

CLASSICISM AND ABSTRACTION IN T.S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*: POETRY AND DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Eliot's *Four Quartets* tend to be identified with the struggle for classical order and the music analogy implicit in the title of the poem, but, as some scholars have tried to demonstrate, Eliot's concern with the visual avant-gardes, in particular ballet, does have an influence on his poetry. These pages are an attempt to analyse the images, metaphors and terminology borrowed from dance which are used in the poem and compare them to a recent transposition of the poem into ballet by the Canadian choreographer Deborah Dunn: the reciprocal connection between word and image testifies to the visual dimension of *Four Quartets*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first part of Eliot's poetry, from *Prufrock and Other Observations* to *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, is generally considered the more innovative and, as far as the visual arts are concerned, the more influenced by their techniques and experimentations. It is certainly possible to observe a development in Eliot's poetical production and his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 may have coincided with a public concern in the social and cultural field. However, since fragmentation is part of Eliot's Modernism, the whole of his works cannot be interpreted separately. Eliot's later poetry, and in particular the *Four Quartets*, is considered as being characterized by a shift towards different topics and an explicitly religious content, along with a strong step towards – or possibly backwards – Classicism and tradition. The meaning of these terms can determine the consideration

and the weight that Eliot's poetry acquire: as I will try to demonstrate, the influence of the avant-gardes does not disappear, but is limited to certain fields of interest.

Burnt Norton, that appears in 1936, is the first quartet and almost ten years pass before the publication of the *Four Quartets* as a whole in 1944. One of the consequences of this peculiar editorial history is the perception, at least in England, of the poem as a single and autonomous entity¹. Considered in its entirety, the poem in four parts is about the mind discovering 'religious truth' in a complex relationship with time and language (Gardner 1986: 61): the poet struggles to express an immaterial dimension and the attempt of conquering time (Moody 1994: 143). Each quartet springs from a geographical landscape, evoked by the title, and is linked to the four elements: air, earth, water and fire respectively. In the analogy with music, implicit in the title, readers and scholars have always looked for hints of unity and meaning: however, even though Eliot declares that there exists a common path between music and poetry, in *The Music of Poetry* he makes it clear that his knowledge of musical form is far from detailed (Kermode 1975: 197-114). The musical connection is strictly linked with Eliot's interest in dance: many scholars testify to Eliot's direct acquaintance with ballet shows and protagonists, giving evidence of both biographical involvement and actual references in his poems². When Eliot is in Paris in 1911, the *Ballets Russes* are running their third season, with Vaslav Nijinskij and Tamara Karsavina as leading dancers: if Eliot actually sees these ballets is only a plausible supposition, while it is certain that he attends the London seasons in the 1920s (Hargrove 1997: 61-88). In

¹ The four poems are first published in collections of poetry and separately as pamphlets. See Moody (1994: 142-143). From here onwards the poems will be referred to by abbreviations: *Four Quartets*: *FQ*; *Burnt Norton*: *BN*; *East Cocker*: *EC*; *The Dry Salvages*: *DS*; *Little Gidding*: *LG*. Punctual references to lines within the poems will be quoted from Eliot (1974a) and abbreviated with *CP*.

² See Hargrove (1997; 1998; 2001); Hoydis (2011); Jones (2009; 2013); Koritz (1995); Lepecki (2000); Mester (1997; 2011); Schuchard (1999).

England, Eliot's friends are great supporters of the *Ballets Russes*, especially the Bloomsbury Group, and when in 1918 Diaghilev's company returns on stage, Eliot and Massine are personally introduced, at the insistent request of the former (Mester 2011: 118).

In 1921 Eliot sees Massine's choreography to Stravinskij's *The Rite of Spring*, whose influence on *The Waste Land* has been often pointed out, although in this case Eliot's attention is captured by the music rather than the choreography: in his *London Letter for The Dial* magazine Eliot (1921a-b) especially praises it for the 'tribal' nature of its notes. Even later, ballet still interests and influences Eliot, in particular in his works on drama, providing him with the example of how theatre should take a step forward in meeting the popular taste. As a matter of fact, it is in his articles and reviews for *The Dial* and the *Criterion* that we find Eliot's assertions on Massine and ballet in general, as well as in pieces of criticism regarding poetic drama and theatre such as *The Beating of a Drum* (1923), *Dialogue on Poetic Drama* (1928) and private correspondence of the 1920s. According to Eliot, ballet – and the *Ballets Russes* in particular – constitutes the starting point for a new drama «if a new drama ever comes» (1921b: 214). What strikes Eliot's attention is the impersonality of the dancer in performance and the communion of tradition and modernity, in both cases particularly referring to Massine's abilities as dancer and choreographer in transforming popular and folklorist elements into a new form of elite art. Thanks to these characteristics, the ballet becomes an ideal model for poetic drama, since it has «unconsciously concerned itself with a permanent form» (1928: xv). In Massine and Nijinskij, Eliot also sees and praises the devotional commitment to practice and perfection. The ascetic attitude of the dancer, implied in order to achieve impersonality, likens dance to every form of ritual: for Eliot «primitive ritual was not only the source of ballet, it was the origin of all art and religion» (Mester 2011: 119-120). On different occasions Eliot expresses the strong relationship between rhythm and words, the movement of the body and emotions, linking them to the origins of classical drama and observing the inefficacy of words to

