Some influences on T. S. Eliot: especially dance

Eliot greatly valued the work of others: in his essay ‘ Tradition and the Individual Talent’, he argues that in order to fully develop their work, a poet must engage deeply with the writers who have come before them. He wrote in literary magazine *The Egoist* in July 1919:

> there is a close analogy between the sort of experience which develops a man and the sort of experience which develops a writer. [...] The relation is a feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy, with another, probably a dead author. [...] it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of this sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost, [...] from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person. The imperative intimacy arouses for the first time a real, an unshakeable confidence. That you possess this secret knowledge, this intimacy, with the dead man, [...] can call yourself alone his friend: it is something more than encouragement to you. It is a cause of development, like personal relations in life.

Eliot was deeply influenced by a vast range of writers, including dramatic poets (Shakespeare, John Webster), anthropologists (Sir James George Frazer, Jane Harrison), philosophers (Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant); the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning; Dante; French poets such as Jules Laforgue, Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire; his contemporaries, especially his friend and occasional editor, Ezra Pound; and ‘nonsense poets’, such as Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. He knew several different languages, and was interested in Sanskrit and Hindu thought, philosophy and religion. He also loved popular entertainment such as music hall, vaudeville and popular song. It is possible to trace all of these threads of influence, and more, in different parts of his work. This module cannot hope to cover all of Eliot’s enthusiasms, but will outline just one of his influences: his interest in dance.

Dancing

Eliot was fascinated by dance, particularly the performances of the Ballets Russes, a groundbreaking Russian ballet company, featuring the famous dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky. Founded and led from 1909–1929 by Sergei Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes created spectacular modern ballets combining many different art forms. Their sets and
costumes were designed by artists like Matisse, Max Ernst, Sonia Delaunay, Miro and Picasso; they worked with contemporary composers, such as Stravinsky; and they were hugely popular among the artistic elite of Paris and London. Their style of choreography was very different from traditional ballet. For example, in their production The Rite of Spring (1913), dancers were told to land flat-footed and stand with their feet turned inwards, the opposite of the usual pose in ballet, in which the feet are turned out and the dancers land gracefully, often en pointe (on tiptoe). This flat-footed approach created an odd, jerky choreography, as if the dancers were impersonating puppets; they also trembled, as if entering a trance. You can see a summary of the work of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes by watching this video: http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/audio-video/video/diaghilev.html

Eliot wrote of The Rite of Spring:

Whether Stravinsky’s music be permanent or ephemeral I do not know; but it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music.1


The first performance of The Rite of Spring, in 1913, caused a sensation and a near-riot in the audience, due to the wild violence and dissonance of its music, and the strangeness of its dancing. Despite the modern musical score, the story of the dance is described as ‘Pictures of Pagan Russia’, suggesting that it is also connected an imagined tribal past. Inspired by tribal rituals celebrating the arrival of spring, it tells the story of a girl who is chosen as a ritual sacrifice, and sentenced to dance herself to death. Eliot was familiar with works of anthropology by Sir George James Frazer (The Golden Bough) and Jane Ellen Harrison, and The Rite of Spring may have chimed with his interest in tribal rituals.

Exercise on Dance and Poetry: Read the following pieces of writing, which conclude with Eliot’s poem ‘The Burnt Dancer’ (1914).

‘In breaking down movement, in bringing it back to simple gestures, Nijinsky has brought expression back to the dance […] He takes the dancers and fixes their arms, he twists them, he would break them if he dared; he works on their bodies with unpitying brutality as if they were things; […] But this is done to tear from them all they can give in expression. And in the end they do speak.’

– Jacques Rivière, on the Ballets Russes performing the Rite of Spring (1913)

‘Movement, then, action, is, as it were, the goal and the end of thought. Perception finds its natural outlet and completion in doing. […] In animals, in so far as they act by “instinct,” as we say, perception, knowing, is usually followed immediately and inevitably by doing, by such doing as is calculated to conserve the animal and his species; but in some of the higher animals, and especially in man, where the nervous system is more complex, perception is not instantly transformed into action; there is an interval for choice between several possible actions. Perception is pent up and becomes, helped by emotion, conscious representation. Now it is, psychologists tell us, just in this interval, this space between perception and reaction, this momentary halt, that all our mental life, our images, our ideas, our consciousness, and assuredly our religion and our art, is built up. […] Art and religion, though perhaps not wholly ritual, spring from the incomplete cycle, from unsatisfied desire, from perception and emotion that have somehow not found immediate outlet in practical action.’

– Jane Harrison, Ancient Art and Ritual (1913)

‘Anyone who has observed one of the great dancers of the Russian school will have observed that the man or the woman whom we admire is a being who exists only during the performances, that it is a personality, a vital flame which appears from nowhere, disappears into nothing and is complete and sufficient in its appearance. […] There are only limited movements that he can make, only a limited degree of emotion that he can express. He is not called upon for his personality. The difference between a great dancer and a merely competent dancer is in the vital flame, that impersonal, and, if you like, inhuman force which transpires between each of the great dancer’s movements. […] I do not by any means intend the actor to be an automaton, nor would I admit that the human actor can be replaced by a
marionette. […] No artist produces great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table-leg.’
– T. S. Eliot, ‘Four Elizabethan Dramatists’ (1924)

‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.’

The Burnt Dancer
Within the yellow ring of flame
A black moth through the night
Caught in the circle of desire
Expiates his heedless flight
With beat of wings that do not tire
Distracted from more vital values
To golden values of the flame
What is the virtue that he shall use
In a world too strange for pride or shame?
A world too strange for pride or blame
Too strange for good or evil:
How drawn here from a distant star
For mirthless dance and silent revel

O danse mon papillon noir!

The tropic odours of your name
From Mozambique or Nicobar
Fall on the ragged teeth of flame
Like perfumed oil upon the waters
What is the secret you have brought us
Children’s voices in little corners
Whimper whimper through the night
Of what disaster do you warn us
Agony nearest to delight?
Dance fast dance faster
There is no mortal disaster
The destiny that may be leaning
Toward us from your hidden star
Is grave, but not with human meaning

O danse mon papillon noir!

Within the circle of my brain
The twisted dance continues.
The patient acolyte of pain,
The strong beyond our human sinews,
The singèd reveller of the fire,
Caught on those horns that toss and toss,
Losing the end of his desire
Desires completion of his loss.
O strayed from whiter flames that burn not
O vagrant from a distant star
O broken guest that may return not

O danse danse mon papillon noir!

Drawing on the pieces above, answer any of the following questions:

1) How do you see the ‘papillon noir’ (‘black butterfly’ or moth) in ‘The Burnt Dancer’? Is it anything more than a moth?

2) Do you see any connection between the kind of choreography Nijinsky is described as creating, and the way in which Eliot describes writing poetry?

3) What do you think Eliot means by ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion’? Does this connect to ‘The Burnt Dancer’ in any way?
4) Explore the relationship between ‘agony’ and ‘delight’ in ‘The Burnt Dancer’.

5) ‘Art and religion, though perhaps not wholly ritual, spring from the incomplete cycle, from unsatisfied desire’ (Jane Harrison): explore ‘incomplete cycles’ and ‘unsatisfied desire’ in ‘The Burnt Dancer’.