

"Dance Lessons for Writers" October 29, 2016

Sat 29 Oct '16 03.30 EDT

The connection between writing and dancing has been much on my mind recently: it's a channel I want to keep open. It feels a little neglected - compared to, say, the relationship between music and prose - maybe because there is something counter-intuitive about it. But for me the two forms are close to each other: I feel dance has something to tell me about what I do.

One of the most solid pieces of writing advice I know is in fact intended for dancers - you can find it in the choreographer Martha Graham's biography. But it relaxes me in front of my laptop the same way I imagine it might induce a young dancer to breathe deeply and wiggle their fingers and toes. Graham writes: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open."

What can an art of words take from the art that needs none? Yet I often think I've learned as much from watching dancers as I have from reading. Dance lessons for writers: lessons of position, attitude, rhythm and style, some of them obvious, some indirect. What follows are a few notes towards that idea.

Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly

"Fred Astaire represents the aristocracy when he dances," claimed Gene Kelly, in old age, "and I represent the proletariat." The distinction is immediately satisfying, though it's a little harder to say why. Tall, thin and elegant, versus muscular and athletic - is that it? There's the obvious matter of top hat and tails versus T-shirt and slacks. But Fred sometimes wore T-shirts and slacks, and was not actually that tall, he only stood as if he were, and when moving always appeared elevated, to be skimming across whichever surface: the floor, the ceiling, an ice rink, a bandstand. Gene's centre of gravity was far lower: he bends his knees, he hunkers down. Kelly is grounded, firmly planted, where Astaire is untethered, free-floating.

Likewise, the aristocrat and the proletariat have different relations to the ground beneath their feet, the first moving fluidly across the surface of the world, the second specifically tethered to a certain spot: a city block, a village, a factory, a stretch of fields. Cyd Charisse claimed her husband always knew which of these dancers she'd been working with by looking at her body at the end of the day: bruised everywhere if it was Kelly, not a blemish if it was Astaire. Not only aloof when it came to the ground, Astaire was aloof around other people's bodies. Through 15 years and 10 movies, it's hard to detect one moment of real sexual tension

between Fred and his Ginger. They have great harmony but little heat. Now think of Kelly with Cyd Charisse in the fantasy sequence of *Singin' in the Rain!* And maybe this is one of the advantages of earthiness: sex.

When I write I feel there's usually a choice to be made between the grounded and the floating. The ground I am thinking of in this case is language as we meet it in its "commonsense" mode. The language of the television, of the supermarket, of the advert, the newspaper, the government, the daily "public" conversation. Some writers like to walk this ground, recreate it, break bits of it off and use it to their advantage, where others barely recognise its existence. Nabokov - a literal aristocrat as well as an aesthetic one - barely ever put a toe upon it. His language is "literary", far from what we think of as our shared linguistic home.

One argument in defence of such literary language might be the way it admits its own artificiality. Commonsense language meanwhile claims to be plain and natural, "conversational", but is often as constructed as asphalt, dreamed up in ad agencies or in the heart of government - sometimes both at the same time. Simultaneously sentimental and coercive. (*The People's Princess*. *The Big Society*. *Make America Great Again*.) Commonsense language claims to take its lead from the way people naturally speak, but any writer who truly attends to the way people speak will soon find himself categorised as a distinctive stylist or satirist or experimentalist. Beckett was like this, and the American writer George Saunders is a good contemporary example. (In dance, the example that comes to my mind is Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, whose thing was tapping up and down the stairs. What could be more normal, more folksy, more grounded and everyday than tapping up and down some stairs? But his signature stage routine involved a staircase pressed right up against another staircase - a stairway to itself - and so up and down he would tap, up and down, down and up, entirely surreal, like an Escher print come to life.)

Astaire is clearly not an experimental dancer like Twyla Tharp or Pina Bausch, but he is surreal in the sense of surpassing the real. He is transcendent. When he dances a question proposes itself: what if a body moved like this through the world? But it is only a rhetorical, fantastical question, for no bodies move like Astaire, no, we only move like him in our dreams.

