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The Ekphrastic Body: Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works*

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ABSTRACT
In *Woolf Works* (2015), how does choreographer Wayne McGregor transpose literary modernism into dance? This essay explores how the concept of ekphrasis—the translation of a work of art from one aesthetic medium to another—illuminates McGregor's ballet. The Virginia Woolf novels that McGregor represents in dance contemplate questions of character, beauty, and the sublime. As an analytical framework, ekphrasis helps to examine historical difference inherent in the reinterpretation of artworks. In McGregor's ballet, that difference involves how Woolf's aesthetic categories reappear today.

KEYWORDS
Ekphrasis; Wayne McGregor; dance; ballet; Virginia Woolf; beauty; sublime

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." The first line of Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel introduces the reader to a character who seeks beauty as her purpose. The story follows a single day's journey in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a party: "For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except…."[1] Except after the war, access to beauty may not be possible. The shadows of death, injustice, and trauma rear their heads when she delights in spring's flowers or contemplates the beautiful. This is why one critic asks, "How nihilistic a character is Clarissa Dalloway?"[2]

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel about doubles: beauty and violence; public and private space; the modern city and "pastoral nostalgia"; past and present; the homogenous, empty time of Big Ben and traumatic memory—fragmented, devastated.[3] And through the doubling of the upper-class lady and the shell-shocked soldier, the text announces itself as an exploration of character, which for Woolf is the foundational element of the novel form.[4] Woolf is searching for a new aesthetic form that represents the eternal qualities of human character and simultaneously remains true to her time.

In May 2015, the Royal Ballet staged the world premiere of Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works: A Triptych* (see Figure 1). The work achieved both critical and box office success and was restaged during the Royal Ballet's 2016–2017 season. I attended performances in 2015. It is a full-length ballet, created around three of Woolf's novels: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931). The rich collaborative work

Figure 1. Beatriz Stix-Brunell and Alessandra Ferri in Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works: A Triptych*, with kind permission from Dave Morgan@Dance Tabs, courtesy of the Royal Opera House.

includes an original score for full orchestra by Max Richter, film, lighting, costumes, a monumental architectural setting, and of course Woolf's stories and McGregor's choreography.[*] This last element, for the most part, departs from McGregor's signature movement vocabulary of extremity to explore a palette that speaks to the lyricism, beauty, loss—the intense human experiences—that Woolf's writings embody. The ballet engages the question of character: modernist, Woolfian character—inconceivable here without beauty.

Why now? Why the urge or the need to reinterpret Woolf's novels for the contemporary stage?[†] And this from a choreographer who has the ability to capture the spirit of the age, who often seems ahead of the times, following no one, creating form and urgency. When we study a text from the past, we not only glimpse the era in which it appeared but it also illuminates our time—for instance, Beethoven's late compositions, or works by

[*] The ballet's creative team: direction and choreography—Wayne McGregor; music—Max Richter; designers—Cigue, We Not I, Wayne McGregor; costume designer—Moritz Junge; lighting designer—Lucy Carter; film designer—Ravi Deepres; sound designer—Chris Ekers; dramaturg—Uzma Hameed. See Uzma Hameed, "Woolfian Perspectives," program notes for *Wolf Works: A Triptych*, the Royal Ballet, Royal Opera House, London, May 11–16, 2015.

[†] In *Woolf Phrase* (2001), William Forsythe deconstructs *Mrs. Dalloway* in dance. McGregor's interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway* in *Woolf Works* is something different: it fully embodies the novel's modernism while simultaneously staying true to our present—a difficult task.

Cézanne, Nijinsky, Woolf. Like any work on the cusp, these texts are multiply located—aesthetically, historically, and politically. New styles can change what the past is, shape the present (the Wildean idea that life imitates art), and reimagine the ways the future unfolds.[5]

McGregor may have delved into Woolf's work simply because it is beautiful. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, aesthetics scholar Elaine Scarry states that beauty urges us to recreate it: when we encounter something beautiful, we want to replicate it. She begins her book with the example of Walter Pater who represents "now in sentences—Leonardo's acts, so that the essay reenacts its subject, becoming a sequence of faces: an angel, a Medusa, a woman and child, a Madonna, John the Baptist, St. Anne, La Giaconda."[6] With Pater's meditations on the *Mona Lisa*, Scarry chooses a remarkable and well-known example of modern ekphrasis: the translation of an image or artwork from one aesthetic medium to another. In a study that argues for the necessity of beauty to lead us to the just, Scarry begins with an ekphrastic encounter. Throughout the book, she continues Pater's example with her own replication of "art for the ages": vivid evocations of Homer, Dante, Matisse. It is to ekphrasis that I am moving, for *Woolf Works* can be read as an exercise in ekphrasis.

But why bring in this concept of ekphrasis to understand *Woolf Works* rather than something more established in the study of dance, such as "interdisciplinarity" or "intermediality"?[7] "Ekphrasis" is not a term commonly used in dance; yet the term is more precise, and it is meaningful to distinguish the differences between it and larger, generic categories.[8] The transformation of works from the sister arts into choreography lays the foundation for a myriad of dances. What is it that ekphrasis can lend to the study of McGregor's dance?

Ekphrasis

In modern literary and art criticism, ekphrasis is often defined as "the verbal representation of visual representation" or "words about an image."[9] The term itself comes from the Greek *ekphrazien*, meaning to "speak out" or "to tell in full."[10] If once a relatively obscure term in the arts and humanities, over the course of the twentieth century its scholarly study exploded. Some call it an invented tradition, which, in an astonishing feat of temporal and spatial transcendence, spans Western literature from Homer's depiction of Achilles's shield to John Keats's Grecian urn to John Ashbery's illusory self-portrait. In its modern incarnation, its primary disciplines have been understood to be the literary and visual arts, often replaying both the dominance of and competition between these art forms.

However, ekphrasis can also encompass other art forms: music, dance, theater, and so on.

