

Review from Arno Böhler, University of Vienna

Kimerer L. LaMothe:
Nietzsche's Dancers (2006)

Part I of *Nietzsche's Dancers* weighs up the significance of dance images in Nietzsche's texts. Step by step, Kimerer L. LaMothe locates the passages, in which she uses the word "dance," from the *The Birth of Tragedy* till "The Works of 1888". During the course of her interpretation she develops the notion that Nietzsche had "*a vision for dance as theopraxis.*" (LaMothe, 89).

Part II and III are discussing the influence of Nietzsche, as a "dancing philosopher," on two famous philosopher-dancers, Isadora Duncan (Part II) and Martha Graham (Part III). LaMothe, herself a dancer and scholar in religious studies, is interested to juxtapose these three figures "to highlight the differences among them along points of mutual concern—namely, the revaluation of Christian attitudes toward bodily being" (xii).

What joins together all three of them is the common belief that more than two thousand years of Christian values have taught man to *misunderstand* his body. Since then "we are, physiologically considered, *false*;" (LaMothe 90, K6, 53; CW 192). Modern man *is*, biologically, a contradiction of values; "he sits between two chairs, he says Yes and No in the same breath" (LaMothe, 90, K6, 52; CW 192)—since a body that embodies Christian values necessarily represents *opposing* values.

But this corporal status is not *just* the expression of a corrupt, weak and decadent body, in which everything "natural", "instinctive" and "resolute" has been put under quotation marks and therefore removed from its own natural status. It can also express the condition of somebody who is able to transform his weakness into a gift, like Nietzsche did, when he supposed that his "sickness prevented him from conforming to the expectations placed upon him by his family, religion, profession, or society. It prevent[ed] him from acting unselfishly." (LaMothe, 103). Through his sickness, Nietzsche became healthier than those whose health enables them to conform to what is expected to them. To put it in more general terms: the weakness of a condition can always become a driving force to overcome the status quo expressed by it. "Which of us would be a free spirit if the church did not exist?" (LaMothe, 88; K5, 270; GM I: 9,36).

The status of a body that represents a *battlefield of contradicting values* is therefore an ambivalent condition in itself. It *can* indicate a status of corporeal corruption and decadence as well as the status of a body, ready to revolt and emancipate itself from this condition, so that a Dionysian power can start to overrule and overcome the Christian heritage embodied in that body, in order to become, and make it, the body of a *free spirit*. “‘Today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a *higher nature*,’ a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values” (LaMothe, 82, K5, 286; GM I:16, 52).

A body that has become a *battlefield* of Dionysian and Christian values is almost pre-destined or most suitable to become a concrete, local place, in which a *physiological revolt against* Christianity takes place in order to ex-scribe (Nancy) and overwrite (Derrida) it from its Christian heritage and make it the home, place and embodiment of a Dionysian power that has started to govern the constitution of a body (Foucault) and rule its bodily formation (Butler).—For LaMothe it is precisely *dance*—dance as a bodily practice—that is the main means to induce this physiological transformation in a body in order to create it anew. Re-generating a Christian body, while transforming it *through* dance *into* a dancing body, a Dionysian “dancing star”, is precisely the form of *theopraxis* that becomes necessary, historically, in a historic moment, in which God has been declared dead. A free spirit, thus, can be defined as a person “unbound by convention, tradition, or habit, having the vitality and discernment needed to do what is necessary for her own health—one who finds in the death of God an occasion to *love* her bodily becoming” (LaMothe, 56). A “daring dance” is what a free spirit does in performing a cultural bodily transformation. “In the end, the difference between the bound and free spirits is not one of intelligence or will, but *energy*” (LaMothe, 40).

To *practice dance* means nothing else than to resist Christian values *physiologically*. But to induce such a bodily transformation in a corrupted body, it is not enough, for LaMothe, to re-read and overwrite a “false” body in a deconstructing, literary manner only. Prior to this literary practice one has to practice dance as well as a muse that precisely works “in an opposite and complementary direction to that opened by the acts of reading and writing” (LaMothe, 45). However, *every* artist *per se* is “a person who has not forgotten his bodily becoming, and who, in making art, speaks to the artist in each of us” (LaMothe, 98). What is special about a dancer is that she “communicates movements, kinetic signs, and not only semantic significance” (LaMothe, 98). A dancer works with the physiological aspects of a

signifier rather than with its fixed semantic meaning. While doing this, she makes an end with a misunderstanding that “consists in understanding the body as a thing rather than a process of its own becoming” (LaMothe, 101).

