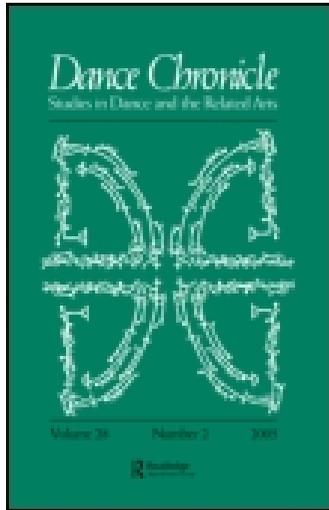


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Publisher: Routledge

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Dance Chronicle

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ldnc20>

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Published online: 30 Jun 2015.



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To cite this article: Chantal Frankenbach (2015) Dancing the Redemption of French Literature: Rivière, Mallarmé, and Le Sacre du printemps, *Dance Chronicle*, 38:2, 134-160

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2015.1043799>

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Dancing the Redemption of French Literature: Rivière, Mallarmé, and *Le Sacre du printemps*

CHANTAL FRANKENBACH

*Just below the surface of his 1913 review of *Le Sacre du printemps*, French literary critic Jacques Rivière issued a manifesto against the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and his purported corruption of French literature. Mallarmé's late-nineteenth-century writing on the ballet pantomime and Loie Fuller, which positioned dance as a symbolic écriture corporelle, represented an erasure of the linguistic purity that Rivière and his colleagues at the Nouvelle Revue Française prized. Rivière's review challenges Mallarmé's conception of both dance and writing, presenting the jolting clarity of Nijinsky's choreography as a crucial recovery of literary precision.*

When, in the 1950s, Albert Camus asked the French statesman Charles de Gaulle how he believed a writer could serve France, de Gaulle answered: “Every man who writes” (a hesitation) “and writes well, serves France.”¹ This sentiment, although stated some forty years after the 1913 Paris premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps*, nevertheless captures an important aspect of the ballet's reception, for *Sacre* became a key work not only in discourse about modernist music and dance, but in debates over literature as well. In the tumult of rancorous commentary on *Sacre*'s scandalous opening night, a particularly insightful review came from Jacques Rivière, a literary critic writing for the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF), who scrutinized *Sacre*'s creators as writers no less than as composers and choreographers. Rivière's review has endured as a seminal appraisal of the ballet's impact, interesting scholars for its surprising insights into the shared aesthetic territory of music, dance, and literature.

Fashioned in two parts, Rivière's reaction to *Sacre* appeared first in August of 1913 as a brief notice of the ballet's utter novelty and then, three months later, as an extended reflection on its deeper cultural significance. The second essay, which will be the primary focus of this article, analyzes both the music of Igor Stravinsky and the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky. Both aspects of the ballet contributed to Rivière's determination that *Sacre*

was “the first masterpiece that we can compare to those of impressionism.”* While presented as a commentary on music and dance, Rivière’s review ultimately forms a manifesto against the effects of Symbolism on French literature, situating the ballet as a crucial turn toward renewed vigor and purity in the French language. In this article, I examine Rivière’s vision of *Sacre* as a work that would inspire French authors to shake off the exhausted ideals of Symbolism and to once again “write well.”

Musicologist Richard Taruskin has noted Rivière’s interest in Stravinsky’s music as a recuperative force for French literature.² Karen D. Levy also observes that Rivière modeled his hopes for French literature on the music of Modest Mussorgsky and Stravinsky.³ Little attention has been given, however, to Rivière’s appraisal of Nijinsky’s choreography as a powerful challenge to both choreographic and literary Symbolism. Rivière himself insists that Nijinsky’s contribution to the work is every bit as important as Stravinsky’s; he writes in the initial essay on *Sacre* that of the ballet’s three authors—Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and painter Nicholas Roerich—Nijinsky is the most surprisingly original and worthy of attention.

Furthermore, analysis of Rivière’s essay in conjunction with his other works of the period suggests that just below the surface of his exuberant response to Nijinsky is a darker and more urgent response to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé and Mallarmé’s influence on French literature. In particular, Rivière’s focus on dance in the *Sacre* essay corresponds remarkably with another essay, “Le Roman d’aventure” (The Adventure Novel), which appeared in the May through July issues of the NRF in 1913. This essay underscores the critic’s belief in movement and action as essential attributes of a renewed classical French literature that would supersede the emblematic dream world of Mallarmé’s Symbolism.[†]

Part of what makes Rivière’s review of *Sacre* such an important anti-Symbolist document is the oblique but unmistakable reference it makes to Mallarmé’s own dance criticism. Numerous scholars of literature have contributed to a rich discussion of Mallarmé’s writing on dance. Evelyn Gould, Susan Jones, and Mary Lewis Shaw offer thorough and insightful analyses of Mallarmé’s understanding of dance as a form of poetry.⁴ Yet very little attention has been given to Rivière’s work on dance and even less to the way it responds to Mallarmé. In this article I argue that in order to fully understand what Rivière intended in his now-canonical commentary on *Sacre*, we must

* Jacques Rivière, “*Le Sacre du printemps*,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 10 (August and November, 1913), reprinted in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, ed. and trans. by Blanche A. Price (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 125. Rivière uses the term “impressionism” interchangeably with “symbolism” and “romanticism.”

† While Mallarmé did not identify strongly with any particular literary movement and his work can be approached from many other perspectives, Rivière’s strong coupling of Mallarmé with Symbolism is symptomatic of his conservative aesthetic, which became a guiding principle in his editorial oversight of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

read his attention to movement and “the act” in conjunction with his great concern for Mallarmé’s erosion of clarity in the French language. Thus we must take account of Mallarmé’s dance criticism and consider its place in the formation of Rivière’s beliefs about dance as a form of writing.

We may do this in two ways. First, because Rivière and Mallarmé each turned what they saw in dance to literary ends, we may compare their choreographic analyses in terms of their literary aesthetics. Rivière sought in movement the same quality he prized in words: hard, clear, materially substantiated communication. Mallarmé, on the other hand, perceived both movement and words as infinitely variable signifiers that enter the reader-spectator’s mind in a web of suggestive allusion. While both writers co-opted dance as a form of writing, their different approaches to the written word determine what they valued in the language of the moving body.

Rivière regarded *Sacre* as a breakthrough in the communicative capacity of language that insists on clarity. He joined words and movement into mutually entangled concepts that supported his aspirations for the renewal of classical French letters. Because Mallarmé’s conception of dance as “*écriture corporelle*” relied on the very metaphors and subjectivities that Rivière distrusted, Nijinsky’s ferociously direct choreography gave the critic a brilliant opportunity to challenge Mallarmé on his own terms and to harness the appearance of a new kind of dance to his goals for a new kind of writing. *Le Sacre du printemps* allowed Rivière to position Nijinsky as a writer, so to speak, of the literature that would overturn Symbolism.

Second, we may compare Rivière and Mallarmé on the basis of their views about the modern dancer Loie Fuller, who is best known for her use of illuminated fabric veils in her dances. Recalling that Mallarmé’s writing on Fuller helped to establish her reputation as the quintessential Symbolist dancer, we may read Rivière’s critique of Fuller in the *Sacre* essay both as a rejection of Mallarmé’s Symbolism in general and as a rebuttal to the poet’s conception of dance as a symbolic form of writing. In effect, Rivière revised Mallarmé’s literary claim on dance, putting Nijinsky in Fuller’s place as the correct representative of corporeal writing.