Recent scholarship on ekphrasis has emphasized its location in the arts and attendant questions of medium, representation, and form. The interdisciplinary exploration summons the exhortations about the arts from the Roman poet Horace's *ut pictura poesis* (a poem should be like a painting) to Gotthold Lessing's cautionary tale about Laocoön and the autonomy of the art forms. Are the art forms one, or are they essentially different?[11] Yet the restriction of ekphrasis to the practice of describing works of art only began in the late nineteenth century and fully came to embody a new aesthetic genre in the mid-twentieth century. Classics scholar Ruth Webb argues that modern scholars have created a new genre of art criticism that emphasizes the description of works of art to the detriment of the true import of ekphrasis, which may be understood through its rhetorical origins. In so doing, these scholars reflect contemporary aesthetic and cultural concerns in a manner incommensurable with ancient definitions of ekphrasis that stress the impact on the listener, the understanding of language as a force acting upon the world, and the inextricable link to performance and the creation of a viewing subject.[12]

Classical sources show that ekphrasis was not restricted to the description of art objects but used to describe a wide array of things: people, places, events, as well as more abstract concepts such as character; nor did it even need to have a real referent but rather could summon an imaginative one.[13] The ancients understood it as a rhetorical tool that had pedagogical, cultural, and political implications. Its primary aim was to affect the listener. In the first century CE, in a Greek handbook of rhetoric, Theon defines ekphrasis as "a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes." Then Plutarch writes,

> The most powerful historian is he who, by the imaging of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting. Thucydides is always striving for this vividness (*enargeia*) in his writing, as he eagerly desires to make the listener a spectator, as it were, and to produce in the minds of his readers the feelings of astonishment and consternation which were experienced by those who witnessed the events.[14]

The listener is made to see. The vividness of language sidesteps the intellect and stirs the deepest emotions, enabling a moment of witnessing—to stand in the stead of another. The most successful rhetoricians used *enargeia* to engage the closely linked faculties of memory and imagination, sculpted by a collective memory and culture.[15] *Enargeia* is understood to be one of the "virtues of ekphrasis" and fundamental to the creation of society.[16] In antiquity, ekphrasis made that which was absent present; it met a material need before mechanical reproduction and created a cultural and historical record to be remembered and passed down. Ekphrasis was

deemed necessary for the education of viewers/listeners as citizens, begging the question of the canon and its place in the creation of a state.[17]

For the ancients, ekphrasis had a clearly delineated purpose. In "Why Ekphrasis?" literary critic Valentine Cunningham argues that the stakes for ekphrasis are equally as high today—the ekphrastic encounter makes a moral claim on us:

> The ethical note is clear: the voice of the ekphrastic is, often, like the Philomel set, morally weighted, admonitory, instructive; the ekphrastic encounter is commonly for the good of the fictional character, is morally heuristic. . . . What ekphrasis registers is the astonishing power of art to tell, convince, persuade, overwhelm, to mean strongly, to *be* with a transcendent force, to be a kind of truth: in other words, ekphrasis celebrates the wonder, the miracle, the shock of art, the *aura* of the art-object (to use Walter Benjamin's word), its *thauma* (to use the *Iliad*'s word).[18]

As Cunningham waxes lyrical in his description of ekphrasis, the question nags, how is the ekphrastic encounter any different from the disinterested contemplation of the beautiful? Cunningham's examples are helpful here; he brings together Homer and Benjamin. Regarding the *thauma* of Achilles's shield, poignantly Homer could not see what was on the shield for he was blind; he was repeating what the muses told him.[19] Historically, the invocation of the muse signaled that the artist was a vessel. The inspiration, genius, creativity did not issue from his own being (as an individual's powers) but passed through him: "Speaking for the muse . . . was to give voice to what all men share, or all would hear."[20] Similarly, Benjamin's aura has everything to do with the re-creation of tradition and community through older aesthetic forms, such as storytelling and the lyric, reinterpreted for a new age. Aesthetic forms are shaped by experience—wisdom—and are passed down through the ages: with each retelling, the stories bear traces of the storyteller, just as an earthen vessel bears the handprints of the potter.[21]

Why ekphrasis? Artists choose to reinterpret a work of art in another medium because they find something of value they wish to share. That value is part of a tradition, a history, that takes on the demands of a new period. More engaging than the moral claim for which Cunningham argues is the back and forth between past and present, between the historical context of the original text and how the text reappears in the present: how the original concerns, values, and questions are reassessed and changed to illuminate the now.

Modern notions of ekphrasis, and its dominant binary of word and image, have a special relationship to the dancing body that fills our literature: Joris-Karl Huysmans, Stéphane Mallarmé, Gustave Flaubert, T. S. Eliot, Oscar Wilde, Woolf are just a few who give literary representation to a dancer or a dance.[22] In *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of*

Mimesis in Literature, literary theorist Françoise Meltzer writes, "Huysmans's description [in *À Rebours*] . . . of Salome dancing, is at once ekphrastic—a 'telling in full,' the bringing to life of an art object—and, simultaneously, a refusal to frame his vision, for his [representation] in no way delimits the movements of the dancing scene to any proscenium or canvas edge."[23] Huysmans's translation of Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing before Herod* conjures the vivid oils of incarnadine and peacock green, yellow gold and speckled blue, and re-creates an image that whets the appetite: the body of a princess adorned only with jewels, dancing for all to see. If this is the seduction of the reader, it is also the perfect embodiment of "ekphrastic hope": the moment when Huysmans surrenders to the impossibility of his endeavor to tell all, allowing the reader to complete the image in the mind's eye through a leap of imagination.[24]

To dwell on the seduction for a moment: In a European American genealogy, literary representations of the racialized and gendered body have often occurred as a performative telling—Huysmans's Salome, Conrad's depiction of Kurtz's African mistress, the Jazz Age's love affair with Josephine Baker. The narrator is mesmerized as if in thrall to the gaze of Medusa, but today's reader is made uneasy by the rupturing language; we are not transported to a place of ekphrastic wonder but rather demand historical accountability and a retelling. Literary theorist W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the ambivalence constituting ekphrasis begins with the contest between the different art forms but ultimately belongs to the larger discourse around the encounter between self and other. Who is being represented? And how? The relationship to other peoples asks fundamental epistemological and ethical questions that carry implications of power, domination, and value.[25] Philosopher Lydia Goehr continues the critique of modern ekphrasis, which she says is "increasingly regarded as a technique illustrative of the autonomous, aesthetic power and capability of works of fine art to produce relations to other works of fine art" and as such is "separated from broader civic practices," eliding questions of history, politics, and viewing. She attends to just such questions in her essay on musical ekphrasis, in which she combines ancient and modern models of ekphrasis to give a powerful example of how to bring ekphrasis to bear upon the performing arts.[26]

To return to Huysmans's ekphrasis of *Salome Dancing*: What happens when the ekphrastic translation is not from image to word but rather from another art form (a poem, a painting, a play) to dance itself? Meltzer identifies a paradox in Huysmans's translation of the Moreau painting relevant for dance and the dancing body: something always exceeds its description or translation—for instance, imagination, temporality, and live performance. Questions of imagination and temporality affect all of the arts; what

is special here is that dance belongs to the performing arts. In antiquity, ekphrasis, with its "shattering impact" of *enargeia*, was not separate from live performance.[27] By bringing ekphrasis into dance, the emphasis is reoriented toward the uniqueness of live performance and its impact on an audience, but now with the addition of the ekphrastic body: Yeats's "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Ekphrasis emphasizes the triangulation of the artist, the work of art, and the beholder. Using ekphrasis as a conceptual tool for dance studies involves asking questions about the singular presence of the body and how the dancer and the dance rewrite history or tradition for an audience. Ekphrasis is a reinterpretation of a text that tells us as much about our own time as it does about a previous one. Its rhetorical tradition highlights the idea that texts are not dead; they are malleable and take on the concerns of a new age.[28] Reading *Woolf Works* as an ekphrastic text illuminates the dialogue between McGregor and Woolf. As the ballet unfolds, Woolf's questions about beauty and character become McGregor's own, historicized by meaningful difference.