From this it becomes clear that, first of all, every “table of values” requires a *physiological* investigation and interpretation rather than a psychological one. Even when one reads and interprets philosophy, one has to read and analyze the physiology of the body *that* philosophizes first, in order to understand the moral judgments, literary expressions and content of a text. In other words, Nietzsche reads “our conception of and relationship to ‘the body’ as a symptom of our physiological health” (LaMothe, 101).

Consequently, he too had to read and analyze his own physiological constitution first in order to understand his written texts properly. “I take readings from myself as from a very subtle and reliable instrument’ (K6, 282; EH 241). Son of a Christian pastor, Nietzsche knew very well that his own body represented a lifelong battlefield of Christian and Dionysian values, witnessed from his own writings. If he had not been sick, he may never have developed dancing as a dominant metaphor for the process of overcoming himself.

In order to become a free spirit Nietzsche had to regenerate his body in making it a daring dance *of* the fiction he wrote, *by* the fiction he wrote. Transforming his own mourning “into dancing by mounting a vision of dance not yet realized in the forms of modern culture: a vision of dance as *theopraxis*” (LaMothe, 104), was the main task of Nietzsche as a dancing philosopher. Making his own texts a *dance* of words, signs and thoughts, Nietzsche performed a transvaluation of his own corporal constitution. “Yes, at the very bottom of my soul I feel grateful to all my misery and bouts of sickness and everything about me that is imperfect, because this sort of thing leaves me with a hundred backdoors through which I can escape from enduring habits,” (LaMothe, 104, K3, 536; GS #295, 237)—including the enduring habit of believing in God.

As a philosopher, Nietzsche had to become a poet himself—a dancer of words—since it is dance, to be more precise, the *performance of dancing* that creates life-affirming values out of itself and teaches us to *love* life physiologically. A free spirit, therefore, is somebody who *loves* to overcome herself. A dancer, on the road to transcend her bodily status quo, and in doing so, becomes someone who *performs* the *love of life* physiologically. “For one cannot

subtract dancing in every form from a noble education—to be able to dance with one’s feet, with concepts, with words: need I still add that one must be able to do it with the pen too—that one must learn to *write*?” (LaMothe 93, K6, 110; TI 512-3).

From such a point of view, it sounds convincing to read Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* as the story of somebody who wants to make his body dance, as LaMothe does in her book. “Zarathustra is, from beginning to the end of *Zarathustra*, a dance” (LaMothe, 50). While *science* does provide a philosophical expression of the idea, it is *Zarathustra* that effects a transformation that enables humans to develop the perspective, strength, and health needed to embrace the idea of eternal recurrence with gratitude as an expression of highest affirmation. In the ‘daring dance’ of these two books, readers learn that they must themselves learn to dance not only in order to love life, but to do philosophy” (LaMothe, 49).

Dance, as a trans-evaluating performance, catalyzes the awareness of one’s bodily becoming as an ongoing process of physical be-coming and therefore has to be called the most primordial expression of the “will to power”.—A drive that drives the physical constitution of the world.—A force, always on the move to overcome the heritage already embodied in a body in order to become somebody new. “The life, Zarathustra loves in himself and in others is this process of overcoming oneself, for ‘what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under* (K 4, 17; Z 127), that is, a *dancer*” (LaMothe, 59).

Zarathustra is all about love, LaMothe summarizes, but a Dionysian love. One that loves our bodies, earth and bodily lives in such a way that it asks everybody to move itself in order to overcome its status quo in producing a life as the performance of a dance-like walk. Zarathustra, the dancer, is thus somebody who has “bit off the head of his great disgust, shatter[ed] the tombs of his youth” (LaMothe, 72) and embraced the doctrine of eternal recurrence physiologically for the sake of his own embodiment.—Once and for all. For “*to dance is to love life*” (LaMothe, 58).

In teaching *us* to educate our senses, to believe in earth and in our bodies, Zarathustra invites everybody to resist ascetic ideals in order to become a dancing star herself. To achieve this goal, Nietzsche had to create the fiction of *Zarathustra* as a sun—a regulative idea—for his own health in order to make his own life a dance-like walk. Writing, as a form of dancing, here becomes a form of *bodily self-creation*.

Until Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, a counter-ideal against ascetic values was lacking. For LaMothe, dance, as a *theopraxis* is this counter-ideal, which was lacking so far.

Even though LaMothe does not render justice to the tragic and nihilistic part of Nietzsche's work, her religious way of reading Nietzsche is very much worth reading and accepting as a layer always operating in Nietzsche's work. Nevertheless one would wish that she would had included some readings of Michel Foucault and Jean Luc Nancy in her book and a more subtle interpretation of Jacques Derrida's work, since all three *of them* are close to what she wants to express in her own daring way in *Nietzsche's Dancers*.

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