LA NOUVELLE REVUE FRANÇAISE

Rivière’s judgment of *Sacre* as a work of literary merit rests solidly within the wider editorial agenda adopted by the NRF. In 1909, its founders—including André Gide, Jean Schlumberger, Gaston Gallimard, and Jacques Copeau—aimed to find and support new writers concerned with classical discipline and clarity and to establish the NRF as a custodian of

traditional French literary values.* They adopted a set of literary criteria first advanced in 1549 by the poet and critic Joachim du Bellay, whose *Défense et illustration de la langue française* was the earliest of many treatises written to advance the cause of linguistic purity—specifically to promote French as a language comparable to Latin and to further protect French from the corrupting influence of Italian.⁵

The NRF founders' choice of du Bellay's treatise aptly demonstrated their classical literary values and their hope for a renewal of French culture—goals that the journal's first editor, Jean Schlumberger, articulated in its inaugural issue. Enlarging upon du Bellay's title, Schlumberger writes: "*La langue* is not just language, it is culture." *Défense* springs from the fact that "everyone is afraid of feeling lost, separated by a yawning gulf from the sure glories of French culture." And *illustrer* "aspires less here to the sense of rendering illustrious than to that of rendering plain."⁶

During its first thirty years, the NRF published both literary criticism and new work, aiming for a balance of both. With a wide readership and the most prestigious circle of authors gathered anywhere in Europe, the NRF set the literary tone for the European continent and launched the venerable publishing house of Gallimard. Except for its cessation during World War I, the journal ran continuously until 1940, forming the tastes of several generations of European writers and readers.[†]

In 1635, the mandate for linguistic clarity set out by du Bellay officially passed to the Académie française, an institution formed from a group of literary enthusiasts who were pressed into government service as grammarians by Cardinal Richelieu. With the weight of the French government behind them, the initially amateur mission was thus turned to the absolutist doctrine "that literature must contribute to the grandeur of the state."⁷ Yet the Académie merely institutionalized a cultural fascination with linguistic purity that had occupied French intellectuals for over a century. Its members' primary activity was to ponder and polish word definitions, the precise meaning of words being the lifeblood of an acutely clear national style at the heart of French cultural identity.

Rivière believed the cure for the Symbolists' subversion of traditional French literary values must be sought in a renewed commitment to the accuracy of words—the most basic units of meaning—whose definitions form the substrate of all literary and cultural reliability. It is no surprise then that Rivière's critique of Symbolism began with Mallarmé. For, as Rivière

* For a history of the NRF and its readership see Justin O'Brien, *From the NRF: An Image of the Twentieth Century from the Pages of the Nouvelle Revue Française* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958), xi–xxiv.

† In 1940, Vichy forces took over the journal and ran it until 1944. When the Gallimard firm revived the journal in 1953 it was renamed *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*. The journal remains in print today.

himself wrote, it was with Mallarmé and his colleagues “that words first showed signs of being debauched.”⁸ The very preoccupation with words that led the Académie française to their extremes of codification also led the Symbolists to explore a different extreme: the limits of semantic permeability.

In her study of dance and literature, Deirdre Priddin observes that for Mallarmé the written word no longer expresses human needs but attains “the reality of the metaphysical,” transforming natural facts “into [their] vibratory near disappearance.”⁹ This aesthetic shift in the signifying function of words grew out of a broader assault on classical French prosody, which had been codified by François de Malherbe in the early seventeenth century. Mallarmé caricatured the breakdown of this near-sacred emblem of French culture in his 1894 lecture at Oxford and Cambridge on the state of French literature. “I do indeed bring news,” he announced. “The most surprising news. Such a case has never been seen. Verse has been tampered with.”¹⁰ This announcement merely confirmed the upheaval of poetic prosody that Mallarmé had predicted in his “Crise de vers” (Crisis of Verse), which formed the preface to René Ghil’s 1886 *Traité du verbe* (Treatise on the Word).¹¹

For Mallarmé, the multivalent possibilities for a word’s meaning became its most important attribute, one that transformed not only writing, but reading as well, moving each from a focus on “meaning” to one on “process.”* This disruption of signification went beyond the mere etymological development of a word, extending to its history in usage and its accumulated associations and convergences with other words. In “Le Roman d’aventure,” Rivière describes how, for the Symbolists, a word has a past:

It has lived in different works and undergone the influence of its environment; it has had adventures; it has had encounters; it has been helped, supported by other words, or else it has come to their aid, has sustained them; and it retains hazy recollections of all its former companions, like a halo around itself. A thousand phantoms, which we cannot quite recognize, surround it and form its vague, mysterious escort.¹²

While Rivière complicates his position with the terms “adventure” and “encounter”—concepts he will also use to diagnose a recovery from Symbolism—in this statement they indicate an alarming breakdown of semantic certainty. The aesthetic quarrel that Rivière and his peers had with

* Barbara Johnson explains why this experience is disconcerting for the reader. “Rather than figure out what the poet meant, the reader must figure out what the language is doing. In other words, the reader learns to see the *search* for meaning as illuminating and meaningful in itself . . . [Mallarmé’s] texts can teach [his] readers to consider the struggle with ambiguity and obscurity not as an *obstacle* to understanding, but as the very *experience* of understanding—of understanding as interminable process.” See Johnson’s essay, “The Liberation of Verse,” in Dennis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 800–1.

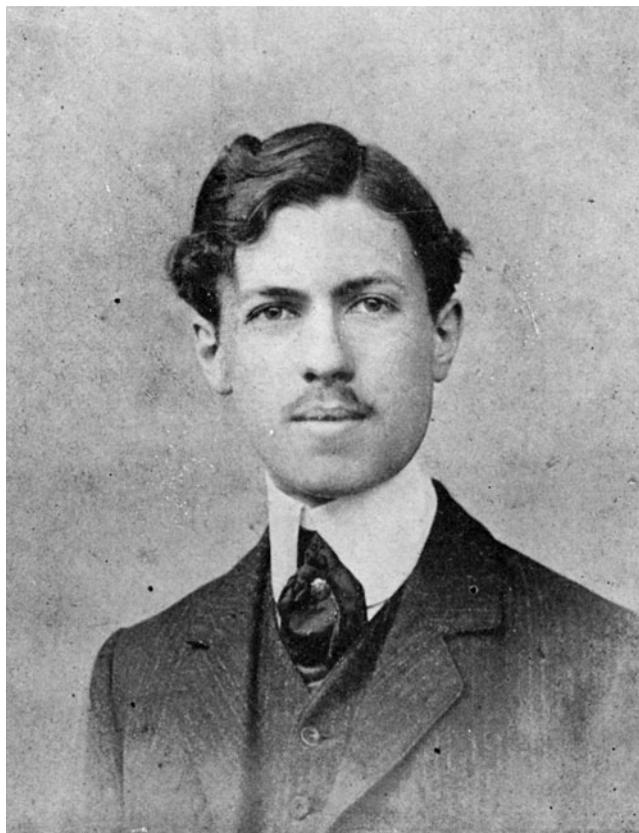


FIGURE 1 Jacques Rivière in 1908. © Photo Panajou—Bordeaux. Reproduced by permission of Photo Panajou—Bordeaux. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

Symbolism broadly addressed Mallarmé's assault on classical literary forms and on the nature of writing and reading, but it turned most crucially on the proper handling of that most precious cultural commodity of France—words and the clarity of their meaning. As I will argue, Rivière found in *Sacre* a vital connection between the deployment of words and the movement of the dancing body.

JACQUES RIVIÈRE

Rivière's primary mission as a writer for the NRF was to confront and correct the alarming degradation of the French language wrought by Mallarmé and his fellow Symbolist poets—a task he felt called to early in his life. Born in Bordelais in July 1886, Rivière grew up in a sternly Catholic household and attended the Lycée Lakanal and the Sorbonne, where he studied philosophy (see Figure 1). After a brief stint as a lecturer in philosophy at the École

Stanislaus, Rivière abandoned the prospect of teaching. In January of 1912, with the help of André Gide, he joined the NRF as secretary, a post he held until the journal ceased publication in 1914 due to the war. Following his military service and years in a German prison camp, Rivière returned to the NRF in 1919 as its editor and remained in that capacity until his death at the age of thirty-nine in 1925.¹³

Rivière's early exposure to Russian authors coincided with a change in political and cultural relations between France and Russia. In the three decades before the First World War, the one-way cultural commerce that had existed between France and Russia since Peter the Great quite suddenly reversed course. According to F. W. J. Hemmings, the abruptness of this reversal constituted "an 'invasion' akin to the march of Russian troops into France in 1814" and one we can also compare to the "invasion" of Parisian culture by the Ballets Russes.* In 1886, when the process was beginning to make itself felt, a contemporary jokingly declared that "Paris was suffering the Russian *revanche* for the burning of Moscow in 1812: but instead of setting the city on fire, the 'Cossacks' were content to drown it under floods of printer's ink."¹⁴ Rather than the Russian expulsion of Napoleon's troops, however, it was the shocking outcome of the Franco-Prussian war that brought France and Russia into a more cooperative political alliance—one that also gave Parisians unprecedented exposure to Russian culture. French universities founded chairs in Russian throughout the 1870s. The novels of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky became available to the French reading public and they learned, according to Hemmings, that this vernacular literature "might even successfully pilot a *fin-de-siècle* generation of French writers who had lost their spiritual bearings."¹⁵

Acutely aware of this spiritual unmooring in French literature, Rivière read Dostoevsky's psychological analyses of such characters as Raskolnikov with fascination. The fact that Dostoevsky's work was often associated with dreams and hallucinatory distortions of reality, with vagueness and digression, did not dissuade Rivière from seeing the monstrous actions of his characters as an antidote to French Symbolism.