Woolf Works: A Triptych

May 2015, London: Big Ben echoes, "There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air."[*] The scrim is as wide as the proscenium, except that it stands vertically. On its surface appear words falling upon each other and filling the screen, and we hear an excerpt from the only extant recording of Woolf's voice:

> Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, associations . . . . And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past. The splendid word "incarnadine," for example—who can use that without remembering "multitudinous seas"?

Woolf reads from "Craftsmanship" (1937), a short essay that discusses words as the medium of writing and the permanent mark of literature as opposed to the ephemerality of cornfields, of trees in a meadow, or even of buildings.[29] Some of the last words Woolf speaks before the music begins are "multitudinous seas incarnadine," conjuring Macbeth's lament about blood, murder, and guilt and interlacing Shakespeare with Woolf, history with questions of the just, and beauty with violence. As the scrim disappears, we see standing in its stead a solitary dancer, her body accumulating the resonances of Woolf's words. She moves imperceptibly—stepping up,

[*] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; New York: Harcourt, Brace 1981), 4; hereafter abbreviated as *MD*.

stepping down. A sense of stillness pervades the hall as the dancer prepares to take flight, to take over the telling of the story. The dancer's body replaces literature's words.[*]

McGregor's medium is the body, the very opposite of words on a page and ever so much more ephemeral, fragile, than those cornfields or trees. His reworking of Woolf's texts is a meditation on life, its tragedy and its joy, its beauty and beyond. In "Craftsmanship," Woolf asks, "How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question."[30] Is this McGregor's question? Within the postmodern world to which he is heir we certainly are at the beginning of a new aesthetic order if the movement vocabulary combines to ask how we create beauty, how we tell the truth.[†]

Woolf Works carries the subtitle, "A Triptych," a form that arose from early Christian art and contains three interwoven tableaux. McGregor translates Woolf's novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves* into three acts: "I Now, I Then," "Becomings," and "Tuesday." Each dance is approximately thirty minutes long. I focus on the first and third acts; together in their union of the beautiful and the sublime they fulfill a narrative arc and illuminate what these aesthetic categories mean today. Captivating us in these two sections is how the dancer acts as storyteller—here an older dancer, the exquisite Alessandra Ferri, playing the novels' main characters and also Woolf as muse, as artist, as human being. The second part deviates from this narrative device and a classical vocabulary, as it returns to McGregor's more established style. "Becomings" resumes the jagged movements, high-pitched speed, and signature undulating torsos that seem post-human in their eradication of expression to articulate extreme technicality and repetition. McGregor's choreographic style plants him within the terrain of a postmodern aesthetic, even if late. In the reviews of *Woolf Works*, many critics mention the startling differences in

[*] I viewed the ballet twice in May of 2015, during its premiere season. At times, I suspect my memory errs. However, because the viewer plays such a unique role in live performance, I agree with Stanley Cavell that these "errors of memory" are vital to what it means to remember a work. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), x. My analysis of "I Now, I Then" is based on the 2015 premiere. My analysis of "Tuesday" is based more on my subsequent viewing of the ballet's 2017 broadcast by the BBC.

[†] Elaine Scarry wrote *On Beauty and Being Just* at the turn of the millennium, which saw the re-evaluation of beauty as a pressing subject of scholarly inquiry. See, for instance, Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). Nehamas begins his study with a quotation from Barnett Newman, "The impulse of modern art was to destroy beauty" (p. 13). However, the rejection of beauty during the twentieth century was only one perspective, albeit a dominant one, linked to a late modernist/postmodern ethos that had significant influence in shaping both the arts and scholarship.

movement vocabulary between "Becomings" and the first and third sections.[31]

Lyricism, fluidity, and both joyful and ravaged expression saturate this new work. Called a story ballet, it nonetheless departs, like Woolf's literature, from nineteenth-century narrative forms. Her novels hinge not on plot but on beauty and character—both emerging through form.

More than one hundred years ago, at the inception of modernism in Britain, Woolf and art critic Roger Fry were electrified by questions of form. Alluding to Fry's 1910 exhibition, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, with paintings by Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse, Woolf quipped in her oft-repeated phrase, "On or about December 1910 human character changed."[32] Her contention was that the representation of character changed formally in painting. This was to augur a sea change in literature with Woolf at the vanguard demanding new tools for a new generation. She argued that the forms of the nineteenth century, preoccupied with a mimetic rendering of reality, could no longer truthfully encompass her generation's historical experience and vision. The artists Woolf and Fry championed sought a deeper essence—in Fry's words, post-impressionism's "treeness of a tree"—to combat the reign of appearance and commodification of art that exemplified broader societal shifts in values.[33] As is well known, modernism was a response to this crisis engendered by capitalist imperialism. It shattered more recent European styles and followed the lead of much older as well as contemporaneous forms, coming from European pre-Renaissance and African and Oceanic art respectively; these left their imprint not only on the visual arts, but also on all of the arts, marking their structures (forms) with a heterogeneity of time and space and the search for an inner essence.[*]

Woolf was keen to study new methods; she borrowed from the other arts to create an impact like that of a post-impressionist painting or even a late Beethoven quartet—prismatic, contrapuntal. Her modern portrait of

[*]It is a misconception to think of modernism as only the shock of the new, i.e., Ezra Pound's injunction "Make It New." Modernism was heavily influenced by the past, a past that did not embody a static or conservative tradition but rather spoke to that which created meaning through time and was passed down through form itself. The examples are endless: In his essays on post-impressionism, Fry repeatedly argues that these modern paintings do not symbolize a break with the past, but continue a much older painterly tradition stemming from the European pre-Renaissance. See Roger Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 61–116. In his writings, Benjamin returns to storytelling and epic and lyric poetry as forms that have potential for revolutionizing society. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 143–66; and Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 313–55. In *On the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky emphasizes that capitalist modernization led to the deadening of the senses. He insists on the necessity of the spiritual in the creation of European abstraction and celebrates works that explore older forms, such as Beethoven's use of the chorale form. See Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911; New York: Guggenheim Foundation, 1946). See also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) for a critique of the erasure of time and the slippage between pre-modern Europe and modern non-Western cultures.

