

Review of Choreographing History, edited by Susan Foster

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Dils, A. (1997) Review of Choreographing History, edited by Susan Foster, *Dance Research Journal* 29 (2), 110-113.

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CHOREOGRAPHING HISTORY edited by Susan Leigh Foster. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. xiii + 264 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 clothbound. \$14.95 paperbound.

Choreographing History and Dance Historiography

Choreographing History, a collection of essays edited and introduced by Susan Leigh Foster, explores the pitfalls and possibilities inherent in writing about the body and its cultural emanations. Since its publication in 1995, I have used essays from the book to help dance graduate students push their thinking beyond the studio and their own physical experience and to realize the varied resources, approaches, and theoretical positions possible in writing about the body. The collection contains some excellent movement description and also theoretical language so dense as to obscure any communication of ideas.

I recently reread the book in search of information on dance historiography. There are few works on the methods, problems, and progress of historical writing in dance. Selma Jeanne Cohen's *Next Week, Swan Lake is* the best-known book, although the introductions to most histories and a few articles also explore the subject (1). Foster in her introduction and Susan Manning, Cynthia Novack, and Lena Hammergren in their contributed essays provide a substantial addition to this body of work.

Foster begins her essay by exploring the problems movement poses for writing history. How are historians to deal with the body, movement, and the meaning these produce when the relationship between these is not natural, always changing, and understood only within a particular context? How are they to write about the body knowing that bodies behave in unexpected ways? How can historians rely on their current bodies and movement experiences to give them reliable comparisons to the past? The later part of Foster's essay explores approaches to writing about the body, focusing on an upsurge in interest in the body by dance theorists, anthropologists, and historians in the 1930s and changes in thinking about the body that occurred in the 1960s.

The middle part of her introduction explores the process of writing history. Many of these ideas are expressed in older, standard historiographies, including those by Marc Bloch, Edward Hallet Carr, and C.V. Wedgwood, but Foster recasts them in dance terms (2). All these authors discuss the difficulty of finding reliable historical information and the splintered nature of that information, the necessity to think beyond personal interests and training to find resources, and the necessity to think carefully about who recorded historical information and why. All discuss the difficulty of realizing an historical event within a fully fleshed understanding of the period.

Like other historiographers, Foster discusses the excitement and danger of having some historical event suddenly jump into vivid certainty; of having an historical figure seem to lead the narrative or the imagined dance or of having a past event enlivened because of a current happenstance. These points are made explicit in an essay by Manning, known for her work on Mary Wigman. Manning recalls an instance that occurred at a 1992 outdoor movement ritual organized by Anna Halprin and held during the scholarly conference that gave origin to this collection of essays. At one moment in the ritual, Manning ran toward a tree to join others in her group.

It was when the group gathered around the base of the tree and reached up to touch its bark that I pulled back, attempting to drag a friend with me. The association with Nazi nature workshop—all those groups of Hitler Youth camping out together—seemed so direct that I couldn't remain part of the event. (p. 173)

Manning goes on to examine her reaction, thinking about the event, its relationship to various community-based events past and present and to her own history, and about others' reactions to the movement ritual. She arrives at an insight about her stance as an idealized spectator in her writing about Wigman. While Manning uses this incident to reflect upon her writing, she demonstrates how current events can seem to bring the past into our lived experience.

New concerns explored by Foster, Manning, Novack, and Hammergren include the difficulty of recognizing assumptions about how the body works and the importance of polyvocality. Novack provides the clearest example of how dancers and dance scholars fail to examine assumptions about the body. After her participation in the same movement ritual discussed by Manning, Novack felt that,

For a conference examining writing about the body and the choreography of history, the unreflexive ritual struck an odd chord, one that promoted a particular view of movement and choreography without making that view explicit. Halprin's implicit assumption of bodily knowledge as essential, mindless truth, and of dancing as a spontaneous expression, devoid of choreographic intent or inspiration, exemplifies a particular construction of the body..., what I have called "the responsive body." (p. 178)

Novack goes on to report that when a discussion arose, few could or would discuss the event analytically and, at the same time, Halprin was upset that conference participants would emphasize thought over feeling. In Foster's introduction, she extends this discussion of the importance of recognizing tacit assumptions about the body to writing about the past. These "bodily theotics" must be discovered before the historian can set an historical body moving in her imagination or on the page.