In 1908, André Gide, Rivière's mentor at the NRF, further revived French interest in the Russian novel with an article on Dostoevsky that claimed the late-nineteenth-century Russian writers—the ones Henry James had called "those loose baggy monsters"—as models for his own fiction.¹⁶ Rivière had been reading Tolstoy since 1905 and before the war had read all of Dostoevsky's major works. Jean-Pierre Cap notes that while Rivière had never visited Russia or probably even met a Russian, he had "a vision of the

* F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 1. Davinia Caddy explores the notion of invasion in the Parisian reception of the Ballets Russes in *The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-Époque Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115–59.

country, which was exalting to him, especially in its ‘primitive’ and tragic aspects.”¹⁷ Thus, not surprisingly, the 1908 appearance of Diaghilev’s *Boris Godunov* further stimulated Rivière’s interest in Russian culture.

Rivière’s vigorous and sustained rejection of Symbolism emerged out of a genuine early interest in its possibilities, gleaned from his youthful acquaintance with the writing of Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Gide, and the music of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Richard Wagner. Yet as Bradford Cook points out, by 1905 Rivière’s disenchantment with Symbolism had begun and by 1910 his tastes formed around a quest for precision that vigorously rejected the diffuse, oversaturated sentiments of Romanticism in all its manifestations.¹⁸ The appearance of the *Sacre* essay in 1913 occurred at a point of deep resolve in Rivière’s literary mission, a time when he had determined what the next generation of French writers must accomplish. His belief in new European readers’ yearning for “the work made act” confirms his impatience with the vaporous, symbolic fantasies that he felt had taken hold of French literary culture and also signals his deep interest in movement as an ally in the literary coup he hoped to carry out.¹⁹

MALLARMÉ AND DANCE

Because Rivière’s essay on *Sacre* answers so directly Mallarmé’s earlier writing on dance, we must pause to examine the precedent for dance criticism that Mallarmé had established in the years before Rivière’s tenure at the NRF. Mallarmé’s first dance writing appeared as “Notes sur le théâtre” (Notes on the Theater) in the *Revue Indépendante* (1886–87) and later joined a collection of essays titled *Crayonné au théâtre* (Penciled at the Theater).²⁰ Among the writings in this collection of theater reviews, two essays—“Ballets” (1886) and “Autre étude de danse. Les fonds dans le ballet d’après une indication récente” (Another Dance Study: Essences of the Ballet according to a Recent Indication; 1893)—established the relationship of Symbolist poetics to balletic movement in the last decades of the nineteenth century.*

Mallarmé’s dance writing employs several layers of symbolic reference to dance. The first is found in the connotative capacity of words that slip

* Mallarmé’s “Ballets” reviews *Les deux pigeons* (The Two Pigeons), a ballet in three acts choreographed by Louis Mérante and composed by André Messager. *Les deux pigeons* premiered at the Paris Opéra in the autumn of 1886. Based on the story of a love between two pigeons in La Fontaine’s *Fables*, the original scenario of *Les deux pigeons* follows a pair of lovers, Pépio and his fiancée Gourouli, through the typical twists of unrequited love, concealed identity, and eventual reconciliation. Mallarmé attended a performance of the ballet at the Éden-Théâtre in 1886. Messager brought a shortened version of the ballet to London in 1906 with choreography by François Ambroisiny. Curiously, Messager revived the shortened version at the Paris Opéra in 1912, bringing it into close proximity with the premiere of *Sacre*. Frederick Ashton revived the ballet for the Royal Ballet in 1961.

from one meaning to another. Also of importance, however, is a softening of definitions that allows the activity of dancing to operate as an emblem of poetic writing. Mallarmé explicitly refers to dance as “the theatrical form of poetry par excellence”²¹ and indeed, the mutability of Mallarmé’s language blurs not only the meaning of particular words, but also the broader distinctions between writing and dance and, by extension, between memory and experience.

While the title *Crayonné au théâtre* indicates that Mallarmé wrote these reviews at the theater, the introductory remarks to the collection situate them as a set of reflections made while he sat before his hearth in the company of a flickering fire. Immediately we sense an unstable relationship between the title (Penciled at the Theater), the circumstance (in front of the fire), and the subject of his thoughts (a ballet). Where is the actual dance taking place? In the theater? In the flickering of the flames? In Mallarmé’s memory? According to Roger Pearson, “the flames dancing in the grate . . . have reminded him of this particular artistic medium. . . . Like flickering flames, the ballerina’s movements occupy a ‘*lieu absolu*’ between reality and imagination: half-human, she is also—briefly, elusively, suggestively—‘*un signe de l’éparse beauté général*’ [a generic sign of scattered beauty].”²² In the Introduction to *Crayonné*, Mallarmé asserts the ballet’s evanescent muteness, a quality that traded easily with Symbolist writing. By speaking through nonspeech, Mallarmé says, the ballet “shouts out its demonstrations through its practice. The instant the miracle happens, to say even that it was that and nothing else, will invalidate it: so intolerant is it of any evidence other than existing.”²³ Mallarmé stresses the fundamental inscrutability of dance, which exists only in our memory. We can know it only by adapting its “fluttering form” to some “exquisite confusion” with ourselves.

“Ballets” begins with a meditation on the effects created by the Italian dancer, Elena Cornalba (see Figure 2), who performed the lead role in *Les deux pigeons* at the Éden-Théâtre in 1886. Mallarmé’s words shift their meanings in a web of associations that entangle the reader in a correspondingly diffuse maze of relational significance. “La Cornalba ravishes me, who dances as if undressed; that is to say that without apparent assistance offered to her rising or falling by a presence flying and drowsed in tulle, she appears, called into the air, to sustain herself there, by virtue of the purely Italian fact of a mellifluous tension in her very person.”²⁴ As Evelyn Gould points out, the opening line of the essay immediately challenges distinctions between dancer and author. “La Cornalba ravishes me, who dances as if undressed.” Caught in Mallarmé’s challenge to the very act of reading, we don’t know for sure who is dancing, “me” or La Cornalba. And more to the point, who is “me,” the reader or the writer? Gould notes that just beneath the surface of this passage lies a “scattered profundity of meanings . . . which become the very subject of the essay itself.”²⁵



FIGURE 2 Mademoiselle Cornalba à l'Éden-Théâtre. Paul Nadar, undated. © Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission of Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

Mallarmé emphasizes the transient nature of dance not just to comment on its existential fragility, but also to superimpose the acts of dancing and writing. The meeting ground between dancer and danced—and between dancer and spectator—is, for Mallarmé, an act of poetry, one in which the dancer “unrolls our convictions in a writing of pirouettes.”²⁶ According to Roger Pearson, “just as the spectator of ballet moves from ‘*nudité spirituelle*’ to an apprehension of the underlying coherence of the dance being performed, so also the reader of *Crayonné au théâtre* moves from the ‘literal’ reading of this [text] as being purely about ballet to the realization that ballet is a metaphor for poetic text.”^{*} Thus, in Mallarmé’s writing,

^{*} Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58. For an account of how Mallarmé uses the concept of *nudité*, see Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé: The Passage from Art to Ritual* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 56.

dance functions as a symbolic act that slips easily into and out of the act of writing.