By contrast, I have seen French boys run up the steps of the High Line in New York to take a photo of the view, their backsides working just like Gene Kelly's in *On The Town*, and I have seen black kids on the A train swing round the pole on their way out of the sliding doors - Kelly again, hanging from that eternal lamppost. Kelly quoted the commonplace when he danced, and he reminds us in turn of the grace we do sometimes possess ourselves. He is the incarnation of our bodies in their youth, at their most fluid and powerful, or whenever our natural talents combine ideally with our hard-earned skills. He is a demonstration of how the prosaic can turn poetic, if we work hard enough. But Astaire, when he dances, has nothing to do with hard work (although we know, from biographies, that he worked very hard, behind the scenes). He is "poetry in motion". His movements are so removed from ours that he sets a limit on our own ambitions. Nobody hopes or expects to dance like Astaire, just as nobody really expects to write like Nabokov.

Harold and Fayard Nicholas

Writing, like dancing, is one of the arts available to people who have nothing. “For 10 and sixpence,” advises Virginia Woolf, “one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare.” The only absolutely necessary equipment in dance is your own body. Some of the greatest dancers have come from the lowliest backgrounds. With many black dancers this has come with the complication of “representing your race”. You are on a stage, in front of your people and other people. What face will you show them? Will you be your self? Your “best self”? A representation? A symbol?

The Nicholas brothers were not street kids - they were the children of college-educated musicians - but they were never formally trained in dance. They learned watching their parents and their parents’ colleagues performing on the “chitlin” circuit, as black vaudeville was then called. Later, when they entered the movies, their performances were usually filmed in such a way as to be non-essential to the story, so that when these films played in the south their spectacular sequences could be snipped out without doing any harm to the integrity of the plot. Genius contained, genius ring-fenced. But also genius undeniable.

“My talent was the weapon,” argued Sammy Davis Jr, “the power, the way for me to fight. It was the one way I might hope to affect a man’s thinking.” Davis was another chitlin hooper, originally, and from straitened circumstances. His logic here is very familiar: it is something of an article of faith within the kinds of families who have few other assets. A mother tells her children to be “twice as good”, she tells them to be “undeniable”. My mother used to say something like it to me. And when I watch the Nicholas brothers I think of that stressful instruction: be twice as good.

The Nicholas brothers were many, many magnitudes better than anybody else. They were better than anyone has a right or need to be. Fred Astaire called their routine in Stormy Weather the greatest example of cinematic dance he ever saw. They are progressing down a giant staircase doing the splits as if the splits is the commonsense way to get somewhere. They are impeccably dressed. They are more than representing - they are excelling.

But I always think I spot a little difference between Harold and Fayard, and it interests me; I take it as a kind of lesson. Fayard seems to me more concerned with this responsibility of representation when he dances: he looks the part, he is the part, his propriety unassailable. He is formal, contained, technically undeniable: a credit to the race. But Harold gives himself over to joy. His hair is his tell: as he dances it loosens itself from the slather of Brylcreem he always put on it, the irrepressible afro curl springs out, he doesn’t even try to brush it back. Between propriety and joy, choose joy.

Michael Jackson and Prince

On YouTube you will find them, locked in many dance-offs, and so you are presented with a stark choice. But it’s not a question of degrees of ability, of who was the greater dancer. The choice is between two completely opposite values: legibility on the one hand, temporality on the other. Between a monument (Jackson) and a kind of mirage (Prince).

But both men were excellent dancers. Putting aside the difference in height, physically they had many similarities. Terribly slight, long necked, thin-legged, powered from the torso rather than the backside, which in both cases was improbably small. And in terms of influence they were of course equally indebted to James Brown. The splits, the rise from the splits, the spin, the glide, the knee bend, the jerk of the head - all stolen from the same source.

