Notes for *And They Were Dancing*

*Patricia Ticineto Clough*

The composition presented below, *And They Were Dancing*, is one of five such compositions that were created over the past nine years. During this time I have been engaged in rethinking the question of the subject in terms of the ontological turn suggested by Deleuzian philosophy, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontologies, as well as feminist theories including object-oriented feminism. Gaining attention in the academy in the early years of the twenty-first century, the ontological turn has encouraged a rethinking of human-centered thought in order to take up the non-human, or the agencies and animacies of objects, things, and environments. It might be thought that the turn to the non-human turns away from the human subject, the human body, human consciousness, and cognition, which cannot but raise the question: who are the subjects of this turn of thought or who became engaged with it one way or another? To raise this question does not have to mean simply reducing

---

1 I wrote three of the five compositions for presentation at the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts on panels that were part of the founding of object-oriented feminism (oof). The first panel was co-organized by Katherine Behar, Frenchy Lunning, and me. For an account of oof, see: Katherine Behar (ed.), *Object-Oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).
thought to the personal—biography or autobiography. Rather, it may lead us to reflect on the personal catch of arising world sensibilities, the feeling of thought stirring in a psychic arrangement, urging us to follow a subjective intuition.

There is an intuition expressed in my compositions. It is that the ontological turn to the non-human has been born in part of human subjects discouraged with what thought has given, discouraged with the world not so much unchanged by thought but discouraged with the changes in the world with which thought has become, or for too long has been enmeshed. There is despair perhaps among those who most believed in the power of reason and in their power in being reasonable. Yet, in this moment of despair there also is potentiality in reason’s giving way to a world sensibility, an awakening to the agencies and animacies of things, objects, and environments. Born of a felt despair and an intuited potentiality about thought itself, the ontological turn raises the question of the subject in the form of other questions: What is the representation of thought in philosophy, poetry, writing? What is the personal? What is the impersonal?

Are these questions nothing but versions of the perennial question of the woman: who is she? What does she want? This might well have been the case when the woman was seen to be the epistemological drive of modern thought, making it necessary for feminists to recover her, restore her, turning modern thought to her own ends—what would become part of the overdetermination of postmodernity. But it is not now that time; it is not that time, even though women still suffer, albeit differently, violence to their minds, bodies, and souls, violations of their life capacities. It is not that time; the despair and self-blaming over

---

the arrogance of modern thought now belongs to all of us, albeit unevenly. After all, postmodern thought demanded that everyone have their representative, so that representation of difference and identity became the aim of one wave of feminism after another, one wave of criticism after another; and we have also seen difference and identity become the currency of biopolitical governance and financial capitalism. In this context, the complaint we might raise against certain strains of the ontological turn as just more of the exclusions constitutive of modernist and postmodernist thought cannot give criticism enough psycho-political traction. For criticism to have psycho-political traction at this moment, I think it is necessary to create, to intervene quickly and steadily, to make something of what comes from thought as it sparkles before us, alluring, beautiful, enlivening, and possibly terribly dangerous. This is not just to make do, but to do, to mobilize creatively. This is my effort in the compositions I have been creating such as the one presented here.

My compositions make use of poetic expressions of childhood memory of trauma and family violence, letting them serve as commentary on current philosophy and critical theory. The poetic expressions draw on my re-experiencing of childhood memories in a psychoanalysis that I have been undertaking during the past nine years. Re-experiencing is an awkward word for conveying what happens to the subject of an analysis. This is because analysis is not so much about remembering childhood experience as much as it is experiencing with another the way objects — persons, things, environments — have become a psychic arrangement of forces and appetites, an infrastructure of (dis)attachment, repetitiously reenacted with more or less tenacity but always with some quantum of difference that is distributed unconsciously, if not non-consciously, across the arrangement. My compositions, while about trauma and family violence in the personal aesthetic of psychoanalysis, also stretch psychoanalysis to sociopolitical trauma, putting me beside myself, as I dissipate into the surrounds to become with other bodies, things, objects, environments, the stuff of poetry, making beautiful speculation about these traumatic times of violence within and without the
family, the community, the nation-state, the colony, the camp. These are the times in which the philosophy and critical theory about which I write are occurring as symptom of these times or as creation against them — perhaps both.

I say beautiful not sublime, as the objects, things, and environments are not experienced as passive things; they are not only an effect of our doing. Rather, they demand something from us as if they had a liveliness of their own, a lively receptivity for a psychic arrangement. Our trauma also finds itself in the intensity of the rhythms and vibrations of these things, objects, and environments. Writing becomes a critical method that is more than representational and necessarily compositional, a matter of piecing together as a practice of allurement or enthrallment, offering a resource both of stunning clarity and tantalizing obfuscation. As such, the compositions are meant to entice those who read them, to seduce a participation in the question of the subject in the form of the other questions about philosophy, poetry writing, the personal, the impersonal of all things, human and nonhuman. To raise the question of the subject then is not to return, or to recover what has been excluded. It is to create, to compose, to intervene, to mobilize. It is to dance.