express these binary oppositions in poetical terms. As Jones (2009: 37; 2013) sums it up, starting from Aristotle's definition of the essential of drama being dance, music and poetry, Eliot defines Massine and Chaplin as the two major exemplary contemporary actors (1923b: 303-6). Moreover, when Eliot refers to the *Ballets Russes* stating that «here seemed to be everything that we wanted in drama except poetry» (1928: xv), he refers both to the themes and to the physical training required by dancers, which recalls, according to Jones, the physical and spiritual abnegation of religious experience. Along with the liturgical and ritual essence intrinsic to dance, Eliot praises Massine's ability to create new forms starting from and sublimating into traditional elements, both in terms of themes and of technical aspects of Romantic and Classical ballet. What is more important, in the *Criterion*, Eliot defines Massine as «the most completely human, impersonal, abstract» among the dancers, and recognizes in him the utmost characteristic of the poet, that is to say, the detachment that leads to impersonality: «the difference between the conventional gesture of the ordinary stage, which is supposed to express emotion, and the abstract gesture of Massine, which symbolises emotion, is enormous» (Eliot 1923b: 305-6). Jones interprets Eliot's use of the adjective 'abstract' in terms of the dancer as a medium «of verbal expression distinct from his subjective personality» (2009: 38-39; 2013: 234-235). Richardson remarks the connection Eliot establishes between dance, drama and ritual, observing how for the poet «the *Ballets Russes* doesn't necessarily convey meaning, but rather participates in a religious and metaphysical form of expression accessible to all cultures» (Richardson 2013: 163-164).

2. CLASSICISM AND TRADITION

The survey of Eliot's main literary theories sheds light on the interaction between poetry and dance in his works. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot defines tradition in terms of historicism, as a mutual process between past and present which leaves both dimensions inevitably altered to the point that «no poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone» (Kermode 1975: 38). Only by acquiring this consciousness can the artist pursue order, which is what really builds a tradition capable of connecting every single work of art to each other: Eliot states that by means of this never-ending continuity every new work of art somehow affects a whole tradition (Kermode 1975: 38-39). Finally, Eliot defines poetry as an instrument of expression and comprehension of reality, of which the poet is an impersonal medium that reshapes ordinary emotions «to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all» (Kermode 1975: 43). Impersonality becomes necessary to achieve a precise expression of feeling, independent from the personal history of the poet: what makes poetry universal is the mutual process of tradition previously introduced, a process the poet cannot and must not be aware of because it can only be perceived by poets of later generations (Kermode 1975: 43-44). In these terms, the predominance of cultural continuity over historical chronology makes it possible for Eliot to better understand, as reader and writer, the works of other great artists of all ages. In analysing Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot comes to the definition of a «mythical method» as opposed to a «historical» one: Eliot defines Joyce's employment of myth as a «scientific revolution» since it shapes a new form that cannot be labelled as 'novel' any longer (Kermode 1975: 177-178). Curiously enough, according to Hargrove, the two main points about the impersonality of the artist and the importance of tradition in the development of new forms of art would have been influenced by Withworth's monograph volume of 1913 on Nijinskij (1997: 62; 86-88).

Almost twenty-five years after these statements, the concepts of tradition and impersonality are pushed to their extreme peaks in an essay originally written for the Virgil Society in 1944: «What is a Classic?». In this piece of criticism Eliot first defines the term ‘Classic’ by referring to Latin and Greek literatures in general and to the leading figures of those literatures. He detaches from the Romanticism/Classicism debate and praises Virgil as the utmost example of Classicism within the context of both Latin literature as a closed system and European literature in general (Kermode 1975: 115-16)³. The main features Eliot detects in order to define Classicism hinge on the concepts of maturity of mind, manners and language, with a strong connection with the comprehensive nature of tradition as defined in 1919, both in terms of history and of language.

Steve Ellis (1992) extensively investigates the Classicism at work in *FQ*, and how it has to be understood in the light of Eliot’s conception of the term as a broader set, mainly concerned with language and form, in which Greek and Latin cultures co-exist with Dante and the Metaphysical poets. Comparing Eliot’s Classicism with general tendencies in contemporary architecture and the visual arts, Ellis builds a bridge between Abstractism and a newly discovered interest in neo-Classicism, as promulgated by artists as Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus movement. Eliot is not alone in looking at Classicism and Classical authors in order to find models for a contemporary way of expression: architecture develops the same attitude towards classical forms intended as rational, simple, linear (and not just ‘Classical’ in the sense of historic neo-Classicism). Ellis acutely observes how critics usually define the *FQ* in comparison to Eliot’s early poetry as ‘abstract’ in a «condemnatory way, but with little thought for its historical relevance» (1992: 18-19).