Yet Prince and Jackson are nothing alike when they dance, and it's very hard to bring to mind Prince dancing, whereas it is practically impossible to forget Jackson. It sounds irrational, but try it for yourself. Prince's moves, no matter how many times you may have observed them, have no firm inscription in memory; they never seem quite fixed or preserved. If someone asks you to dance like Prince, what will you do? Spin, possibly, and do the splits, if you're able. But there won't appear to be anything especially Prince-like about that. It's mysterious. How can you dance and dance, in front of millions of people, for years, and still seem like a secret only I know? (And isn't it the case that to be a Prince fan is to feel that Prince was your secret alone?)

I never went to see Michael Jackson, but I saw Prince half a dozen times. I saw him in stadiums with thousands of people, so have a rational understanding that he was in no sense my secret, that he was in fact a superstar. But I still say his shows were illegible, private, like the performance of a man in the middle of a room at a house party. It was the greatest thing you ever saw and yet its greatness was confined to the moment in which it was happening.

Jackson was exactly the opposite. Every move he made was absolutely legible, public, endlessly copied and copyable, like a meme before the word existed. He thought in images, and across time. He deliberately outlined and then marked once more the edges around each move, like a cop drawing a chalk line round a body. Stuck his neck forward if he was moving backwards. Cut his trousers short so you could read his ankles. Grabbed his groin so you could better understand its gyrations. Gloved one hand so you might attend to its rhythmic genius, the way it punctuated everything, like an exclamation mark.

Towards the end, his curious stagewear became increasingly tasked with this job of outline and distinction. It looked like a form of armour, the purpose of which was to define each element of his body so no movement of it would pass unnoted. His arms and legs multiply strapped - a literal visualisation of his flexible joints - and a metallic sash running left to right across his breastplate, accentuating the shift of his shoulders along this diagonal. A heavyweight's belt accentuated slender hips and divided the torso from the legs, so you noticed when the top and bottom half of the body pulled in opposite directions. Finally a silver thong, rendering his eloquent groin as clear as if it were in ALL CAPS. It wasn't subtle, there was no subtext, but it was clearly legible. People will be dancing like Michael Jackson until the end of time.

But Prince, precious, elusive Prince, well, there lays one whose name was writ in water. And from Prince a writer might take the lesson that elusiveness can possess a deeper beauty than the legible. In the world of words, we have Keats to remind us of this, and to demonstrate what a long afterlife an elusive artist can have, even when placed beside as clearly drawn a figure as Lord Byron. Prince represents the inspiration of the moment, like an ode composed to capture a passing sensation. And when the mood changes, he changes with it: another good lesson.

There's no freedom in being a monument. Better to be the guy still jamming in the wee hours

of the house party, and though everybody films it on their phones no one proves quite able to capture the essence of it. And now he's gone, having escaped us one more time. I don't claim Prince's image won't last as long as Jackson's. I only say that in our minds it will never be as distinct.

Janet Jackson / Madonna / Beyoncé

These three don't just invite copies - they demand them. They go further than legibility into proscription. They lead armies, and we join them. We are like those uniformed dancers moving in military formation behind them, an anonymous corps whose job it is to copy precisely the gestures of their general.

This was made literal on Beyoncé's Formation tour recently, when the general raised her right arm like a shotgun, pulled the trigger with her left and the sound of gunshot rang out. There is nothing intimate about this kind of dancing: like the military, it operates as a form of franchise, whereby a ruling idea - "America", "Beyoncé" - presides over many cells that span the world. Maybe it is for this reason that much of the crowd I saw at Wembley could be found, for long periods, not facing in the direction of the stage at all, instead turning to their friends and partners. They didn't need to watch Beyoncé any more than soldiers need to look fixedly at the flag to perform their duties. Our queen was up there somewhere dancing - but the idea of her had already been internalised. Friends from the gym stood in circles and pumped their fists, girlfriends from hen nights turned inwards and did "Beyoncé" to each other, and boys from the Beyhive screamed every word into each other's faces. They could have done the same at home, but this was a public display of allegiance.

Janet Jackson kicked off this curious phenomenon, Madonna continued it, Beyoncé is its apex. Here dancing is intended as a demonstration of the female will, a concrete articulation of its reach and possibilities. The lesson is quite clear. My body obeys me. My dancers obey me. Now you will obey me. And then everybody in the crowd imagines being obeyed like Bey - a delightful imagining.