And They Were Dancing

And they were dancing:
she in a salmon colored silk gown
and he in black patent leather shoes.
They were dancing to the big band music of those times, their times.
In waves of motion, they glide past me. Gracefully,
practiced at the intricate footwork of the Peabody.
And they were dancing in those times, in time, seemingly carefree,
until a bit off beat, a tangle of feet, she slips and falls.
He goes down with her, landing on his knee.
Slow motion to dead time.
Then, suddenly
she spits words of disdain directed at him
sending a spasm of violence
through the stylish choreography of the Peabody.

My eyes shut tight.
My ears refuse to function. But something passes through:
the musical tones and the dance steps.
Sensibilities ingressing into actuality,
ghosting the present potentiality
Her afterlife and his: lingering lingering

If recently dance has captured the attention of critical theory, it is because its kinesthetic abundance not only instigates conceptual movement beyond the fixity of received categories. It also is because dance directly addresses what the body can do, and not only the human body but other bodies too — the choreographic body or object that tweaks the time of everyday movement, inviting movement to tend toward the time of the event and the experience of potential in the feel of the future in the present, when an object no longer seems to be quite what you thought it was, and the experience of time no longer feels as linear. And time slips and the choreographic objects dance:

Her silk gown thrown on the bed
and the white gardenias he gave her browning at the edge
in my head playing like a black and white movie from 1934,
before the fall, when they met in the glove factory.
He always would say that he fell in love with her immediately
hearing her sing over the din of the sewing machines.
Did he whisper: I adore you
in her ear, as they danced the Peabody
seemingly carefree,
in waves of motion gracefully past me?

“Events are only events because they perish.” “Perishing is inevitable.” Events come and perish but not into nothingness. Perished events are like memories ready for reactivation that,
nonetheless invent new movement. And the violence too is reactivated inventively, even more cruelly for that: the spasm of violence from them to me through the stylish choreography of the Peabody.

The spasm begins “in stillness and crescendos to extreme intensity and then dissipates.” But it reiterates its presence again and again unexpectedly; sometimes, its effects disappear immediately and other times they linger indefinitely, corrosive and tenacious, impregnating everything that I am resolved to grasp bringing to ruin whatever beauty there might be.

And she spits words of disdain and he to his knee again and again
The spasm of violence from them to me
I do not see.
I do not hear.
I do not know that I am there

The spasm happens from within as the body attempts to escape from itself. “It is not I who attempts to escape from my body; it is the body that attempts to escape from itself by means of…a spasm.” In dance, the spasm performs the body at the edges of representation at the limits of sense as it moves into sensation.

Sensations moving in both directions simultaneously disorienting exterior and interior, a motion that touches those who see that touches me, making unclear what of this spasming flesh will come to be my body.

It was five years before she would agree to marry him, pitying him, she said, for having waited each and every day for her to reply. And it is as if I were there to see from the start, even before the fall, a tear in the movie from 1934. What was he waiting for? The block against love was already there, tearing apart body from psyche, tenderness from sexuality, leaving only isolated moments of release, there on the ballroom floor, leaving an excess of energy entering me bodily.

Their dancing, like a primal scene,  
an event of violent agitation,  
a spasm agitating the flesh of their bodies enmeshed  
before I am me, if ever it is to be,  
if ever there is to be a body for me  
other than their bodies, laying there  
I should not see. I should not hear.  
I should not know what happens there.  
So near to their bed I lay,  
the fingers of my left hand tracing  
a sensing without touching,  
a dwelling in the shaping of the flowers  
made of brownish-red mahogany on the foot board of their bed.

It is said that it was to cure a spider’s bite that her female ancestors from Sicily first danced the tarantella, producing a trance-like frenzy that also struck fear especially in men who should care but didn’t: fathers, brothers, husbands, doctors, priests. Later they would dance the tarantella when Sicily resisted the North’s imposition of the unification of Italy and throughout the massive migration at the turn of the twentieth century, the dance continued among women who were left behind or who were on their way to factories here, there and everywhere. Just as the dancing led to southern Italian women being characterized in Northern Italy as savage, superstitious or crazy, a generation later, when the women arrived in the glove factories, they
often still were seen as primitive, insane, promiscuous, and racially inferior.\(^6\)

> Was it the spider bite of history
> that made her spit poisonous disdain
> that made her female ancestors seem to others
> what she finally became:
savage superstitious insane?

**Spider (or Tarantula): It is the spirit of revenge or resentment. Its power of contagion is its venom. Its will to punish and to judge. Its weapon is the thread, the thread of morality. It preaches equality (that everyone become like it).**\(^7\)

The Peabody was danced from the early decades of the twentieth century to the years following a depression and a world war as consumerism was expanding and movies were giving ballroom dancing a wide-screened envisioning. But the dance would not be transmitted to the dancers’ children. They would move to the beat of rock-and-roll in years just before the onrush of postmodernity and after dance would take itself off the dance floor and outside to the streets in hip-hop, breakdancing, and skateboarding. The unity of technique and choreography broken, dance was opened to another sociality.