Clarissa assumes the radical discoveries of character found in post-impressionism—for instance, Matisse's *The Girl with Green Eyes* (1908) or Cézanne's *Mme Cézanne in a Striped Skirt* (ca. 1877). Fry writes that Cézanne's "portrait of his wife has . . . the great monumental quality of early art, of Piero della Francesca or Mantegna. It has that self-contained inner life, that resistance and assurance that belong to a real image, not to a mere reflection of some more insistent reality."[34] If in the nineteenth-century novel, plot conveyed character, Woolf's modernist texts explore how formal elements themselves could constitute character. She experiments with form to create a character that is "self-contained," representing both her time and the eternal.[35] A multiplicity of perspectives, prism-like, contributes to the creation of Clarissa as a character. By destabilizing the voice of omniscience and our grasp of reality, Woolf questions the idea of who is known and how she is represented. The novelist molds character out of innovative and intertwined structural elements: free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, shifting narrative viewpoints, the sublimation of exterior events by interior reflection, the fragmentary, the disintegration of linear time.[36]

Are we not at a time similar to 1910s London, Berlin, Zurich, Paris: politically volatile, aesthetically ripe? A time that has potential to open up new aesthetic avenues and forge the future? If a century ago artists were beginning to question humanism and its attendant truths, a new generation is now searching for answers to the abyss of meaning that the turn away from humanism and beauty created throughout the long twentieth century.[37] The questions, then, for *Woolf Works* expand upon *why now*: What does the ekphrastic encounter enable us to see or imagine? How does the ballet interpret the questions of modernist beauty and character for our time?

Studying *Woolf Works* through ekphrasis engages questions of history and tradition; it does not, however, signify a recapitulation of a modernist aesthetic. McGregor's ekphrasis illuminates Woolf's texts and our age in a manner different from, say, the ekphrasis of George Balanchine's two-act *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1962) or Fredrick Ashton's one-act *The Dream* (1964), which both interpret Shakespeare's magical text with a fidelity to narrative and characterization. McGregor's full staging with music, film, lights, costumes, and architectural set also differ from Balanchine's modernist, formalist ballets, which depart from narrative and staging altogether. In the 1970s, philosopher David Michael Levin contextualized Balanchine's choreography within art history's discourse on modernist formalism. His essay points to the significance of reading dance with and through the other arts, while it also shows the changing questions and concerns in the arts and scholarship. Levin follows Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried's

project of separating the artistic disciplines and revealing the inner character of a medium. He celebrates Balanchine's formalism as a repudiation of external subject matter in order to demonstrate dance's singular possibilities. The abstractness of dance formalism (without story, mimetic gestures and postures, expression, theatricality) centers on the body as medium, which illuminates the movements of classical ballet and withdraws from the larger questions that structure human life.[38] Within a context of late capitalism, modernist formalism turns inward, proposing art as a value in itself.[39]

The modernist insistence on the autonomy of the art forms happened at a certain moment in history—after Woolf's modernism. McGregor's work shows that these concerns are not his. McGregor affirms the body as medium in a radically different way. His ekphrastic body—linked to literature's form and content—reveals the body not as a blank canvas, but as a human body, fragile and resilient, symbolizing the human condition and integrally tied to humanity and all the existential, political, historical, and moral questions that being human engenders. Through ballet's movement vocabulary and his unique artistic collaborations, McGregor explores the past and tradition while simultaneously addressing the concerns of our contemporary world. But how does one translate a novel that is a meditation on life—beauty, love, meaning, time, war, illness, suffering, death—into a ballet?

Woolf Works begins with a re-presentation of *Mrs. Dalloway*, called "I Now, I Then." Like Woolf, McGregor dips into time's depths: "What a lark! What a plunge!" (*MD*, 3). His ballet brings together the novel's two Clarissas: her present self, literature's *flâneuse* walking through London in this period after the war, and a much earlier, younger self (eighteen years of age) spending time in the country, filled with the unimaginable joys of youth and learning, new loves, stolen kisses, as well as the tragedies that sometimes beset even the young. McGregor casts two dancers as Clarissa: Ferri and Stix-Brunell. We see them together, not through the reveries or flashbacks of stream of consciousness but rather through the comingling of time and space that the medium of dance affords (see Figure 1). Woolf's expression of time is nonlinear, that of the everyday, striated by memory and the past. Indeed, her modernist novels demonstrate how the present produces the past. The strands of heterogeneous time (past, lived present, and the demands or possibilities of the future) are simultaneously interwoven.[40] With dance, McGregor is able to represent different temporalities at the same moment, without earlier selves being read as anachronistic. His two Clarissas dance together: lightness, beauty, ebullience—the pleasures of youth—fill the opening. Moth-like, the younger Clarissa moves with an incandescent glow. And then, similar to how Woolf structures a character's

perspective, with even minor figures darting in and out of the narration, so, too, McGregor choreographs the balletic entrance of secondary characters, adding to the abundance of intimacy and pleasure. The movement and costumes conjure those iconic gardens and parties remembered by all: where beauty dwells. But the war must intervene.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf devises the doubling of the upper-class lady and the shell-shocked soldier: two characters completely removed from one another by gender and class but living existentially together. As Big Ben tolls and the news of Septimus's death is announced, Clarissa realizes she understands this soldier with every fiber of her being: "There was an embrace in death" (*MD*, 184). What is essential to Clarissa as a character, writes literary scholar Harold Bloom, "is Septimus, her daemon, the vulnerable or Shelleyan genius that in itself is hallucinatory, but in Clarissa hovers always as a visionary apprehension just off to the side from madness. What saves her from madness is her image of a central self, crystalline and diamond, the Paterian image of an ascetic aestheticism as familiar to us from Wallace Stevens as it is from Virginia Woolf."[41] If Clarissa's illness (or the world's sorrow) continuously threatens to engulf her, her engagement with beauty grounds her, imposes discipline on her, and allows her to find meaning in the world. The metaphysical questions that underlie the book—for instance, what is the meaning of "that eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness" (*MD*, 25)—become the background against which Woolf's vision of beauty is conceptualized. Simply said, beauty is part of the duality of life and opens a space of refuge. In this context, character cannot be understood without the apprehension of beauty.

For Clarissa, beauty is most closely linked to flowers. From the chaos of the street emerges the stillness of the flower shop: "There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations. There were roses; there were irises" (*MD*, 13). Contemplating them allows Clarissa to imagine life otherwise: a perfect domesticity that figures daily life with laughter and intimacy, muslin frocks, and midsummer's evenings. In her flight of imagination she creates her own violet hour, "after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows" (*MD*, 13). Woolf is adamant that beauty (like love) is disinterested and creates meaning.