Mallarmé's conception of writing, reading, and dancing as metaphorically interconnected elements of the theater appears most obviously in a passage that suggests the dancer is, in fact, the writer. Yet she is a different kind of writer than the one Rivière will read in Nijinsky. Mallarmé's writer works in the nebulous space between dancer and scribe, the sensual terrain in which each absorbs the tendencies of the other.

The judgment or axiom to be affirmed in the case of ballet! Namely, that *the dancer is not a woman dancing*, for these juxtaposed reasons: that *she is not a woman*, but a metaphor summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form: knife, goblet, flower, etc., and that *she is not dancing*, but suggesting, through the miracle of bends and leaps, a kind of corporal writing, what it would take pages of prose, dialogue, and description to express, if it were transcribed: a poem independent of any scribal apparatus.²⁷

The dance review is thus transformed by Mallarmé into what Gould calls a two-way mirror, "making it unclear if the reviewer translates the ballet performance in his writing or if the ballerina translates the reviewer's mental (virtual) performance in hers."²⁸

A number of scholars have commented on Mallarmé's conflation of dance with writing. Heather Williams finds that dance, for Mallarmé, "is consistently an informing model, or a metaphor, for a 'writing' which is itself a new way of conceiving communication in art."²⁹ Williams suggests that Mallarmé uses the terms ballet and dance almost interchangeably with writing. According to Shaw, Mallarmé sees the dancer's movement as "a poem that, paradoxically, is never inscribed (i.e., fixed or permanently recorded as is the poem on the page)."³⁰ It has a poetic function that is never materially realized, making the dancer a metaphor of a written text. "The absence-in-presence of the dancing figure implies a presence-in-absence of the literary text." Shaw observes that because the Symbolism possible in dance does not arise from a codified semiotic system, its signs are "inherently open-ended," requiring the spectator to choose what is being signified. "It is only when the audience supplements dance steps with a metaphorical sense that the dancer attains a sign-function, and the dance becomes a poem." Corroborating this opinion, Gordon Millan notes that, "each time he refers to dance, Mallarmé thinks equally of poetic writing."³¹ Thus, Mallarmé's writing about dance mirrors, on an enlarged scale, the operation he carries out with words, loosening the tethers of literal meaning to the point that each reader-spectator must decipher anew the boundaries between text and object.

MALLARMÉ AND LOIE FULLER

Mallarmé saw Loie Fuller dance for the first time in February of 1893, three months after her Paris debut at the Folies-Bergère. His first writing about her appeared in the *National Observer* on May 13, 1893, in an article titled “Considérations sur l’art du ballet et la Loie Fuller,” which was then condensed and published as “Autre étude de danse” in the *Revue Franco-Américaine* in June, 1895, and later included in *Crayonné au théâtre*.³²

By many accounts, Fuller had a profound impact on Mallarmé. Roger Pearson, for example, writes that Fuller “danced the dance of which Mallarmé had dreamt.”³³ Yet numerous scholars have also noted the importance of Mallarmé’s writing to Fuller’s career. André Levinson writes, “One day Stéphane Mallarmé, aesthete of the absolute, was seen penciling, in his seat at the Folies-Bergère, his luminous *aperçus* on the so-called serpentine dances of Loie Fuller, *fontaine intarissable d’elle-meme* (inexhaustible fountains of their essence). Since then the whole world has followed.”³⁴ According to Frank Kermode, other Symbolist writers took notice of Mallarmé’s attention to Fuller and she eventually came “to stand in for the liberation of Symbolism from Wagner,” wresting the composer’s system of suggestion in the music drama to Mallarmé’s “*l’incorporation visuelle de l’idée*” (the visual manifestation of the idea).³⁵ Susan Jones further demonstrates how Mallarmé’s assessment of Fuller initiated a literary discourse on the symbolic nature of dance among other writers including Heinrich Heine, Jules Massenet, Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, and T. S. Eliot.³⁶

The nebulous meeting ground between dancer, spectator, and writer first explored by Mallarmé in “Ballets” also hovers in his account of Fuller’s theatrical dancing. Mallarmé writes of the lighted silk veils that envelope her body to obscure it from the spectator’s gaze.

In the terrible cascade of cloth, the figure swoons, radiant, cold; illustrating many a spinning image tending toward a distant unfolding: a giant petal or butterfly, uncrumpling, all according to order, clear and elementary. Or she fuses with the rapid nuances transmuting their crepuscular or grotesque phantasmagoria of air and water into a rapidity of passions—delight, mourning, anger. One needs, to set them off, prismatic, violent, or diluted, the vertigo of a soul that is as if cast into the air by an artifice.³⁷

Fuller’s rejection of the permanent stage set, the proverbial “cardboard” that Mallarmé abhors in the spectacle of ballet-pantomime, makes way for what he calls Fuller’s “atmosphere or [*sic*] nothingness, visions no sooner known than scattered, just their limpid evocation. The stage is freed for any fiction, cleared and instated by the play of a veil with attitudes and gestures; the site, all movement, becomes the very pure result.”³⁸ Her renunciation of



FIGURE 3 Loie Fuller dancing. Isaiah West Taber, 1897. Musée d'Orsay. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission of RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

the ballet's traditional stage settings thus leads, in Mallarmé's thought, to a heightened enchantment with those props directly attached to the dancer, those that project her attitudes and gestures away from her body, refracting the spectator's awareness of the dancer's movement (see Figure 3). "Thus this peeling away of multiple layers around a nudity, enlarged by ordered or tempestuous contradictory flights, circling, magnifies it until dissolution: a central nothingness, all volition, for everything obeys a fleeting impulse to disappear in whirls."³⁹ Fuller's props of silk, made real by their proximity to her body, nonetheless serve an obscuring function. Her movement is vaporized by its extension beyond her body and its motivating impulses.

Her dance resonates outward in a cloud of illegibility, just as Mallarmé's words reach past their primary significance to a diffusion of suggestion.

Mallarmé's writing about dance, designed to break down the boundaries between dancer and spectator, reader and writer, words and actions, formed a powerful prompt for Rivière, who longed to recover the clarity of all these relationships. A comparison of the two authors' views shows that each recognized his own literary values in choreographic movement. For Mallarmé, all of dance is "only the mysterious sacred interpretation of the act."⁴⁰ Rivière, on the other hand, sees "the act" as the thing in itself that is made real and immediate in Nijinsky's *Le Sacre*, and that must become the focus of the next generation of French authors.

RIVIÈRE AND THE BALLETS RUSSES

The pounding, repetitive violence in the movement and sound of *Le Sacre du printemps* struck Rivière and his compatriots at the NRF with the force and precision of a lightning bolt. Its directness of action galvanized Rivière's quest for a literary uprising that would subject the morass of blurred impressions from the Romantic age to completely new and rigorous modes of thought. Yet even before the premiere of *Sacre*, Rivière had become alert to the power of Russian music and theater in the operas Diaghilev brought to Paris. In February 1911, Rivière reviewed Diaghilev's production of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and found in its Russian melodies the same precision he would praise in Nijinsky's choreography two years later. With little effort to disguise a comparison to Debussy, Rivière writes that Mussorgsky's music, sounding like "Russia's voice itself," offers the French a healthy reminder of what they have lost. "It is manifold and active; it is clear precipitation . . . entirely deliberate. . . . The melody does not consent to become shrouded anymore than to grow languid. Nothing blurs its limpidity. It is a line without shadows."⁴¹

Soon after the Mussorgsky essay appeared in September 1911, Rivière declared Michel Fokine's *Petrushka* a revelation. In this review, he locates the power of dance in the body's fundamental impetus for movement. What interests him is not mere plasticity, but "to be able to see a human being leaning, taut, ready for the leap . . . obeying frantically the hidden rhythms of his overflowing life."⁴² Rivière contrasts his impression of *Petrushka* to the disappointment he felt in Fokine's *Narcisse*,* whose "little juxtapositions" and "unstable harmonic equilibriums," whose "arbitrary detail" and "discordant scraps" wither before a character like *Petrushka* who is whole and frank, and shows that "everything is at each instant what it was supposed to be."⁴³

* *Narcisse* was composed by Nicholas Tcherepnin and choreographed by Michel Fokine. Its premiere took place at the Théâtre de Monte Carlo in April 1911.