³ For a comparison between the themes of descent and circularity in *FQ* and book VI of *Aeneid*, see Rutledge (1966); on the role of tradition in Virgil and Eliot, see Kennedy (1995); Reeves (2005). The most extensive analysis of Virgil’s influence on Eliot’s poetry is provided by Reeves (1989).

The Hollow Men marks a turning point in Eliot's career, especially as regards the poet's interest in a new form of language devoid of what he defines, in an essay on Dante, as «poetical ornament», aiming at the «greatest economy of words» (Kermode 1975: 217). In *What is a Classic?* Eliot explains that, because the English language is still in constant evolution, it fails to reach the perfection of Classicism and needs to pursue a common style (Kermode 1975: 126). Ellis observes that Eliot's models of Classicism, mainly Dante and Virgil, are not English (1992: 11); moreover, the poet's relationship with these models is peculiar, especially as far as language is concerned. In *FQ*, Eliot almost opposes Dante's ideas about the variety of language and the rich polyphony that populates *The Waste Land* is replaced in favour of a poetry that, as Eliot writes, aims at «a beauty which shall not be in the line or isolable passage, but woven into the dramatic texture itself» (Kermode 1975: 255). This remark, that refers to drama and in particular to Yeats, suits the *FQ* as well, where the stress is more on language itself, rather than on what the poet can do with it (Ellis 1992: 12). The importance of the whole over the peculiar details of single passages or lines is to be found in the very *BN*, where the poet asserts the efficacy of his words in terms of 'form' and 'pattern', a theme that recurs in *LG*, where the exactness of words is evoked and praised (*CP*: 208). The poet goes on in the same section giving specific hints of how the linearity of this language is to be shaped, creating innovation on the basis of tradition (*CP*: 208). Eventually, it is with a dance metaphor that Eliot sums up all the characteristics of language, with an image that suggests circularity and, therefore, again, pattern, order, linearity: «the complete consort dancing together» (*CP*: 208).

3. FROM DANCE TO *FOUR QUARTETS*

Bearing in mind Eliot's theories, in particular the relationship between tradition, ritual and the impersonality of the poet, or of the artistic

voice in general, it is possible to approach the images the poet borrows from the dance scenery in order to develop some of the thematic and stylistic elements that form part of the *FQ*. In particular, the elements most exploited are those referring to the linguistic representation of the ecstatic contemplation and knowledge of transcendence and to the innate relationship between rhythm and words. Hargrove (1997: 84-85), Mester (2011: 123) and Richardson (2013: 169-171) enlist the places in the *FQ* in which dance language, metaphors, images and symbols occur. In the first lines of *BN* the «dance of the artery» is mentioned in circular terms as an expression of triumphant vitality (*CP*: 178). In section V the «crying shadow of the funeral dance» (*CP*: 182) somehow evokes an impersonal abstraction of the figure of Narcissus's dance of «religious purification» (Mester 2011: 123)⁴; likewise, in section II of *LG*, the purifying agency of fire alludes to dance in terms of rigour and devotion, exhorting to move «in measure/like a dancer» (*CP*: 205). In Section III of *LG* (*CP*: 207) Eliot refers to *Le Spectre de la rose*, a choreography commissioned to Michel Fokine by Sergej Diaghilev, with Nijinskij and Karsavina as leading dancers. In the manuscript, Eliot replaces the term 'ghost' with 'spectre', a case in which a word change significantly implies a definite reference and Eliot explicitly mentions the ballet in his private correspondence with John Hayward (Gardner 1980: 202)⁵. In Fokine's choreography, the rose – Nijinskij's character – functions as an objective correlative to the female protagonist who, smelling the scent of the flower, remembers her first ball. The rose is transformed into a young dancer in her dreams, only

⁴ Protagonist of an early poem by Eliot (*The Death of St. Narcissus*) Narcissus, «a dancer to God», has often been identified with Nijinskij. See Hargrove (1997: 69-70); Bernstein (1976; 1981).

⁵ Hargrove (1997: 69) notes a mistake by Gardner, who claimed Eliot actually saw Nijinskij dancing in this role, while the dancer had already been dismissed by the Company in the late 1910s. However, another possible source for Eliot could be the portrait *en pointe* of Nijinskij, provided by W. Lewis for Madam Strindberg's Cabaret Theatre Club. See Richardson (2013: 159).

to vanish leaving her with the fallen flower at her awakening. In the *FQ*, memory is evoked by means of similar rhetorical mechanisms and objective correlatives, often involving roses – as in the opening scene of the rose garden in *BN*. According to Hargrove (1997: 61-88), Eliot's memory of this ballet affects almost every reference he makes to the rose, symbolizing human or divine love. However, the two main explicit dance images occurring in *FQ* are the one of the «still point of the turning world» (*CP*: 179) in section I of *BN*, and the rural dance of the first section of *EC* (*CP*: 184-5).