Manning's insight about polyvocality is further explored in Hammergren's essay and in Foster's introduction. Using her research on Isadora Duncan in Sweden as an example, Hammergren asks readers to imagine writing as an audience member on the evening of a Duncan performance and writing as a current historian who understands Duncan's subsequent career and impact on her profession (p. 188). Foster illustrates the point in verbal and graphic terms. In the visual choreography of her opening page, headings, subheadings, and three different kinds of type organize Foster's voices. She uses an italicized, introspective "I" for the writing body, a declarative, sans-serifed "we" for her voice as trained historian, and a serifed "one" for Foster as current scholar, the most prevalent voice. The author introduces these voices, then switches to her scholar mode for most of the essay, bringing back the italicized and sans-serifed print to describe a bout between Terpsichore and Clio as a conclusion.

The effect of this is to make the writing performative; I find my attention focused on Foster's self-presentations and on the movement she generates in the text. I glimpse Foster sitting at her desk, squinting, groping to formulate a description as she describes herself, but I also see her moving between things she has read as evidenced by her footnotes and things she must be writing. I wonder if Foster's interest in bodily theotics, for example, is evident in her now published *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (3). The most uncomfortable aspect of Foster's introduction is that she rarely uses examples. The essays following explicate much of what Foster introduces, but she provides no neat immediate example to clarify and close her thought.

Foster points out one final difficulty in writing dance history, that of preserving the sense of the body's agency, of writing about the body as a generator of ideas and action rather than a repository for other cultural forces. Here, Susan McClary in "Music, the Pythagoreans, and the Body" provides the best example.

On May 12, 1965, producer Jerry Wexler approached some studio musicians during a recording session and said, "Why don't you pick up on this thing here?" He then executed a brief physical gesture for the musicians. Guitarist Steve Cropper later explained: "[Wexler] said this was the way the kids were dancing; they were putting the accent on two. Basically, we'd been one-beat-accenters with an afterbeat, it was like 'boom dah,' but here this was a thing that went 'unchaw,' just the reverse as far as the accent goes.... [Drummer]

Al [Jackson] and I have been using that as a natural thing now, ever since we did it. We play a downbeat and then two is almost on but a little bit behind, only with a complete impact. It turned us on to a heck of a thing."(4) The resulting tune, Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour" (p. 84)

McClary uses this example to explain music as a social, body-driven practice rather than one derived from math-based theory. Her example also serves to point out the necessity of looking for instances of bodily agency in everyday behavior and in situations beyond the dance realm where the impact, rather than only the act of, movement is apparent.

In order to write about the body as generating change, dance historians may need to turn to writing historical fiction, a form that allows for more detailed description, or to writing histories that focus on the everyday. To my knowledge, no one has written a microhistory about dance, in the way that Carlo Ginzburg made the everyday the forerunner of and key to understanding religious belief in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (5). While there are many dance stars and big dance events to excavate and many new perspectives from which to rewrite the past, our thinking might be best honed by a change in scope.

NOTES

1. *Next Week, Swan Lake: Reflections on Dance and Dances* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982). Other books and articles containing writing on dance historiography include: Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Ann Daly, "What Revolution?" *Ballet international* (January 1991): 4950; Christens L. Schlundt, "The Still Point of Perfection," in *Proceedings: Dance History Scholars Fifth Annual Conference* (Boston, 13-15 February 1982): 103-110; and Richard Ralph, "On the Light Fantastic Toe: Dance Scholarship and Academic Fashion," *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts* 18, no. 2, (1995): 249- 260.
2. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953); Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); C.V. Wedgwood, *The Sense of the Past* (New York: Collier Books, 1960).
3. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
4. Cropper, quoted in Stokes, Tucker, and Ward, *Rock of Ages*, quoted in McClary.
5. Carlo Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).