Already detecting in *Petrushka* a remedy for Symbolism, Rivière conceives dance as “the art in which one creates with one’s self, with the closest and most natural materials one could ever have use of. We will owe to Russia to have relearned . . . a naïve use for so many riches with which we no longer know what to do.”

Along the way to his discovery of *Sacre*, Rivière wrote a second essay on Fokine, titled “Russian Ballet and Fokine” (July 1912), that illustrates his quest to grasp the essence of the Russian ballet. Rivière insists that Parisian audiences, beguiled by the Russians’ scenic barbarisms, have failed to comprehend that the soul of its art is dancing. They have applauded Stravinsky’s music and marveled at Bakst’s great genius, “but they still have not understood that what should be admired in Russian ballet is dance.”⁴⁴ Rivière proposes to strip the ballet of its décor and costumes to reveal its existence as dance alone. Moreover, the movement itself, he says, must be scrutinized so that we see what actually animates the body. Parisians must have the courage to look beyond the stationary attitudes, the plastic lines of arrested movement. These images are only the periods at the end of a sentence. In his search for the essence of action, Rivière urges a new attention to the generative forces of dance that these beguiling plastic attitudes interrupt.

While Rivière’s pre-*Sacre* reviews reveal his early uncertainty about the true significance of the Russian ballet, they show too that, by 1911, his fascination with the truth of physical movement had already entered into his search for a new post-Symbolist French literature. They also indicate that Rivière was grappling with the readiness of Parisian audiences to appreciate what was before them. In the first *Sacre* essay (August 1913), Rivière declares that the artists of the Ballets Russes—particularly Nijinsky—gave Paris no preparation for what would erupt in *Sacre*. The full force of their originality, not yet fully expressed in *Firebird* or even *Petrushka*, formed “a terrible blow to the habits which they had formed in us.” *Sacre*, he says, changes everything and modifies “the very source of all our esthetic judgments.”⁴⁵ Given this state of shock, Rivière asks for time to consider the ballet carefully, so he might give a thorough account of what Paris has just witnessed.

The second *Sacre* essay (November 1913) begins straightaway with Rivière’s now-famous declaration that the great originality of *Sacre* is to have done without “sauce.”* Rivière’s opening paragraph boldly announces, in the

* The quotation is from Rivière, “*Le Sacre du printemps*,” 125. In a letter to the *Daily Mail* published on July 12, 1913, Nijinsky had responded to claims that his choreography for *Sacre* was “a crime against grace” by explaining that he could compose graceful dances if he wished to, but that his own inclinations were primitive. “I eat my meat without sauce Béarnaise. There have been schools of painting and sculpture that went on getting suaver and suaver until there was no expression but only banality left; then there always came a revolt. Perhaps something like this has happened in dancing.” Whether Rivière took this statement as a model for his own assessment of *Sacre* is difficult to know, but it seems likely that he borrowed the sauce metaphor from Nijinsky.

plainest words possible, the complete lack of “atmosphere” in *Sacre*. Both Mallarmé and Fuller seem barely concealed in his statement that in *Sacre* “nothing is blurred, nothing diminished by shadows; there are no veils, no poetic blendings; there is no trace of atmosphere. . . . [E]verything here is straightforward, entire, clear, and rough.”⁴⁶

In the first section of the essay, Rivière analyses Stravinsky’s music, which, he says, “has lost that aureole we have grown accustomed to seeing around orchestral music.”⁴⁷ He compares Stravinsky to Debussy, whose music, like Symbolist poetry, “can express things only by allusions.”

It does not reach things; it merely points them out; it sends us vaguely toward them; it makes them stir; but it does not seize them. . . . [T]here are a thousand indistinct presences which it quietly annexes and persuades to remain close to it. Our pleasure in hearing this music lies precisely in our feeling ourselves directed toward an indistinct something that is palpitating nearby, half-concealed.⁴⁸

Stravinsky, however, does without this kind of “sauce.” “He deliberately removes all uncertainty, all vibration from his music.” Restoring a fundamental stability to the signification process, Stravinsky “turns toward each object and names it; . . . he speaks wherever it is necessary and in the most exact, the most strict, the most textual fashion.” Instead of evoking, he pronounces, and indeed the harsh, pounding dissonances of *Sacre* make no pretense at allusion. Stravinsky “turns back to things; he finds them, seizes them, brings them back.”⁴⁹

Yet *Sacre*’s music, according to Rivière, is not the ballet’s truly novel aspect. The fact that we can hear its predecessor in Mussorgsky’s music demonstrates its affinity with an ongoing current. Rather, it is Nijinsky’s choreography that breaks entirely with traditional models of dance. “Its newness is so harsh, so raw, that we must not deny the public the right . . . of rearing before it.”⁵⁰ Again, Rivière announces “a renunciation of sauce,” stipulating two kinds that have smothered dance thus far. First, he says,

There is the Loie Fuller sauce: the play of light, the floating of drapery, the envelopment of the body in veils which hide its lines, the obliteration of all contours. The dancer seeks above all to melt into the surroundings, to drown her movements in wider, less defined movements, to hide all precise form in a sort of multicolored effusion of which she becomes only the indistinct, mysterious center.⁵¹

The Russians, he says, declared themselves against this “sauce” from the very beginning. “They made the body reappear from under the veils, drew it out of that undulant atmosphere in which it bathed; they wanted to touch us by the body’s own movement, by the very visible, evident figure that the dancer sketches with his arms and legs. They brought clean gestures back

into the dance." *Sacre* revealed a new world to Rivière that he saw from a writer's perspective. "A dancer could come out of the shadow, could let all his gestures be seen, write them all out without mystery. . . . No doubt, no smudges, nothing appealing to my hesitation."⁵²

Beyond the rejection of props and veils, Rivière perceived in *Sacre* the elimination of a second kind of "sauce": a more subtle choreographic deception embedded in the nature of balletic movement. This deeper shrouding ultimately causes the body to relinquish its expressive autonomy to a choreographically prescribed arc of movement. Rivière writes that the ballet dancer "travels along a path he destroys as he passes; he moves along a mysterious thread which becomes invisible behind him. . . . [H]e is like a magician concentrating on obliterating the trace of himself. . . . Something comes between him and us; it is his very movement. . . . [W]e perceive him only through a mist formed by all his gestures."⁵³ In traditional balletic movement, he says, the dancer's first steps mark a line that is immediately erased, and in the process, the dancer's agency is folded into the dance.

Once the first movements have been invented by the body, it is as if, becoming conscious of themselves, they said to their author: "Enough now! Let us take over!" And so they break loose; by repetition, duplication, variation, they engender one another; out of themselves they draw an indefinite abundance. The body which first inspired them is now merely their implement; nothing further is asked of it excepting to receive the movements and to carry them out. Therefore it loses its own form and articulation in their hands. The movements arrange the body, correct it, retouch it, put in transitions where there were hiatuses. They join its members by a slender, continuous stroke; they efface its angles, stop up the gaps, build bridges. From head to toe, the body acquires a certain fluid, curvilinear quality.⁵⁴

Looking back to Fokine's *Le Spectre de la rose*, Rivière describes in Nijinsky's dancing a body that has given itself over to the fluidity of line such that his body "literally disappears in its own dance."⁵⁵ The second type of "sauce," then, is a separation of the genuine agency of the body from the dance it is performing. For Rivière this amounts to a fabrication, a breach of communicative clarity just as troubling as those presented by Fuller and, ultimately, by Mallarmé. "Instead of [the dancer] being immersed in a colored atmosphere, he is plunged into a dynamic one which gives the body as much indistinctness as do the luminous veils of Loie Fuller."⁵⁶ This second "sauce" is what Rivière ultimately finds boiled away by *Sacre*, where the dancers reject even the metaphorical veil of balletic contour and obey the primary impulses of the human body.