In the very beginning of *BN* Eliot establishes the temporal paradigm of his investigation, introducing the concept of time in terms of eternal circularity (*CP*: 177): this conception of time has much to do, in Eliot's case, with Heraclitean thought rather than Plato, along with other elements of oriental philosophy, Buddhism and St. Augustine's meditation on temporal dimension. In particular, Clubb (1961) investigates how the use of paradox in the *FQ* mirrors a Heraclitean methodological thought, rather than direct attachment to Heraclitus. In these terms, the two fragments by Heraclitus placed before *BN* – and later to the whole *FQ* – announce the two main themes of the poem: the reality of a universal truth behind material perception and the concept of time as «constant state of flux» (Clubb 1961: 19-21). «The still point of the turning world» (*CP*: 179) is the figure Eliot uses in order to give form to this particular concept of time. The temporal dimension is not flattened to the present time, but the present constitutes the segment in which past and future coexist in a dynamic of intention and experience. In other terms, it stands for the grasping, or intuition, of a transcendental truth that can be only exploited in terms of contraries and opposites in oxymoronic terms:

Neither flesh nor fleshless;
 Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
 But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
 Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
 towards,
 Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
(*CP*: 179)

The image of the ‘still point’, already implied by Eliot in the Coriolan poems⁶ and indebted to Charles Williams’s novel *The Greater Trumps*, has been read in different ways. Clubb assumes it in terms of the mathematical point: an element in the Euclidean geometry which detains no dimension whatsoever, but which is the first and essential constituent of every form and figure (1961: 26-27). Martz notices that the image of the ‘still point’ and of the ‘wheel’ often occur related to each other in Eliot’s poems, the latter meaning a pattern of action and suffering endlessly turning at the axis that remains still: moreover, the two images are also evoked in the two quotes by Heraclitus (1972: 128-9). What links these symbols together is the conception, expressed by Eliot in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, that the responsibility of the individual belongs to society as a whole, thus reminding the multiple meaning of the verb ‘to suffer’ as ‘undergoing pain’ but also ‘permitting, consenting’ (Martz 1972: 127). The symbol of the wheel, standing for the «eternally decreed pattern of suffering, which is also action, and of action, which is also suffering» (Martz 1972: 128), recurs throughout Eliot’s poetry, as for instance in *Ash Wednesday* (*CP*: 92) and in the Coriolan poems (*CP*: 132). As it becomes clear, stillness is strongly linked to the Word with a capital letter, while suffering an action pertains to the realm of the material world. Thus «the still point of the turning world» becomes the moment of consciousness that transcends time and the material world and is the theme that links all of Eliot’s work, from the words of Buddha and St. Augustine in the second half of *The Waste Land* to the mystic and ascetic dimension of *LG* (Martz 1972: 130). That is to say, as Eliot himself expresses in an essay on Pascal, the struggle towards the union of «the knowledge of worldliness» and «asceticism» (Eliot 1931: 411). In particular in *BN*, a moment of such an «individual union» is given in the recollection of the moment in the rose garden:

⁶ *Triumphal March* (1931).

the sensual memory is only possible in a process of redemption of time, in other words, only by the transcendental experience of the 'still point' (Martz 1972: 136). On the other hand, the experience of memory is deceptive, implying the ambivalence and ambiguity of the experience described (*CP*: 177). As a consequence, the ineffability of «the still point of the turning world» only acquires meaning and consistency in a transcendent, if not overtly religious dimension, despite the difficulty of its comprehension in terms of experience (Martz 1972: 133).

More recently the same image has been read strictly in ballet terms, given the explicit reference to the semantic field of movement and Eliot's interest in ballet. Lepecki (2000: 334-42) reads the 'still point' from a physiological point of view, identifying Eliot's reference with what actually happens to the body of the dancer in a moment of equilibrium in neuroscientific terms and with the definition of dance in terms of stillness instead of movement. Jones (2009: 33-36; 2013: 227) resumes this reading, even though she rejects Lepecki's assumption of a reference to Nijinskij's performance in *The Rite of Spring* (1910). Jones's scepticism arises from the fact that Eliot's relationship with dance cannot be forced too much and that it is not possible to demonstrate that Eliot actually saw the Parisian performance of 1913, while he certainly sees the *Ballet Russes* in London in 1921: in that circumstance Massine has already replaced Nijinskij and, as mentioned, in that occasion Eliot almost dispraises the choreography. Furthermore, Jones observes how Eliot's employment of dance and the figure of the still point are to be necessarily read in the light of modernism and of the poet's preoccupations in the literary and meta-poetic issues of tradition. In other words, the «still point of the turning world» provides, according to Jones, nothing more than an objective correlative of the «human experience of timelessness, a moment of spiritual fulfilment that can be experienced physically, an activity for which [Eliot] found expression as physiological balance in the dancer's state of poise and equilibrium – a timeless, yet temporal, phenomenon» (2009: 32-35;