Lady writers who inspire similar devotion (in far smaller audiences): Muriel Spark, Joan Didion, Jane Austen. Such writers offer the same essential qualities (or illusions): total control (over their form) and no freedom (for the reader). Compare and contrast, say, Jean Rhys or Octavia Butler, lady writers much loved but rarely copied. There's too much freedom in them. Meanwhile every sentence of Didion's says: obey me! Who runs the world? Girls!

David Byrne and David Bowie

The art of not dancing - a vital lesson. Sometimes it is very important to be awkward, inelegant, jerking, to be neither poetic nor prosaic, to be positively bad. To express other possibilities for bodies, alternative values, to stop making sense. It's interesting to me that both these artists did their "worst" dancing to their blackest cuts. "Take me to the river," sings Byrne, in square trousers 20 times too large, looking down at his jerking hips as if they belong to someone else. This music is not mine, his trousers say, and his movements go further: maybe this body isn't mine, either. At the end of this seam of logic lies a liberating thought:

maybe nobody truly owns anything.

People can be too precious about their “heritage”, about their “tradition” - writers especially. Preservation and protection have their place but they shouldn’t block either freedom or theft. All possible aesthetic expressions are available to all peoples - under the sign of love. Bowie and Byrne’s evident love for what was “not theirs” brings out new angles in familiar sounds. It hadn’t occurred to me before seeing these men dance that a person might choose, for example, to meet the curve of a drum beat with anything but the matching curving movement of their body, that is, with harmony and heat. But it turns out you can also resist: throw up a curious angle and suddenly spasm, like Bowie, or wonder if that’s truly your own arm, like Byrne.

I think of young Luther Vandross, singing backup a few feet behind Bowie, during Young Americans, watching Bowie flail and thrash. I wonder what his take on all that was. Did he ever think: “Now, what in the world is he doing?” But a few performances in, it was clear to everybody. Here was something different. Something old, and yet new.

Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov

When you face an audience, which way will you turn? Inwards or outwards? Or some combination of the two? Nureyev, so fierce and neurotic, so vulnerable, so beautiful - like a deer suddenly caught in our headlamps - is faced resolutely inwards. You “can’t take your eyes off him”, as people like to say, but at the same time he is almost excruciating to watch. We feel we might break him, that he might crumble - or explode. He never does, but still, whenever he leaps you sense the possibility of total disaster, as you do with certain high-strung athletes no matter how many times they run or jump or dive. With Nureyev you are an onlooker, you are a person who has been granted the great honour of being present while Nureyev dances. I don’t mean this sarcastically: it is an honour to watch Nureyev, even in these grainy old videos on YouTube. He’s a kind of miracle, and is fully cognisant of this when he dances, and what did you do today to warrant an audience with a miracle? (See also: Dostoevsky.)

With Baryshnikov, I have no fears of disaster. He is an outward-facing artist, he is trying to please me and he succeeds completely. His face dances as much as his arms and legs. (Nureyev’s face, meanwhile, is permanently lost in transcendent feeling.) Sometimes Baryshnikov wants to please me so much he’ll even try tap dancing with Liza Minnelli, risking the scorn of the purists. (I am not a purist. I am delighted!) He is a charmer, an entertainer, he is comic, dramatic, cerebral, a clown - whatever you need him to be. Baryshnikov is both loving and loved. He has high and low modes, tough and soft poses, but he’s always facing outwards, to us, his audience. (See also: Tolstoy.)

Once I met Baryshnikov over a New York dinner table: I was so star-struck I could hardly speak. Finally I asked him: “Did you ever meet Fred Astaire?” He smiled. He said: “Yes, once, at a dinner. I was very star-struck, I hardly spoke. But I watched his hands all the time, they were like a lesson in themselves - so elegant!”

. Swing Time by Zadie Smith is published on 15 November (Hamish Hamilton, £18.99). To order a copy for £15.57, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.