Part of what makes Rivière's analysis of *Sacre* so effective as literary criticism is the way he blends the conceptual fields of writing and dance,

using literary concepts to illuminate human movement and the vocabulary of dance to explain writing. While it is likely he learned to do this from Mallarmé, Rivière turns his own mingling of literary and choreographic art against the disorienting effects of Symbolism. Rivière writes about *Sacre* as a return to the body and its natural movements “in order to listen to nothing but its most immediate, basic, etymological signs.”⁵⁷ The acuity of meaning so carefully tended by the Académie française and so systematically undermined by the Symbolists is recoverable, in Rivière’s view, only by a return to the most fundamental physical facts to be found in the instinctive movements of the human body. This is a discovery that Rivière translates easily back to writing because clear words and distinct movements serve the same communicative principle in his conception of dance and writing.

For Rivière, the basic unit of thought is the word; once a word’s precise meaning combines with others it begins, through its obligation to form syntactic relationships, either to gain or to lose sharpness, depending on the author’s aims. By the time it becomes part of a sentence, a word has lent its distinct purpose to the necessity of a conglomerate. In the hands of a Symbolist poet, who appeals to the emotions and who wishes to exploit a plurality of meanings, the word loses all solidity. On the contrary, a classical writer, appealing to the reader’s intellect, will bring his words to their most exacting definitive capacity.

The brilliance of Rivière’s *Sacre* essay lies in the fact that he sees and expresses all these linguistic relationships in movement. He makes this comparison first with the Romantic tendencies of Fokine’s traditional balletic movement. The body in repose, Rivière says, has thousands of latent possibilities. Fokine made these possibilities converge into movement “which joined them together and drained them all off; he listened to them as a group rather than as single units; he expressed them by substitution, by replacing their divergent multitude with a simple, continuous arabesque.”⁵⁸ In other words, Fokine composed his dances as Symbolist sentences, creating lines that would blend singular movements into chains of steps, melding one with another until the physical meaning of a particular step or gesture relinquished its fundamental significance. Nijinsky, on the other hand, requires movement to obey its most basic function.

In the *Sacre du printemps* . . . whenever the body offers tendencies and opportunities, the movement breaks off and begins afresh; each time the body feels possible starting points in itself, the dancer again springs into movement. He is constantly taking possession of himself again, like a bubbling spring whose every surge must be successively drained off; he goes back into himself, and the dance becomes the analysis, the enumeration of all those urges to move that he discovers within himself.⁵⁹

Rivière notices this in the way Nijinsky treats groups of dancers as well. He uses them “to espouse details, to discover and bring out individual orders.” Unlike Fokine, whose groups must move only in response to one another in a fluid exchange of choreographic motifs, Nijinsky sought a singular motivation for each group’s movement. “He consulted its signs and tendencies; he observed it like a scientist; he saw it rise, tremble, undulate, be transported suddenly by the power of its inner force; he followed its molecular formation; he caught its instincts at the very moment when they were manifesting themselves.” The violent ruptures and angular gestures in *Sacre* restore intelligibility to dance by “breaking up movement,” returning it to simple motions of accurate expression, exposing it to impulses that contain something “deep and compact,” essential to its meaning. This dancer “is no longer obliged to bind together his successive gestures.” He makes his movement as unique as the object it expresses, naming it “with the momentary inertia of his whole body.”⁶⁰ In Nijinsky’s choreography, Rivière sees the equivalent of the carefully tended word and a powerful validation of his allegiance to a culture that made its words a prized asset.

Rivière further positions himself as the guardian of the French language when he compares Nijinsky’s “speech”—consisting of movements that seem “less adroit, less diverse, less intelligent”—to the “elegant speaker” evoked by Fokine. While in his early reviews of the Ballets Russes Rivière had written enthusiastically about Fokine, by the premiere of *Sacre* he had come to value a more direct movement vocabulary. Nijinsky’s language includes “no tricks in phrasing, no pirouettes, no preterition.” The dancer in *Sacre* lands upon the things he wants to express “with his whole weight,” marking each with his entire being.⁶¹ The associative collection of meanings that words accrue in both Mallarmé’s poetry and Fokine’s balletic contours gives way to movements that delimit themselves from the fabric of the dance.

With pitiless cruelty, he works with these bodies as if they were things; he imposes impossible movements upon them, attitudes which seem deformed. But he does so in order to get out of them all the expression they can give. And at last, in fact, they do speak. From all these strange, distorted forms rises a certain evidence; they represent clearly a thousand difficult, secret objects which we now need only watch.⁶²

According to Rivière, the expressively potent dance must ultimately capture a physical authenticity that predates language. “We contemplate [Nijinsky’s movements] before the arrival of language, before the innumerable, nuanced but talkative crowd of words hastens to gather around them. There is no need to translate; this is no symbol which we must leave in order to go to the object.” Instead, a certain “inner recognition” takes hold. “Every gesture of the dancer is like a word which might be said to resemble me . . .

[I]t immediately encounters my limbs, the depths of my organism in a basic, complete, and perfect harmony.”⁶³

Indeed, the raw truths made possible by Nijinsky’s movement are a shock to Symbolist sensibilities—just the shock Rivière sought to break the hold of Romanticism on European culture. Language itself had shown itself too dangerously susceptible to appropriations and permutations. A confrontation with physical mechanisms at the deepest cellular level, beyond the reach of human agency, was the only way to awaken European audiences from their complacent, comfortable dream world. In the stamping indifference of a primitive society to the sacrifice of a young girl, Parisians must also recognize the hideously factual meanings encoded in “the horrible work of the cells,” mechanisms for which there is no symbol and by which physiological processes insure our survival.⁶⁴ When Rivière calls *Sacre* a “biological ballet,” he suggests that no human interpretation intervenes in these fundamental communications. They are raw physical facts that only the body can replicate: corporeal words, so to speak, that are beyond cultural corruption.

RIVIÈRE’S “LE ROMAN D’AVENTURE”

In the May, June, and July 1913 issues of the NRF—those between *Sacre*’s premiere and Rivière’s first *Sacre* essay—Rivière brought out another article that forms a companion to his review of the ballet and further illuminates the reciprocity of word and corporeal action in Rivière’s thought. Both essays address Symbolism as a degradation of French culture; both propose action, dynamism, and confrontation as a remedy for its distortions. “Le Roman d’aventure” begins with the frankly stated premise that Symbolism has reached its peak and enjoyed its old age, but must now be considered dead. Rivière carefully dissects the nature and effects of Symbolism, naming Mallarmé as its principal champion and alluding to him in numerous ways. We can easily detect the author of *Crayonné au théâtre* caricatured in Rivière’s description of Symbolist idealism:

That generation was in the midst of the universe in much the same way as one is sometimes in the depths of an armchair in a softly lighted study at the end of a day of great mental effort. One sees objects grow faint, move away, draw back into a sort of distance which seems to be none other than that of thought itself. . . . The people who lived in the midst of that dream naturally could enjoy only ideal pleasures. . . . Above all they liked to remember; they kept busy stirring up the fires of memory. Letting the gray sky peer in at the windows, shyly gay, they silently marveled at the little flames that leaped up.⁶⁵

The time has come, Rivière claims, for a new kind of writer to supplant the Symbolist. “But where,” he asks, “is this author? We do not even know he exists. We must construct him, in turn, out of nothing, taking our inspiration from ourselves.”⁶⁶ While he claims not to know who will write the next chapter in French literature, Rivière does know how it will read. Where Mallarmé had written in *Crayonné* that “the perfect writing rejects any adventure,” Rivière, on the other hand, situates adventure—and the adventure novel—at the center of his vision for a new literature.*

Writing in a collection of NRF essays commemorating Rivière after his death in 1925, Edmond Jaloux recalled Rivière’s “extremely important essay on the adventure novel.” According to Jaloux, Rivière saw the adventure novel as a complete renewal of the genre exemplified by Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Honoré de Balzac and Stendhal. Rivière’s vision for the novel remains, in Jaloux’s estimation, one “we will always be able to come back to . . . to find a sort of salvation.”⁶⁷