2013). As a matter of fact, quoting Sally Ann Ness's definition of balance (2008), Jones maintains that Eliot's physiological description of the 'still point' is something that occurs not only in modernism, but in every system of dance: it describes an instant of extreme muscular tension and balance loaded with potential movement just before it actually happens⁷.

Jones finally compares the opening of *BN* in the garden scene to the choreography of *Le Jardin aux lilas*, by Anthony Tudor. During the writing of *BN*, both Eliot and Tudor are working at the Mercury theatre in London: according to Jones, the coexistence of opposites described in Eliot's poem is equivalent to the attempt in the ballet to grasp a moment inside and outside human temporal experience, achieved by the juxtaposition of movement and stillness on the stage. As far as the 'still point' is concerned, the choreographer and the poet aim to and achieve the same expression of internalized moment of intensity and sublimity (2009: 41; 2013: 235-239).

The second explicit dance scene occurring in *FQ* concerns the ritual revels of *EC*. In section I, set in the rural village from where Eliot's ancestors arrive in Boston, memory recovers the ghostly scene of a country wedding. The villagers dance in couple and are then joined by other members of the community:

In that open field
 If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
 On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
 Of the weak pipe and the little drum
 And see them dancing around the bonfire
 the association of man and woman
 In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie
 A dignified and commodious sacrament.
 Two and two, necessarye coniunction,

⁷ Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham will further develop the stillness-movement dynamic in relation to body's perception in time and space. See, among others, Jones (2009: 48; 2013); Franco (2003).

Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
 Whiche betokeneth concorde. Round and round the fire
 Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles
 (CP: 184-5)

The ritual element is present both in the wedding, which is referred to as 'daunsinge' – a consciously archaic lexical choice (Gardner 1980: 30; 202) – and in the act itself of dancing, which connects itself to the primitive nature of rituals as the first and main constituent of civilised communities. Dance is the primordial and, at the same time, artificial means through which the villagers celebrate, understand and scan the time of their own lives – the psychological perception of their being; and the time of nature and of the earth – milking, harvesting, but also seasons and constellations:

Keeping time,
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
 As in their living in the living seasons
 The time of the seasons and the constellations
 The time of milking and the time of harvest
 The time of the coupling of man and woman
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.
 (CP: 185)

The pervasive element that functions as binding agent between the internal reception of time and its external measurement and representation through the dance is, again, rhythm. This is lexically stressed by the presence of 'the weak pipe' and 'the little drum', evoked by the images of circularity – the gathering around the bonfire – and by the euphonic repetitions of anaphoric elements, depicted ekphrastically by the lyrical voice: 'keeping time/ keeping the rhythm in their dance', 'the time of...'. The choice of the tense is also incisive: gerunds predominate the passage and suggest the idea of continuity and circularity of the action. The never-ending cycle of life-death-

rebirth is then re-affirmed in the very last oxymoron that closes the scene and that resumes an alliteration in /d/, previously introduced by «drinking»: «Dung and death». As Reeves observes, the alliteration, that is kept through the following four lines (*CP*: 186-189), remarks the cyclical pattern as it «hints that ‘death’ has given way to ‘dawn’ and ‘another day’ in the cycle around which the protagonist is continually moving ‘here/Or there, or elsewhere’» (Reeves 1989: 123). The social dimension of the ritual is given by the representation of a rural community, though these peasants are only living in the past, as ghosts evoked by memory: again, tradition exists on a complexity of temporal levels that affect each other constantly⁸.

It is possible to conclude the brief survey on this dance image by pointing out a further connection with Virgil, which both testifies to the general range of Eliot’s classical sources and to the strict relation between dance and ancestral rituals or traditions. Generally speaking, Reeves states that *EC* is the place in *FQ* where «Virgilian agrarianism can be sensed most strongly» (Reeves 1989: 118) both in terms of themes and poetic strategies. The dance scene of *EC* recalls the Virgilian *pietas* – with the word humility recurring several times in *FQ* – as both referred to the human acknowledgement of death and of a past which is beyond recall (Reeves 1989: 118-119). The vision of an «agrarian community» also exemplifies a clear Virgilian poetic strategy: the seventeenth-century dance is presented within the dance of the seasons, with a movement from the particular to the general that can be read as a «metaphysical pattern [that] informs Eliot’s social, political and religious thought» in the light of Virgilian agrarianism (Reeves 1989: 123-124).