Not surprisingly, as Clarissa's double, Septimus, too, is profoundly affected by the beautiful. It is everywhere—embedded in the everyday:

> We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky

> swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (*MD*, 69)

Septimus is conscious of beauty's call. Beauty and meaningfulness begin in the natural world: a flight of swallows, a sun-kissed leaf, even a fly, and elsewhere time's movement and the glimpse of waves. Not only nature has a creative force, but humans, too, create beauty. Woolf deliberately marks the space of human intentionality. Beauty abounds in the houses and representations of antelopes—lithe, graceful. A duality exists: Beauty is ubiquitous; yet it unveils reality and the self as illusory. Beauty makes no claims of singularity, neither in its extraordinariness, nor in its creation through genius. No "I" exists, only a "we" that creates. Woolf does not suggest that selfhood emerges through the encounter with beauty, a commonplace in the articulation of beauty.[42] What she indicates, instead, is the dissolution of a sense of self in the experience of beauty, and the communion with others: in Iris Murdoch's words, "the unselfing" of the self.[43] Both beauty and death bring together Clarissa and Septimus:

> But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. (*MD*, 186)

Or in those moments of joy, beauty inspires love: "Then came the most exquisite moment of [Clarissa's] whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips" (*MD*, 35).[*]

Violence, illness, and death interrupt both Clarissa's flower-filled imaginings and Septimus's meditation on beauty; these are the undercurrents that ceaselessly disturb the novel. Similarly, traumatic fragments pierce McGregor's *Woolf Works*. The effects of war and madness unleash themselves on the dancers. Septimus, performed by Edward Watson, dances a solo fraught with tragic tension. Evans, Septimus's officer and friend, who died in the war, haunts Septimus at every turn. When Septimus and Evans, performed by Tristan Dyer, dance together, it foreshadows a heart-wrenching pas de deux between Septimus and Clarissa. In the novel, the

[*] While Woolf's concept of beauty is disinterested, it does not, as in Immanuel Kant's writings, symbolize morality. Here, as beauty unfolds into love, Woolf agrees with Kant. In an explication of Kant's concept of beauty, Jacques Rancière writes, "Beauty, says Kant, has nothing to do with the internal finality or perfection of the work. On the contrary, it points toward an improvement, an intensification of life whose destination is to be communicated, to take part in an improvement of a collective form of life based on the intensification of a capacity to share." Jacques Rancière, "Art, Life, Finality: The Metamorphoses of Beauty," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2017): 599.

doppelgänger figures never meet; in the ballet, the proscenium stage makes their encounter raw. Clarissa and Septimus dance to the tolling of the bells. At the end, they go to one of the set's three monumental windows and stand there. Septimus is poised on the ledge of the window, arms extended in Christ-like imagery, ready to jump. We know that he does jump out of a window ("beauty was behind a pane of glass") because he cannot untangle beauty from violence; beauty's path does not lead to the just or to meaning: "It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window, as they left Newhaven; it might be possible that the world is without meaning" (*MD*, 87, 88).

Behind the search for beauty is the question of meaning that undergirds the novel. In response to his question, "How nihilistic a character is Clarissa Dalloway?" Bloom answers, "Clarissa, perhaps unlike the narrator in *Mrs. Dalloway*, combats nihilism with her will"—a will contoured by her aestheticism.[44] In an essay on late modernism, and apropos here, Stanley Cavell defines "nihilism" as "the denial of the value of shared meaning altogether."[45] Clarissa and Septimus fight against such a denial, even if madness overtakes Septimus in the end. Bloom recognizes this; but his hesitation about the narrator is telling. The narrator's shadow of skepticism emphasizes Clarissa's ambivalence and Septimus's hopelessness, connected not only to war's trauma but also to life's condition of suffering.

The last lines of *Mrs. Dalloway* read, "It is Clarissa, he said. / For there she was." In standing there, Clarissa defeats skepticism. While she might be saved from the fate of madness and death, Woolf's doubling of Clarissa with Septimus gives a shattering critique of gender, class, and justice in Georgian society. Simultaneously, Woolf's action defies fixed parameters of social identity to create a single consciousness, prefiguring the movement of *The Waves*. As "I Now, I Then" closes, the other dancers fall away leaving Clarissa alone. In standing there, her resilience shines through.

In "I Now, I Then," McGregor follows only the outline of *Mrs. Dalloway*, representing in dance some of its iconic moments. Mostly, he distills the novel to its essence. The threads of nation and empire have been lost. He goes beyond categories of gender, race, and nation—even the individual—to emphasize universal questions of humanity. The characters inhabit a space between the individual and the archetype. Dancers represent youth, love, aging, illness, trauma, and death. The staging, through costumes and contemporaneous film fragments, depicts Woolf's world—the particular; McGregor's choreography emphasizes eternal values.[*]

[*] Literary critic Terry Eagleton argues that the Romantics changed the concept of character from the universal and abstract to the particular and individual—ideas intertwined with the rise of modern individualism. While nineteenth-century realists embedded the individual in structures of kinship and community, the modernists, like the Romantics, stressed the expression of an inner self. See Terry Eagleton, "Character" in *How to Read*

Woolf's modernism creates character through shifting perspectives and the fragmentation of linear time, and often her characters' thoughts are reflected as a philosophic meditation on life. Like Woolf, McGregor uses formal elements, rather than plot, to convey character. Shifting perspectives direct the ballet; the narrative belongs primarily to Clarissa and Septimus, with their two stories merging in their pas de deux. And linear time explodes when the two Clarissas (the older and younger) share the stage. Not surprisingly, McGregor's crafting of character differs from that in a nineteenth-century, or even a twentieth-century, ballet. For example, in Ashton's restaging of *Sylvia* or *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, the development of character occurs through plot and pantomime, or in Balanchine's modernist, formalist ballets there is the erasure of character altogether. This continues in McGregor's own work, as in *Chroma* (2006) and *Infra* (2008).

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the concept of character is inextricable from beauty: herein, the novel creates a site of tension between content and form. If thematically beauty is upended by injustice and violence, the novel itself is painstakingly wrapped in beautiful form. The novel grapples with the world's loss of meaning; yet as a work of art, the novel says, here is permanence, meaning, beauty.[46]

Woolf Works presents not only a translation from literature to dance but also a shift in the conception of beauty from early modernism to now. Baudelaire was adamant, "since every age and every people have had their own form of beauty, we inevitably have ours."[47] Here we find that ekphrastic difference, contoured by history, for our time. History is understood through the articulation of specific concepts. What does it mean to introduce a ballet that is explicitly and deliberately about the beautiful today? While Woolf questioned beauty's availability for her time, she never gave up on the work of art and its inextricable hold on beauty and truth: the work of art must embody a truth, "a spirit we live by, life itself."[48] Her era's despair, however, led to an ironic and disillusioned stance toward art. Modernism ushered in a time that refused to believe in beauty. *Woolf Works* revitalizes beauty. The poetry of Woolf's words becomes the poetry of McGregor's dancing body in the rawness, immediacy, and vulnerability of live performance. The ballet makes beauty's presence urgent for our society, both for the individual beholder and for our capacity to share. Those questions of nihilism do not touch McGregor's Clarissa; rather, the ballet fully embraces the value of shared meaning, which in the end specifies the relationship between artists and audience. "I Now, I Then"

Literature (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 45–79. I would add that, by the early twentieth century, modernism's "Who am I?" became the anguished cry of the individual torn by society itself.

postulates a claim for beauty; it reinvigorates discussions on beauty as a vehicle leading to the just, to truth, to an understanding that the material (and the medium) is not everything. In the encounter with beauty, "unselfing" occurs and we become part of a bigger whole. The ballet reorients our attention to beauty's promise.