If recently dance has captured critical attention, it may be for its excess energy, the in-excess of choreography. Dance no more than any other cultural practice is not simply produced by following rules. The dancing body, in “its kinesthetic specificity formulates an appeal […] to be apprehended and felt,” encouraging participation and a return to the scene of dancing again and again. This is “its own version of unabsorbable excess” that comes back to the body “overwhelms the senses” as a “dreaded

---


\(^7\) I take these words from Gilles Deleuze on Nietzsche. See *Pure Immanence: Essay on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 94.
figure of contagion,” like a devil dancing jealously, spitefully, hatefully in and around the pieces of bedroom furniture of a brownish red mahogany.8

She dreamed that he would purchase them for her. Mirrors, chairs, dressers and the bed, where they lay just beyond mine, a cot with an iron frame cold to the touch of my fingers counting out the beats fingers like dancing feet. And I begin to wonder about the numbers in my head that could be orderly ordering the excess of energy made into a choreography

Only in name primal, the scene was always meant to be blinding, deafening, stupifying so that its time seems to be forever after some past pleasure, etching in flesh the very definition of pleasure as endless guilty longing for what has actually never been.

The child left there only to see, hungrily, awaiting what cannot be. Yearning turning into the bitter haunting of an abstract power, the power of the past randomly to drain the potentiality of the present again and again, differently. Yet always starting with a choice, not made by me alone but also by some force

of an arrangement of feet, of sheets, of the metal frame of my bed of my fingers tracing brownish red feeling again for potentiality in the mahogany feeling for the wild probabilities in a body of artistic experimentation for the proliferation of sensibilities in-excess of choreography now, more commonly realized digitally in a program for calculating reality but other species of actuality too other genres of humanity.

“The program is bound up in the materialization of [...] a normative field.” It is “a scrim of expectation overlaid upon the real” which all the actants uphold in “a web of influence, and motivation,” defending against the violation of an expressive outburst or physical act. But “the event is a violent exception or amplification, an object of fascination or concern that destabilizes a stabilized field.” As such, the event is also the bearer of potentiality in excess of the program, in excess of choreography.

This is dance as it assembles the gestures of actual bodies with those of virtual bodies, with virtual movements. In this sense to dance is to experiment. “Dance operates as a kind of pure experimentation” with the body’s capacity to be whatever it assembles.

I catch the gestures mid-flight immobilizing them in the night by means of “an ontological measuring” that nonetheless is receptive to the pressure of potentiality: “a living relationship


10 I take these thoughts and words from Jose Gil, “Paradoxical Body,” in Planes of Composition, 96–97.
that intermingles intensities with two extensive quantities,” a mother and a father right there near my bed where I lay.11

I am looking back at them. Still looking back for them in the analysis of psychic memory and in a research in philosophy, studying that impossibility of fleeing in those moments when an extreme tension, a pain, a sensation of uneasiness surges toward an outside that does not exist, something that is so constituted as to make fleeing impossible while also making it necessary. It is necessary to flee this impossibility of a no outside, no elsewhere. Like the drive of sexuality, this specific excitation cannot find its discharge outside psychic memory but may never cease in its efforts to do so. To dance.

And they were dancing. In my head like in a movie from 1934, they criss-cross the ballroom floor. Their bodies facing each other, each slightly to the side of the other, they dance with some speed the intricate steps of the Peabody, indicating which steps next to take through eyes looking furtively and fingers pressing with certainty in the curve of the back or in the fold of the arm.

Like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astair
they were dancing gracefully
until a bit off beat, a tangle of feet
They fall
They fall
They fall together forever.

The experience of falling, falling forever, is thought to have no language and rather be a wordless bodily memory of a body being without any relation or orientation and instead being in an ongoing, near complete dissociation as profound anxiety dances free in bodily memories.12


Yet in its backward-looking glance, the history of dance turns the error of the fall to insight about what has come to ruins and what can arise out of ruins: bodies dancing against destruction, with hope against despair, cutting through the verticality, falling to horizontality, a laterality of movement. If modern dance still is vertical while opening to the contraction, the spiral and the rapid fall to the ground, in postmodernism, there is a clearer break from the vertical, as the hinge between inside and outside is at least partially undone: dancing feet up the side of building walls and bodies flying down from high above. There is a release from being taut and vigilant. From responding in an upright position to the body’s being on the floor and more, the body moves through elegant yet disjointed, unexpected articulations that call forth a reorientation of bodily spaces in relation to the forces of gravity. Traumatic drops to the knee and falling down to the ground become ordinary for bodies used to dangerous situations where risking may be the only relief. But there is more, as the body, still moving, may seize the moment where minor differences can make all the difference, where wild probabilities still prevail as forces of the real.\footnote{I take the history of dance referenced in this last paragraph from Martin, \textit{Knowledge LTD}, 143–212.}