As a matter of fact, Eliot’s landscape maintains a Virgilian allure in its evocative traits and there can be assumed, in Eliot’s lines, a poetic memory – if not a punctual reference – of a specific Virgilian scene taken from the *Georgics*. In the first book (Verg. *Georg.* 1, 345-350),

⁸ Concerning this aspect, Ellis (1992) also compares, in the light of Classicism, the absence of pictorial landscapes in the *FQ* to the treatment of the same subject in contemporary painting.

Virgil describes a country sacrificial rite accompanied by the triple dance of the community of peasants, in which both movement and circularity are expressed from a linguistic and thematic point of view (*ter... eat; chorus*; ll. 345; 346). Moreover, these lines are preceded and followed by an extensive description of seasons and constellations: in particular at line 335 (*caeli mensis et sidera serva*), Virgil seems to resound almost literally in the Eliotean «time of the seasons and constellations». The link between dance and ancestral tradition can also be compared in Eliot and Virgil. As a matter of fact, Thomas stresses the ‘rarity’ and ‘clumsiness’ of rhythm in this passage as an emphasis of the «uncouth nature (*incompositos*) of the rustic dance» (Thomas 1988: 126) and observes how the ritual described overlaps an archaic frame to the present time in which the action takes place⁹. Other oblique references can be observed, among which a few can be mentioned, such as the presence of fire in the famous praise of country life (Verg. *Georg.* 2, 528 *ignis ubi in medio*) and Tityrus’ *tenuis avena* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1,2), a symbol of Arcadia itself, somehow revived by the “weak pipe” of Eliot’s own peasants¹⁰.

Actual dance-scenes or elements connected to the general environment of ballet present in the *FQ* function as objective correlatives that, besides helping the poet to express what he needs, are justified in the light of his concerns in the ritual and liturgical dimensions linked with dance. The connection he operates between these elements and the ontological essence of drama – since its classical origins – is also crucial in a way that Gardner (1968) extensively demonstrates, illustrating how the contemporaneity of

⁹ «Though these *carmina* are presumably hymns to Ceres, in juxtaposition with *motus incompositos* they look to the archaic, even specifically Saturnian, verses of 2.386 (*uersibus incomptis ludunt*) [...].As at 347, the archaic flavour of the line distinguishes it, and the account of rustic piety which it closes, from more modern realities of the bulk of the poem. The activity described in these lines belongs to the age of Saturn, not Jupiter (2. 538)» (Thomas 1988: 126-127).

¹⁰ I would like to thank professor Oniga for suggesting these Virgilian parallels to me. For an in-depth analysis of Virgilian agrarianism in Eliot and of the presence of Virgil in *FQ*, see Reeves (1989: 96-157).

Eliot's involvement in theatre and the drafting of the *FQ* influenced the theological and poetical language of the latter. Eliot sees a social function for poetry that culminates in verse drama as a physical and topological place in which the ritual gathering of an audience fulfils and completes the utmost scope of poetry. However, it is in *FQ* that Eliot achieves the highest peaks of linguistic precision and expression, especially in those lines which explore the inability of language to express the ineffable nature of reality and of spiritual dimension (Gardner 1968: 74-75).

4. FROM *FOUR QUARTETS* TO DANCE

As much as dance influences the composition and the elaboration of some of the main themes of *FQ*, the poem itself inspires ballet: a reciprocity that testifies to the visual dimension of Eliot's later poetry.

Susan Jones investigates the possibility that Eliot might have actually influenced modern choreography in the United States. In particular, the scholar investigates Martha Graham's choreographies in the light of her quotes of Eliot's poems in her *Notebooks* (1973). Moreover, quoting Mark Franko, Jones points out an analogy of themes between Eliot and Graham in terms of «consciousness of materials» deriving from «the primitive» and «ritual»: Jones connects Graham's attitude towards tradition to Eliot's already mentioned theories on impersonality and the role of primitivism in the renovation of tradition. The scholar illustrates how Graham adopts her reading of Eliot's poems in order to invoke the 'still point' as a means to express themes such as memory and transcendence (2009: 43-47; 2013: 239-244). Eliot's poetry does not cease to provide a source of inspiration for choreographers and dancers: the musical *Cats* (1981) is perhaps the most famous adaptation of a poem by Eliot, even though certainly not Eliot's most canonically rewarded work. Eliot's *Old Possum Book of Practical Cats*, first published in 1939, is a collection of almost nonsensical poems that the poet writes

for his godchildren in 1930. While working on the characters and choreography, Andrew Lloyd Webber consulted with Valery Eliot and, in some of the musical's songs, the lyrics coincide with the poems.