The final act of McGregor's ballet (titled "Tuesday") reinterprets Woolf's *The Waves*. A shift in staging and mood occurs as an immense, filmic image of waves fills the stage, simultaneously overwhelming and awe-inspiring (see Figure 2). The ballet transitions from the beautiful to the sublime—from a search for meaning in the world to an experience of transcendence. Here, the sublime evokes majesty, elevation, dignity, grandeur, nobility, vividness, astonishment, and exaltation. This language comes from the first-century Greek treatise *On the Sublime*, attributed to the rhetorician Longinus. (Such descriptors have often been applied to ekphrasis, as well, and through such intensity both ekphrasis and the sublime have, as

Figure 2. Alessandra Ferri and Federico Bonelli in "Tuesday" from Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works: A Triptych*, courtesy of Robbie Jack for Getty Images.

Longinus states of the latter, a "strong and lasting hold on the memory."[49]) A long line of modern thinkers, most prominently Immanuel Kant, draws from Longinus to explore the sublime as a secular concept of transcendence, expanding the soul and rendering thought and feeling noble. The modern theory of the sublime enables a cultural critique; it shows the individual in a powerful light, able to combat increasing political, technological, and material subjugation and its consequent spiritual devastation.[*] Kant scholar Eli Friedlander writes, "The sublime presents our capacity to act absolutely, not to be conditioned in our actions by sensuous interests. In other words it presents our capacity to act freely."[50] According to this perspective, it is not, for instance, the presence of nature as terrifying or threatening, but the way we apprehend nature that is of significance. "It is the disposition of the soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgment and not the object that is to be called sublime," writes Kant.[51] The emphasis on beholding—and in live performance, the audience beholding together—speaks to the sublime's intersubjective experience and its ability to reflect the bond of a common humanity.

The Waves is itself ekphrastic: as Woolf notes, the novel conjures a Beethoven string quartet in words.[†] In question is Beethoven's late work, especially the String Quartet in B-flat Major, op. 130 (1825) with its original ending, the *Grosse Fuge*, op. 133.[52] Theodor Adorno emphasizes that Beethoven's late work created a much more difficult style—"before the startled gaze of human eyes."[‡] Late style encompasses the sublime, as a music composed in the face of death.[53] It deals with the ephemerality of life and presents an unyielding reflection upon illness and death. It marks the figure of the aging artist who has gained wisdom but nonetheless interiorizes intransigence rather than serenity.[54] Here artistic maturity is not equated with harmony, resolution, or totality but rather dissonance, fissures, rifts, and unresolved contradiction.[55] Adorno's insistence on a negative dialectics with its stress on irresolution preserves the work's

[*] Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19–22. If beauty lost much value in the closing decades of the last century, the sublime had a significant presence in postmodern theory with thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, who used it to explore the limits of representation. Literary theorist Robert Doran argues for an understanding of the sublime that recuperates its origins as an experience of transcendence and "that reveals our (natural) vocation for the infinite and the divine." He writes, "The sublime appears very differently from a posthumanist, postmodernist perspective, that is, from a perspective in which subjectivity no longer constitutes an essential or even a viable point of reference. Far from signifying an elevation of mind or heroic values, the sublime in contemporary critical theory has been assimilated into an antimodern or anti-Enlightenment discourse that is opposed to the values the sublime previously embodied." Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, 270, 21–22.

[†] I am grateful to Edward Dusinberre for making me aware of the connection between *The Waves* and late Beethoven. See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 3*: 1925–1930, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1980), 119.

[‡] Most likely part of Theodor Adorno's contribution on Beethoven to Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, quoted in Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 8

catastrophic force.[56] The contrapuntal style in opp. 130 and 133 belies the extreme isolation found in late Beethoven. Writing about the late quartets, Beethoven scholar Daniel Chua says that the music forces us to ask: Can we make meaning of history? Are there any foundations left to build on? Is this an exhaustion of humanism? His answer to the last: No. The music's moments of vulnerability transcend the crisis in its final reach for truth.[57] Woolf's work affirms this stance.

The Waves embodies Woolf's late style with its formal iconoclasm, thematic leanings, unresolved contradictions, and sublime yearnings.[58] McGregor's interpretation of *The Waves* illuminates its essence, and simultaneously it exceeds the novel's content to create a mythopoetic realm. McGregor imbues "Tuesday" with a deep melancholy. Against the image and sound of waves, in a voice-over, a woman reads Woolf's suicide letter written on a Tuesday to Leonard Woolf: "Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time." With these words the leitmotiv of madness from *Mrs. Dalloway* returns; the letter also signals the inclusion of Woolf's own story. Ferri stands beneath the waves, and soon Federico Bonelli joins her (see Figure 2). They mimic the movement of waves, gently up and down, with simple *demi-pliés*.

Unlike "I Now, I Then," the staging does not conjure the early decades of the twentieth century. A minimalism pervades the set: simple costuming, film, not late Beethoven but a score by Max Richter possessing Glassian overtones. The film, by Ravi Deepres, serves as the backdrop: the simple majesty of the waves in a slow crescendo, gathering momentum visually and aurally.

The dancers partner one other. Traveling across the stage, they rise and fall to the sound of the sea. A few minutes in, the music enters magnifying the intensity of the roiling waves. The two dancers embody the swell of the waves. While a *pas de cheval* may allude to a pivotal riding accident in the novel, the movements are abstract and wash over us like sound. The partnering is so close, with a tenderness and love that exceeds romantic love. Perhaps, the dancers symbolize Woolf and her husband Leonard; but they need not because this final act transcends the particular to reach the archetypal and mythological. They dance not as man and woman with an aura of eroticism; rather, they rise and fall together, intimately bound as the novel's characters—a single consciousness or the movement of time. As Ferri is held aloft in a simple *passé* and then swung, the gesture becomes the pendulum of time. It represents neither *Mrs. Dalloway*'s leaden circles of Big Ben nor traumatic memory. A sense of slowness marks the movement. There is a deep expressiveness to the introspection of the dancers. Yet they are never removed from us; they are viscerally connected to the

audience, sharing the commonalities of what it means to be a sentient being and recognizing the beholder so crucial to ekphrasis.

As Bonelli exits, six children run in, representing the novel's six contrapuntal figures. Against the ubiquitous image of the sea, they play on the seaside with rope and form a circle: the rituals of childhood, of life—recalling a maypole dance or the circles of Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, where the sacred is unleashed to renew life. To the lamentation of a solo soprano, the children leave; a company of satyrs and nymphs arrives, wearing clear plastic masks with jagged edges outlined in white. They are spirits of the sea, otherworldly, not human—though neither post-human nor technological. They symbolize a primitive nature that is deeply embedded in nature's mythology and the sublime.

