dance and classical ballet, Donlon redefined her Irishness by means of choreographic expression—in a creative process which she situated "somewhere between remembering and forgetting" (85). Cronin's essay reflects on similar processes of self-definition: her analysis presents a fascinating insight to her work with iconic dancer-choreographer Pina Bausch, and gives a detailed account of her contributions to Bausch's rehearsal processes. Cronin describes how she was required to trace, research, and perform her own Irishness in response to a set of tasks called the *Aufgaben* as part of Bausch's rehearsal methodology, which was an approach that demanded dancers' personal engagement with their own cultural heritage. In her creative reflection to the theme "A Dance from Your Country," Cronin presented a choreography that relied largely on elements of Irish step-dance, in which, she later acknowledged, she had no formal training, and only recalled some steps from her early childhood (110).

These two essays point towards two interesting directions of thought. Firstly, considering that the most important element of the process of discovery

“for Cronin was ‘spending time’ with memory,” her narrative, similarly to Donlon’s account, emphasizes the importance of remembrance and the recollection of embodied experience in identity formation. This presupposes the necessity of a certain distance in creative self-reflection, even in cases when the discovery is made through the most subjective engagement with time, triggered by the physical involvement of the body. Secondly, both Cronin’s and Donlon’s performative statements on their Irish cultural belonging provide examples for “inauthentic” renditions of a style of dance that is internationally labelled as Ireland’s cultural trademark. Although neither of the authors aspired to authenticity in these performances, both refer to their works (and many of their subsequent projects on international platforms) being received as “typically Irish,” which brings us to the questions of national stereotypes, simplifications, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations (97). In relation to this, Cronin quotes Ninette de Valois, who claimed herself, alongside other internationally acclaimed artists with an Irish background, “a hoarder of matters Irish,” pointing to the oversimplified labeling that is an inevitable part of the reception of productions that are engaged with its performers’ national identity and cultural traditions (112).

Beside their commentary on the creative processes of self-definition, the aforementioned discussions provide useful examples for “embodied research”—a practice-based research approach that involves the researcher’s personal and corporeal engagement with the studied material (108). Possible methodologies for this type of research are most comprehensibly described by Foley, whose chapter discusses the author’s own method of “preserving the intangible cultural heritage” of Irish traditional step-dance (67). In her study, Foley summarizes her personal journey of collecting dances from elderly step dancers of the Kerry region to preserve performance styles that were on the decline due to the influences of modernity (74). In her investigations, she relied largely on her own embodied experience in learning these dances, which she later amended by applying a method of dance notation (Labanotation) that she mastered as part of her professional training in Laban Studies in London (75).

Foley’s chapter brings to light two important aspects of the possible uses of dance, both of which provide interesting starting points for further critical thought and discussion. The first observation stems from the apparent similarity between Foley’s case and the examples by Donlon and Cronin, concerning how authors’ international connections affected their relationship to the traditions of their native cultures. In all three projects, it was the multinational context (manifested in international productions or studies) that triggered and facilitated the performers’ reevaluation of their country’s national values, therefore demonstrating the importance of intercultural “connections in motion” in processes of identity formation (2). The second point that

requires further attention is that, despite its similarities with uses of dance described in earlier chapters, Foley's approach is contrastive to the previous examples in terms of its motivation and practical aim. Whereas all of the other practitioners exploited the possibilities of movement and choreographic expression to stimulate cultural change in forms of personal and collective discoveries, Foley applied it as a tool *against* change and transformation, and relied on corporeality as an aid for the preservation and protection of national cultural inheritances. This contrastive yet complementary juxtaposition of the uses of dance in the thread of presented examples points out the multitude of possibilities this form of expression carries, which is one of the most revealing arguments of the volume.

The collection concludes with essays discussing how dance transformed individual artists' experiences in their modes of expression, and how it became an "agent of change" in their body of work. Most of the chapters in this section focus on literature: among others, Susan Jones writes about the influence of modern dance on the style of Samuel Beckett's prose and drama, Siobhán Purcell discusses the performative aspects of the works of James Joyce and Beckett as inspired by the figure and art of modernist dancer Lucia Joyce (whose talent as an illustrator and important contributions to her father's works the chapter highlights), and Margaret Mills Harper analyses dance and the role of the dancer in W. B. Yeats's poetry. Harper's chapter, besides providing insightful reinterpretations of several of Yeats's most well-known poems with regard to their appropriations of the figure of the dancer, highlights how the poet's interest in corporeality and bodies in motion affected his logic and creative thought. The central argument of the paper is that Yeats's professional engagements with dance and Modernist dancers led him towards reformulating the "ideational structures" of his works (both creative and philosophical), which was a change inseparable from his experiments in occult practices (4). Harper defines this shift as a move for Yeats from being a "binary thinker"—understanding the working mechanism of the universe in terms of antinomies and oppositional qualities—to envisioning the driving force of life as being derived from the constantly changing relationship between these polarities (163). In other words, in Yeats's thought, "art and life" were reimagined as oppositions *in motion* (163). In addition to reinforcing the influence of dance on the poet's oeuvre, this thought provides new insight to the interpretation of the structure and dramaturgy of Yeats's later poetry and plays as inherently dynamic and dance-like. Another important statement Harper makes is that in Yeats's vision, movement not only constitutes the core of powerful life, but also always points towards something unreachable and unfathomable—to an "unsettled territory" that seeks to be, but never could be, conquered (161). With this claim, the essay turns back to the idea of considering literary representations and academic

discourses on movement as essentially open-ended and thus “impossible,” yet at the same time encourages and justifies the validity of these dialogues taking place (158).

The final piece in the volume, by Jan Frohburg and Tanja Poppelreuter, is a refreshing exception among discussions on literature, as it elaborates on the interplay of choreographic expression with music, performance, and architecture, presented through the work of German-American architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. This closing chapter not only provides a fascinating overview of Mies van der Rohe’s achievements as a pioneer of Modernist architecture, but gives a holistic overview of the manifold links between different art forms at the turn of the century, which nicely encapsulates the scope and primary aim of the volume.

The joint conclusion of the discussions in the collection is that dance has always been a means to find new possibilities, both for the creative individual and, through performance, education, and research, for the larger community as well. In the kaleidoscopic vision of the present volume of essays, these possibilities unfold in most engaging ways, through the accounts of personal and shared “connections in motion” (2).