To explain the concept of adventure in relation to Symbolism, Rivière asserts that the subject of a Symbolist poet’s work is never an event. “It is always an emotion, a very pure, abstract emotion, without cause or roots, an impression detached from its origin.”⁶⁸ No event is needed, he says, for the Symbolist merely skips ahead to the emotions an event would evoke and dwells in them instead. And because there is no event, there is no confrontation, and thus no action. The Symbolist poet’s mind engages in what Rivière calls “a negative preparation, a chemical operation rather than a physiological one.” Consequently, the Symbolists’ words become agents of a secondary process in which not the thing itself, but rather its reverberations, act upon the reader. They function, according to Rivière “like people engaged in a game in which the aim is to mention nothing directly and to grant one another such a subtle, spiritual attention that the sentences need only turn lightly to the right or the left to be completely understood.”⁶⁹ In the absence

* Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 318. Rivière certainly meant for this new novel to be a mark of French culture, yet he had formed his conception of it through his early exposure to Russian literature. Rivière considered Dostoyevsky the supreme exemplar of the adventure novelist and names him as such (along with Dickens, Defoe, and Stevenson) in his closing thoughts in “Le Roman d’aventure.” In May 1911, Rivière wrote an essay on a production of *The Brothers Karamazov* staged by Jacques Copeau, the first editor of the NRF, in which he praises the length and complexity of Dostoyevsky’s novel. A number of scholars have investigated the reception of the Russian novel in French intellectual circles. See André Gide, *Dostoevsky* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1923; reprint, Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1961); F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France 1884–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950); Mischa Harry Fayer, *Gide, Freedom and Dostoevsky* (Burlington, VT: Lane Press, 1946); Henri Peyre, *French Literary Imagination and Dostoevsky and Other Essays* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1975); Peter M. Axelm, *The Modern Confessional Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

of any true engagement with reality, only the invitation to experience a derivative emotion remains.

What makes the concept of adventure crucial to Rivière's understanding of *Sacre* is that it originates, above all, in action. By declaring its source of agency in physical reality, active dynamism protects the new writing from descending into the merely symbolic. Imagining the new author of France, Rivière notes, "The Symbolist writer was in a state of memory; ours will be in a state of adventure."⁷⁰

Rivière explicitly addresses the problem of Symbolism in terms of words and the purpose their author puts them to. A Symbolist, he says, chooses a word less for its meaning than for its emotional power because "a word can always express more than it means."⁷¹ When a word is used to record an emotion in a Symbolist work, "its harmonics must also agree with the feeling that the writer wants to suggest." Its effect must enter the emotions, however, without jostling the intellect. "If the word is especially well chosen, it may even take the place, we might say, of its own meaning. . . . Our heart receives it so exactly that our mind dispenses with the necessity of understanding it and of perceiving its logical connection with the other words in the sentence."

Rivière exploits this interpretation of Symbolist aesthetics to underscore the disembodied nature of its message in the same way that he critiques the balletic line as a failure of signification. This use of words, he says, produces a subjective work, "stripped of all that was material, tangible, and exterior by the consciousness of its creator. It has been reduced until it expresses only a pure emotion. . . . It has not become materialized; it is constructed anew each time it meets a reader."⁷² Clearly defined words are swallowed up by the sentences they are bound to and by the readers' mandate to interpret them without reference to any substantive or logical certainty. Their agency is folded into an emotional effect just as the steps of Fokine's *Le Spectre de la rose* are subsumed into choreographic patterns that erase their particular significance.

Rivière claims in "Le Roman d'aventure" that modern readers are ready for something new. "The moment has come," he says, "to collect our thoughts, to listen, to understand what is happening."⁷³ A new generation has arrived, starved for the shock of the real. "We are people for whom the novelty of living has been reborn. A sharp little wind has blown suddenly through the darkness and boredom of the dying nineteenth century, dispersing the dreams that made us groggy."⁷⁴ The adventure novel represents this renewal with a form of writing committed to the bold specific act, to engagements formed by real events. "The perfect realization of a novel lies in its perfect activity. It becomes 'an act' when it comes to the point of being composed only of actions. No more place for dreams or immobile settings; all of its elements move together."⁷⁵ To erase the passivity of the Symbolist, the new author's every thought must pass "from energy to action." He will

no longer be occupied with the world of dreams and mental delights, “since he sees things clear, intact, real, completely separated from his mind, driven entirely outside himself, exterior and solid. . . . [T]he novel he will write will be entirely an act.”⁷⁶

Rivière seems to abandon his search for linguistic clarity when he notes that adventure writing appears first “in a rudimentary and almost shapeless form; its elements are entangled in one another; now there is only one where there will be several later; everything is too simplified, as it is in lower animals who have a single organ to serve several functions.” Possessing the attributes of a moving body, the language of the adventure novel will be simple, moving like a brute of the lowest order, whose thoughts “can turn toward only one side at a time; to answer the different questions that assail it, it is obliged to turn successively toward each one, moving its whole body like a person with a crick in his neck. It has the uneasiness of unformed beings; its crudeness hinders it like a weight.” Nonetheless, this writing finds its way past the hard constraints it meets. “It strains, makes an effort against its own simplicity. Inwardly, it butts against the too great solidity of its planes. Its awkward limbs crack away from the mass and are taught to move.”⁷⁷

Contemporary accounts of the dancing at the premiere of *Sacre* bear a remarkable resemblance to Rivière’s depiction of adventurous writing. In *L’Echo de Paris*, Adolphe Boschot writes of dancers dressed in garish colors, pointed caps, and animal skins, performing the dances of savages. A tightly closed mass of dancers gesture like the possessed.

The ladies are pressed against one another, jammed together like sardines, and all their lovely heads drop to their right shoulders, fixed in that contorted pose by a collective crick in the neck. . . . In the second act, we see a lovely dancer, Mademoiselle Piltz. The choreographer destroys her as if for pleasure: he deforms her legs by making her stand motionless with her feet turned in as far as possible. It is hideous. . . . And when she does finally move, she must hold her head in her hands pressed to one shoulder to show that she is suffering at once from a terrible toothache and from that wretched crick in the neck that is the “poet-choreographer’s trademark.”⁷⁸

Boschot recounts the beastly monotony of dancers “who repeat the same gesture a hundred times: they stamp the ground, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp and they stamp. . . . Suddenly: they break in two and salute. And they stamp, they stamp, they stamp. . . . Suddenly: a little old woman falls down headfirst and bares her underskirts. . . . And they stamp, they stamp. . . .” The following day, writing in *Comoedia*, another reviewer writes of *Sacre*’s “spontaneous and irrational poses” and “the jerky gestures of prehistoric automatons.” This gives the impression, he says, of “animal

automaticity, of very precisely stylized convulsive reflexes” meant to convey “animality and instinctive reflexes.”⁷⁹

Pierre Lalo’s comparison in *Le Temps* of Nijinsky’s movement vocabulary to more traditional ballet also uses the terms Rivière applies to writing.

In *Le Sacre du printemps* there is not one line, not one movement of one character, that gives a semblance of grace, of elegance, of lightness, of nobility, of eloquence or of expressivity. . . . The dancers are nearly always jammed together in tight groups, making clumsy, cramped, and constrained gestures, the movements of awkward, uncoordinated cripples. They shake their arms as if they were stumps, and their legs as if they were made of wood. They do not dance: rather, they jump, paw at the ground, stamp, and tremble convulsively in place; if they make a movement, they repeat it inexorably, to the point of exhaustion.⁸⁰

The striking likeness of Rivière’s description of “adventure writing” to contemporary descriptions of the movement in *Sacre* suggest that Rivière had read these reviews and, imagining Nijinsky as a writer/choreographer, allowed their vocabulary to enter his rendering of adventure writing. Yet it is also reasonable to imagine that he saw just what these other critics did in the movement of *Sacre*—the brutish stamping feet, the clumps of savagely bent heads—but related it to the realm of words and literature. Like the crude movements in *Sacre*, Rivière’s new writing wrestles for meaning with the truth of the body, seeking reality through actions—“adventure”—that safeguard it from the merely symbolic.