The water spirits grace the stage by themselves. Their movements are luscious and gentle and wash over us. Each stretch of the arm points to another world. When Ferri returns, she communes with the spirits. They cross the stage in soft, sensuous *jetés*, moving into a loose circle before falling into a shifting line behind Ferri. The company enacts simple movements together. In one sequence, the dancers perform the rituals of reverence, paying respect to the audience and all four corners of the stage—the far reaches of their mythical world, or our human one. Even when they break into different formations, a sense of oneness pervades the stage. "I Now, I Then" tells about the traumas of warfare and the violence that negates beauty. Here there is no violence, only a deep pain and sadness experienced through the ages.

The music intensifies; the film's waves crash, summoning Woolf's words: "The waves fell; withdrew, and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping."[*] Different satyrs pass Ferri and then place her center stage. Momentarily, she stands there, until Bonelli returns and lifts her high above him. The music continues to crescendo; it reaches the precipice, and then *subito piano*. Stop. Near silence. A moment of transcendence. Herein lies the force inherent in the apprehension of the sublime image. The sublime re-enchants the world.

With unyielding insistence, both Woolf and McGregor hover on existential questions of life, death, and eternal renewal. In the closing passages of *The Waves*, Bernard, one of the work's six characters, asks, "But how describe the world seen without a self?" (*W*, 287). His final soliloquy combines all six characters in a fugue-like manner: "I" becomes "we." It recalls the last twenty bars of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* in its increasing pace and affirmation of the eternal:

> This is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.

[*] Viriginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), 150; hereafter abbreviated as *W*.

> And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us . . . ? It is death. Death is the enemy. . . . Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!
>
> *The waves broke on the shore.* [*W*, 297]

The first dance of McGregor's *Woolf Works* begins with the body in stillness: Alessandra Ferri standing. The triptych closes with the stillness of her body again: here death, and through an ekphrastic lens, the idea of renewal.

The ekphrastic body

"What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird?" asks Elaine Scarry. "It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication," inviting one to create not only copies, but also resemblances and works of art; it brings newness into the world.[59] Beauty inspires ekphrasis. As McGregor's *Woolf Works* demonstrates, Woolf attunes us to beauty's aura, even if at times, the ekphrastic beauty brings to mind the lying beauty that Simone de Beauvoir was devastated to realize while listening to a Beethoven Andante after another horrendous massacre during the Algerian War, or beauty's truth of which Adorno writes: "Even the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror."[*] This duality permeates both the novels and the ballet. Woolf chronicles a deep ambivalence toward the modern historical world while simultaneously showing a profound trust in the work of art. In *Moments of Being*, Woolf writes, "*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."[60] The artist does not exist, only the artwork, which, as the "real thing behind appearances," produces a shock of meaning.[61] Today, the modernist idealism of a Woolf, a Benjamin, or an Adorno—that art can transform consciousness and society—does not have the same currency.[62]

How, then, in our time do we understand McGregor's ballets that can be read as explorations of beauty, classical notions of the sublime, and, recently, the sacred, as in *Yugen* (2018)—a ballet choreographed to Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, with a Japanese name that means supreme grace? This work cannot be thought of as a return to an

[*] I am grateful to James Young for relating the de Beauvoir story. See Jean-Luc Moreau, *Simone de Beauvoir: Le goût d'une vie* (Montréal, Canada: Écriture, 2008), 203. See also Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2006), 25.

outdated humanism. In the 1970s, Bernstein was adamant that questions of beauty, truth, and spirit, while seemingly out of fashion, inspired him. If his society disdained such questions, he maintained that they emerged eternally.[63]

In *Woolf Works*, McGregor re-engages larger narratives of beauty, truth, justice. "How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?" The question that Woolf asks becomes McGregor's own, without irony or irreverence. While the resurgence of beauty has been disturbing scholarship for quite some time now, choreographers have kept it at a distance, especially in both contemporary ballet and contemporary dance. What does McGregor's return to these big questions signify? Why are we ready to embrace his vision, filled with beauty, the sublime, and the sacred? Maybe it is simple: we cannot afford to forgo what beauty can offer. In a world that continues to splinter and show intolerance, these categories remind us of what it means to be human.

Ekphrasis brings us to this question of how we understand the other: another work of art that inspires—begets—a new work; another art form that asks for a moment of stillness and allows the imagination to create something new; or just the other in front of us, next to us, who makes us realize that the audience is created together, that we share a world. The ekphrastic body—an other, fully alive and vulnerable before the audience—makes the idea of a shared world even more poignant: a mutual pledge of being with the other.

The ekphrastic body specifies that the ekphrasis occurs in dance. It alludes to the question of medium that has been so significant for the modern concept of ekphrasis. In *The Muses*, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy contemplates the spirits to formulate his central question: "Why are there several arts and not just one?" Nancy continues, "In one way or another, art would thus be in default or in excess of its own concept. One could also say: 'art' never appears except in a tension between two concepts of art, one technical and the other sublime—and this tension itself remains in general without concept."[64] Modern ekphrasis is founded on this tension: the material specificity of each art form (the technical aspect), which reflects the plurality of the muses in dialogue with the essence or meaning of art (the sublime). Nancy's question is provocative with regard to ekphrasis: what is the relationship between the plurality of the arts and art's essence? Ekphrasis need not be about a hierarchy of the arts or a competition with another art form. Rather, Nancy emphasizes what the arts share and how they exist together, posing diverse questions about society and the political world. The plurality of the art forms is dialectically related to a shared essence. The multiple origins of art are what interests Nancy; the

essence of art begins in plurality. Each work of art is the "opening of a world" that embodies a "plurality of worlds."[65] The body in dance is unique as a medium. It marks both an implicit recognition of difference and the sharing of the world. As the site of ekphrasis, the body contains the traces of otherness.

If ekphrasis is about aesthetic representation, it also delineates other forms of representation—cultural, political, and economic. It politicizes the relationship between dance and the other arts, dance and society: How does it create meaning? Who creates? Who dances? Who views?[*] Classics scholar Simon Goldhill argues that the importance of ekphrasis lies in the creation of the viewing subject: "The reading and production of ekphrastic epigram is part of a system that functions to produce a cultivated and cultured citizen of Empire, who knows how to perform in the world of culture and who knows thus how to play the game of competitive self-scrutiny as a performer in culture."[66] He speaks of an elite, ancient world that still resonates today. In a cosmopolitan world, culture and the recognition of its status, guides the creation of the self. For the ancients, ekphrasis molded the viewer as citizen; its urgency heralded the creation of a common understanding. Ekphrasis creates and perpetuates a canon, replete with questions of power.[†] Cultural representations support the imagined community.[67] But that imagined community of the nation is idealized, and the reality is less benign and homogeneous. Many more parallel communities actually constitute the state.[68] Not one storehouse of images or artworks speaks to us all.