The most recent experiment of a ballet inspired by Eliot's poetry is that of a Canadian dancer, Deborah Dunn, who in 2009 composed a solo-choreography to the *FQ*. Dunn, who approached dance during her university years while studying visual arts, is an eclectic artist, especially dealing with theatre, who often explores the relationship between movement and language, in particular literature. Inspired by the listening of Alec Guinness's reading of the *FQ*, Dunn has been prompted to dance to it. The choreography is composed of four solo-ballets in which Dunn is the dancer: in the first three parts she wears a man tweed-suit, while in the last one she dances in a red tulle dress inspired by a rose. Curiously enough, the upper part of the rose-costume resembles the one used by Nijinskij in *Le Spectre de la rose*. The likeness is not a coincidence, as Dunn herself has confirmed: «I was inspired by Nijinsky's *Spectre de la rose*. I remember reading that Eliot saw and liked that dance very much»¹¹. Nijinskij's costume, designed by Léon Baskt, created a sensational effect of de-personification of the dancer who appeared almost «sexless» in it (Hargrove 1997: 72)¹². A similar intent in terms of gender-treatment lies behind Dunn's choice of wearing a man's suit: «I wanted to recall Eliot, to bring out the modernity of the poem and to disturb the reception of my body as 100%, I wanted the feminine body to have to work its way out of the grid»¹³.

According to McCallum (2011), Dunn's achievement in this work is that of establishing a correspondence between body, movement,

¹¹ Deborah Dunn agreed to be interviewed and personally confirmed this in an email she sent me on 28th February 2012.

¹² Dunn's costume can be seen on her website: <http://www.trialanderos.com/eng/stills.html>; for Nijinskij's costume, see <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/8923>.

¹³ My interview.

language and words, avoiding the narrative that is not even present in the source text. McCallum especially praises Dunn's ability to translate Eliot's words to physical form on descriptive and metaphorical levels, as if really words were given life: the reviewer goes on explaining and describing how the images that Dunn creates with her movements are «subtle but eminently legible» (McCallum 2011). The beginning of the poem is rendered in the choreography with the mimic of time passing by means of a circular movement of her arms, «establishing an imagery connected to space and time» (McCallum 2011). Likewise, the «deception of the thrush» (*CP*: 177) is almost recited in a literal way, by means of the movement of the dancer's hands.

As a matter of fact, whereas the subject of *FQ* is extremely complex and elevated, Eliot struggles over all his poems in order to achieve the «exactness» of words, a linearity of thought and language that functions as a grid to grasp the meaning behind words: some reviewers define the movement language Dunn displays in this choreography as very simple and linear, as far as the position of feet and hands are concerned. Perhaps a correspondence between Dunn's attempt and Eliot's pursuit of abstract forms can be drawn, even though there always lies a risk of pushing the parallel too far. At the same time, one of the negative criticisms that emerges from the reception of the ballet is that, at times, the codification Dunn operates in transposing words into images might result overemphasized. In my opinion, however, these sort of inter-semiotic translations play the explanatory role that the most visual and intelligible parts have in the poems, such as the garden, the sea-landscape, the laughter of the children, the Chinese jar and other objective correlatives that guide the reader through the poem.

I think it is worth noting another aspect of continuity with the tradition of *Le Spectre de la rose*. In many interviews, Nijinskij's daughter has pointed out how Fokine and her father freed the circular movement, or, in Eliot's words, the 'pattern' of dancers in general, and of their arms in particular:

My father choreographed one way, my aunt choreographed another way and I choreographed another way. However what binds us is a family choreography and it's the circle. [...] He [Fokine] would liberate the dance with a movement for instance like this [mimes] that goes on transcendently. He would never stay confined within the circle. He would use very harmonious arm movements, the flow of arm movements¹⁴.

In addition to this, as suggested also by the above mentioned Heraclitean element present in the poem, circularity runs throughout the *FQ* not only as a topic, but also from a structural point of view: Dunn often resumes the circular pattern, for example when she enters the scene pirouetting onto the stage. McCallum describes Dunn's interpretation of *LG* as an «euphoric, regal culmination to the performance» pulling the audience «out of the thoughtful, contemplative mood of the first three acts and wrapping them in the sweet, heady aura of this stately but romantic closing act» (McCallum 2011). This description might sound overenthusiastic if compared to a canonic reading of *LG*, according to which the last quartet is not less contemplative than the others, but it should be remembered that McCallum does not react directly to *LG*, but to Dunn's perception, reception and translation of Eliot's poem. When asked whether she had in mind more the transcendental element or the pursuit of pattern and order of the poem when composing the choreography, Dunn replies that her role as a dancer is to work with a sensual response to words and ideas, stressing that in Eliot's case this has been even more necessary and challenging, given the complexity of themes of the poem:

I have no more reverence for the transcendental passages of poetry than those exploring order. In fact I would say I tried to keep God out of it as much as possible though that was

¹⁴ My transcription of Kyra Nijinskij being interviewed by Margot Fonteyn: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4MyvujNfA> (minutes 2.14 - 3.16).

impossible. I told myself I was working with detail, devotion and discipline. I put the body first more than I usually do in my work because I knew Eliot was taking care of the rest and I wanted to give a predominantly sensual response, as I am a dancer and not an intellectual¹⁵.