While it seems almost naïvely simple, Rivière’s notion of adventure as a corrective for Symbolism forms a nuanced complex that has tangible ties to what he perceived both in the dancing of *Sacre* and in the very act of writing. “The perfect realization of a novel lies in its perfect activity. It becomes ‘an act’ when it comes to the point of being composed only of actions. No more place for dreams or immobile settings; all of its elements move together. . . . Such is the first characteristic of the new novel which will come quite naturally from the activity of its author.”⁸¹ Levy notes the many-layered meaning of Rivière’s concept of “adventure” and its correlation to the activity of writing. “With his gaze focused on the world around him rather than on his own interior visions, the writer himself will be ‘in a state of adventure.’”⁸² By rejecting indulgence in the symbolic, the very act of writing becomes “adventurous.”

CONCLUSION

We know from “Le Roman d’aventure” that Rivière was in search of a writer who could overturn what he saw as the degenerative cultural malaise of

Romanticism. The essays he produced in conjunction with the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* indicate that when he saw *Sacre*, he recognized the author he needed. Nijinsky's dancers do everything that Mallarmé's do not. They state only what they mean. They say only what is most necessary in the most fundamental way possible. Their gestures form a mode of signification that returns "the act" to its hard, immutable relation to the mechanisms of human experience. They write, so to speak, a bold rejoinder to Mallarmé's dancer who, though presented as a writer, is only a symbol. Where Mallarmé admires the film of connotation that hovers around Fuller's "central nothingness" and her ultimate dissolution of meaning, Rivière celebrates the truth of the dancer's body, down to the very activity of its cells. He concretizes movement on the stage as a fact to be counted on, to be experienced and hailed as a vital and true action that can bring us an utterly dependable communion with reality.

Rivière's review of *Sacre* is widely acknowledged as a profoundly insightful record of the ballet's artistic value. What has not been recognized is the extent to which he understood *Sacre's* creators—especially Nijinsky—as writers. It may have been through Mallarmé—the most prominent representative of the very movement he aimed to eradicate—that Rivière learned to conceive of dancing as writing. But it was in Nijinsky that he recognized his own literary values made manifest as movement and action. Read in conjunction with "Le Roman d'aventure," Rivière's review of *Sacre* positions this ballet as an adventure novel in the form of pure human movement. The ballet reduces the principle of action to its clearest and most cogent expression, stating in movement alone what Rivière longed to restore to language. As I noted at the beginning of this article, de Gaulle saw a French patriot in every writer who wrote well. When Rivière discovered *Le Sacre du printemps*, he found a Russian choreographer who acted as a writer: one who, because he wrote well, served France.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 178.

2. Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 989–95; and Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism," *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed Sept. 9, 2014).

3. Karen D. Levy, *Jacques Rivière* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 79.

4. Evelyn Gould, "Pencil and Erasing Mallarmé's 'Ballets,'" *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January 1993): 97–105; Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Susan Jones, "Une écriture corporelle": The Dancer in the Text of Mallarmé and Yeats," in *The Body and the Arts*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Ulrika Maude, and Jane Macnaughton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 237–53; Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé: The Passage from Art to Ritual* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also these studies of Mallarmé's writing on dance: Heather Williams, *Mallarmé's Ideas in Language* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004); Robert

- Greer Cohn, *Mallarmé's Divagations: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
5. Sanche de Gramont, *The French: Portrait of a People* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), 263.
 6. Jean Schlumberger, "Considérations," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1909; reprint, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1968), 9–11. See also Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 989.
 7. Gramont, *The French*, 265.
 8. Jacques Rivière, *Nouvelles études* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 308–9.
 9. Deirdre Priddin, *The Art of the Dance in French Literature* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1952), 55.
 10. Cited in Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 798–99.
 11. René Ghil, *Traité du verbe* (Paris: Giraud, 1886).
 12. Jacques Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, ed. and trans. Blanche A. Price (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 89.
 13. For biographies of Rivière see Martin Turnell, *Jacques Rivière* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953); Karen D. Levy, *Jacques Rivière* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982); *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, ed. and trans. Blanche A. Price; Bradford Cook, *Jacques Rivière: A Life of the Spirit* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958); Jean-Pierre Cap, *Decadence of Freedom: Jacques Rivière's Perception of Russian Mentality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
 14. F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 1.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Henry James, Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1907), quoted in Roger Gard, ed., *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 515.
 17. Cap, *Decadence of Freedom*, 35.
 18. Bradford Cook, "Jacques Rivière and Symbolism," *Yale French Studies*, vol. 9 (1952): 103–7.
 19. Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, 100.
 20. Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, 54.
 21. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 308. Translation by Chantal Frankenbach.
 22. Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, 57. See Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 295.
 23. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 119–20.
 24. Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 303; Stéphane Mallarmé, trans. Evelyn Gould, "Ballets," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 15 no. 1 (January, 1993): 106. Alternate translations are found in Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 129; and Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose*, ed. and trans. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 2001), 108.
 25. Gould, "Pencil and Erasing," 100.
 26. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 120.
 27. Ibid., 130.
 28. Gould, "Pencil and Erasing," 104.
 29. Heather Williams, *Mallarmé's Ideas in Language* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 115.
 30. Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé*, 53–55.
 31. Gordon Millan, *Documents Stéphane Mallarmé*, vol. 2 (Saint-Genouph: Librairie Nizet, 2000), 114. See also Mallarmé's correspondence with Vittorio Pica in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 83.
 32. Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, 89.
 33. Ibid., 88–89.
 34. Cited in Frank Kermode, "Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev," *Salmagundi*, no. 33/34 (Spring–Summer, 1976): 42.
 35. Ibid., 44.
 36. Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*, 14.
 37. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 135. See Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 308.
 38. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 136–37. See Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 309.
 39. Ibid.
 40. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 132. See Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, 305.

41. Jacques Rivière, "Muossorgski," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 5 (February, 1911): 314–17; reprinted in Cap, *Decadence of Freedom*, 52–53.
42. Jacques Rivière, "Petrouchka, ballet d'Igor Stravinsky," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 6 (September 1911): 376–77; reprinted in Cap, *Decadence of Freedom*, 59.
43. Rivière, "Petrouchka," reprinted in Cap, *Decadence of Freedom*, 58.
44. Jacques Rivière, "Des Ballets Russes et de Fokine," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 8 (July 1912): 174–80; reprinted in Cap, *Decadence of Freedom*, 60.
45. Jacques Rivière, "Le Sacre du printemps, Ballet par Igor Stravinsky, Nicolas Roerich et Vlaslav [sic] Nijinski (Théâtre des Champs-Élysées)" *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 10 (August 1913): 309–13.
46. Jacques Rivière, "Le Sacre du printemps," in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, ed. and trans. Blanche A. Price (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 125.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 126.
49. Ibid., 126–27.
50. Ibid., 133.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 134.
53. Ibid., 135.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 135–36.
56. Ibid., 136.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 137–40.
61. Ibid., 140.
62. Ibid., 141.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 145.
65. Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, 93–94.
66. Ibid., 97.
67. Edmond Jaloux, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 24 (Paris: Gallimard, 1925), 550. Translation by Rowan Frankenbach.
68. Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," in *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays by Jacques Rivière*, 86–87.
69. Ibid., 91.
70. Ibid., 109.
71. Ibid., 89–90, for all quotations in this paragraph.
72. Ibid., 90.
73. Ibid., 84.
74. Ibid., 94.
75. Ibid., 108.
76. Ibid., 97.
77. Ibid., 97–98.
78. Aldophe Boschot, "Le Sacre du printemps, ballet en deux actes de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky et Nijinsky," *L'Echo de Paris*, vol. 30, no. 10518 (May 30, 1913): 6. Translation by Chantal Frankenbach.
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80. Pierre Lalo, "Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," *Le Temps* (June 3, 1913): 3. Translation by Chantal Frankenbach.
81. Rivière, "Le Roman d'aventure," 108.
82. Levy, *Jacques Rivière*, 79.