What is more, using ekphrasis as a heuristic tool to explore other cultural perspectives, arts, and traditions allows for a different understanding of the canon.[‡] For example, consider Merce Cunningham's *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three,* which represents the nine emotions of Indian classical aesthetics.[69] Or the many reinterpretations of *The Rite of*

[*] A decade ago Mark Franko called for a more political understanding of dance: "Dance history contains insights not just into the relation of dance to political power, but also into dance and the politics of representation. It is precisely at the level of the politics of representation that we touch upon the question of how dance history is to be represented. . . . Any serious discussion of the exception challenges the canon itself. Challenging the canonical exclusivity of dance history obliges us to invoke forgotten or suppressed alternatives—culturally, aesthetically, and politically." Mark Franko, "Dance and the Political: States of Exception," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1 & 2 (2006): 12.

[†] In an article on the silenced aspects of ekphrasis, Page duBois states, "If ekphrastic texts are about learning to see, to read visual texts, they also concern domination and power, the privileging of some readers over others, and our own tendencies to identify with elite privileged readers in the past, those educated and cultured few whom we see as like ourselves." Page duBois, "Reading the Writing on the Wall," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 46.

[‡] Edward Said argues for a canon that is contrapuntal with numerous interwoven voices: "Viewed this way, the canonical humanities, far from being a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past . . . will always remain open to changing combinations of sense and signification; every reading and interpretation of a canonical work reanimates it in the present, furnishes an occasion for rereading, allows the modern and the new to be situated together in a broad historical field whose usefulness is that it shows us history as an agnostic process still being made, rather than finished and settled once and for all." Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

Spring, including those by Pina Bausch and Bangarra Dance Theatre, which skew a dominant perspective.* What would these types of cross-cultural references make possible?

For now: What does *Woolf Works* enable us to see or imagine? At the very end of the ballet—at the *subito piano* with its moment of near silence—an image transfixes us. Bonelli lowers Ferri, and the company, almost completely still, flanks them. The ekphrastic bodies represent otherworldly spirits with an enveloping sense of mythological diversity and inclusiveness. In this image of stillness, everything is suspended. In our time of political divisiveness, would it be false to ask if we could imagine a shared space of plurality and unity—to see plurality as the origin of unity? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to take it down a notch. Nancy writes, "Art today has the task of responding to, and taking responsibility for, this world."[70] *Woolf Works* does this beautifully.

For W. J. T. Mitchell

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Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1981), 5.
2. Harold Bloom, introduction to *Clarissa Dalloway* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 2.
3. The felicitous phrase "pastoral nostalgia" is borrowed from Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 183.
4. See Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).
5. See Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed" (1967), in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184. See also Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," in *Intentions* (New York: Brentano's, 1905), 1–55; and the letters between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, in *Aesthetics and Politics,* Theodor Adorno et al. (London: Verso, 1994), 110–41.
6. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

*The postmodern view expands the modern concept of ekphrasis (as a translation of a work from one aesthetic medium to another) to encompass the re-presentation of artworks from within the same art form as well. This broader view rightly brings up questions about limits on the concept in order for it to maintain meaning. However, if what is at stake in ekphrasis is no longer about the differences between aesthetic mediums but rather how we explore historical and cultural difference, ekphrasis as an interpretive mode opens up countless possibilities for dance. See Lydia Goehr, "How to Do More with Words: Two Views of (Musical) Ekphrasis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 4 (2010): 406.

7. See for example Norman Bryson, "Cultural Studies and Dance History," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance,* ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 55–77; Ramsay Burt, "The Specter of Interdisciplinarity," *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (2009): 3–22; Sabine Huschka, "Media-Bodies: Choreography as Intermedial Thinking Through in the Work of William Forsythe," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 1 (2010): 61–72.
8. For a discussion of ekphrasis and dance in ancient texts, see Karin Schlapbach, *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse: Literary and Philosophical Approaches to Dance in the Later Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
9. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 152; James A. W. Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 299; Shardi Bartsch and Ják Elsner, "Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): i. For additional scholarship on ekphrasis, see Leo Spitzer, "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar," *Comparative Literature* 7, no. 3 (1955): 203–25; Murray Krieger, "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Moment of Poetry; or Laocoön Revisited," in *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 105–28; Peter Wagner, "Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality—The State(s) of the Art(s)," in *Icons—Texts—Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality,* ed. Peter Wagner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 1–40; Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2016); and "*Ekphrasis* Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 15, no. 1 (1999): 7–18. For the nonliterary arts, see Siglind Bruhn, "A Concert of Paintings: 'Musical Ekphrasis' in the Twentieth Century," *Poetics Today* 22, no. 3 (2001): 551–605; Lydia Goehr, "How to Do More with Words: Two Views of (Musical) Ekphrasis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 4 (2010): 389–410.
10. Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 18.
11. See C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry, The "Ars Poetica"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (1766; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). See also Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8–10; and Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 177–79.
12. Webb. *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion,* 30–33, 7–8, 23, 27. See also Jaś Elsner, "Viewing Ariadne: From Ekphrasis to Wall Painting in the Roman World," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 20–44; and Simon Goldhill, "What Is Ekphrasis For?," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 1–19.
13. Bartsch and Elsner, "Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis," iv; Goldhill, "What Is Ekphrasis For?," 4.
14. Theon, quoted in Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion,* 14. For Plutarch, I integrate translations from both Webb and Goldhill. Plutarch, quoted in Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion,* 20; and Goldhill, "What Is Ekphrasis For?," 5.
15. Webb, "*Ekphrasis* Ancient and Modern," 18.
16. Theon, quoted in Goldhill, "What Is Ekphrasis For?," 3.

17. See Goehr, "How to Do More with Words," 397; and Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion*, 13–38.
18. Valentine Cunningham, "Why Ekphrasis?," *Classical Philology* 102, no.1 (2007): 65.
19. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 176. On *thauma*, see Andrew Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 87–131.
20. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," 202.
21. See Walter Benjamin's trajectory of thinking about aesthetic form: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Random House, 1969), 217–52; Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 143–66; Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 313–55. See also Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2008): 336–75.
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24. See Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 152–57.
25. Ibid. See also Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation," which examines the objectification of women that often occurs in ekphrasis.
26. Goehr, "How to Do More with Words," 398.
27. Longinus, quoted in Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion,* 22–23.
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33. Roger Fry and Desmond MacCarthy, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (London: Ballantyne, 1910), 9. Exhibition held at the Grafton Galleries.
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35. See Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*.
36. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 546.
37. See Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
38. David Michael Levin, "Balanchine's Formalism," *Salmagundi*, no. 33–34 (1976): 216–36.

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49. Longinus, *On the Sublime,* trans. H. L. Havell (London: Macmillan, 1890), 12.
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