However, Dunn's use of the terms 'detail', 'devotion' and 'discipline' certainly sounds very Eliotean in the terms the poet expresses to refer to the physical, mental and personal experience of the dancer, a commitment he wished could be ascribed to the actor and poet too.

I find it revealing that Dunn encountered the poem through an oral reading of it: the fact that she decided to give form and shape to a specific succession of sounds confirms, in my opinion, a synaesthetic dimension in the poetry of Eliot, in which it is not immediate or even possible to detect where music ends and images start. Dunn confirms this reading by declaring that «it was the musical dimension of the poetry that struck me first, though Eliot's musicality is intimately linked to image»¹⁶. Along with Guinness's and her own voice, Dunn dances to a minimalist music composed by Diane Labrosse. In *The Rite of Spring* Eliot praises the role of rhythm and of primitive attitude in the music of Stravinskij and, generally speaking, tribal and rhythmical sounds remind him of the noise of the modern age and the interior angst of modern man. The music choice of Dunn's ballet, and the result of her dancing to a human voice might also have conscious or unconscious relations with Eliot's conceiving of the musicality of poetry.

¹⁵ My interview

¹⁶ Ibid.

4. CONCLUSION

Several attempts have been made to read the poetry of T.S. Eliot as related to the visual arts, or, better to say, to analyse the influence of avant-garde techniques on the poet's work. In this regard it needs to be pointed out that such a comparison can be carried out, in Eliot's circumstances, from both a biographical and a cultural point of view. The poet certainly has a strong interest and even some contacts in the artistic field. Nonetheless, it can be legitimately assumed that there exists a general common ground among the arts of a certain historical and cultural period that does not imply a direct or intentional contact between artists¹⁷. Eliot's interest in the visual dimension range from the pictorial avant-gardes to the multidimensional art of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, with their conflation of music, dance and painting.

The poet's approach is much more speculative rather than descriptive: what emerges from the analysis of several scholars is that the influence of art techniques on Eliot's poems come from an intellectual knowledge of theory rather than direct fruition of paintings or sculptures. On the other hand, it is inevitable that Eliot saw some of these works, whether actual ones or reproductions in books: in the avant-gardes techniques Eliot finds the tools he is looking for in order to mould his thought into poetry¹⁸. Contrary to a general tendency on Eliotean criticism, a few scholars contribute in providing evidence of a permanent influence of visual art techniques in Eliot's later poetry, even though with different results. Dance in particular gives Eliot imaginative elements and material suitable to

¹⁷ See, among others, Curtius (1948); Auerbach (1946); Praz (1925; 1971); Pinelli (1993); Pagnini (1970; 1980).

¹⁸ Dickey (2006); Roper (2002); Roston (2000); Thompson (1980); Tomlinson (1980). I have investigated the relationship of Eliot's poetry and the visual arts in my MA dissertation: "*What might have been is an abstraction. A Visual Perspective on the Poetry of T.S. Eliot*" (University of Udine, 2011). On the relationship with dance, see above n. 2; F. Dickey is currently co-editing with J. Morgenstern a collection of essays on this topic: *T. S. Eliot and the Arts, Essays on Eliot and Art, Music, Dance, and Film*.

shape objective correlatives appropriate for the renewed religious and philosophical interest of his late production.

An even less attention has been given to the relationship between Eliot's poetry and the visual arts in reversed terms, despite the existence of examples of this reciprocal influence. Deborah Dunn's transposition of the whole of *FQ* into dance constitutes an interesting statement of inter-semiotic translation and testifies to the visual dimension of the *FQ* from many different points of view. First of all, the link with dance springs somehow directly from the poem, as it constitutes one of the visual sources of Eliot's later poetry. Moreover, the creative process from one form of artistic expression to another mirrors Eliot's own theories on literary criticism and on the pursuit of a mature literature that could aspire to a certain degree of 'Classicism'.

From this brief analysis, I think it is possible to suggest that there exists a reciprocity in the relationship between *FQ* and dance that testifies to a visual dimension of Eliot's poetry. Moreover, when considering the act of translation from poetry to dance it is worth observing how much a poem, as a text, is newly revived at each performance, somehow manifesting its traditional, oral element. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot speaks of «order» and «alteration» when referring to the interaction between the existing canon and the creation of a new work of art¹⁹. In Eliot's terms, both an aesthetic and intellectual consequence of Dunn's choreography provides a possible alteration of the poem itself.

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¹⁹ «What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. [...] The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered» (Kermode 1975: 38).

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