

The Eloquent Torso

By Alice Godfroy

In *Prendre corps et langue*, Alice Godfroy offers a unique journey through contemporary French poetry, illuminated both by the phenomenology of the body proper and the poetics of Contact Improvisation. Phenomenological rigor combines with in-depth knowledge of contemporary dance, serving as an entry way into the various physiological, philosophical and metaphysical questions raised by the practice of Contact Improvisation. In the wake of Sally Bane's pioneering works, dance studies often insist on the democratization of the body in contemporary dance—but which body is referred to? Which hierarchies fall and resurface? In this chapter, Godfroy exposes the potential and political virtue of contemporary dance's great invention : the mobility of the torso. [RB]

Contemporary dance education takes root in a body politics aiming to redistribute power dynamics within the territories of the flesh. This (often unformulated) program has made for the overturning of established hierarchies : minorities appear, unheard voices rise from the depths of the body. At the dawn of the 20th century, the first voice to be heard is that of the very grounded foot—far from the head and its contiguous celestial vault—whose humility (*humus*, soil), reconciling us with our earthliness, conditions the rise of the highest realities. True to the initial violence of any revolution, the overthrowing of the head by the feet caused the latter to generate much noise (Mary Wigman literally pounded the ground) and to display maximum visibility (in a stupefying gesture of provocation, Isadora Duncan decided to dance barefoot). Though this foot rebellion laid out a model for further action, it was merely the raucous inception of a more subtle de-hierarchizations to follow. These gradually discontinued their project to overthrow the powers that be, in order to favor a balancing of forces within the body.

From its inception, the contemporary dancing body has defined itself in opposition to a model canonized, in essence, by centuries of classical ballet. From *ports de bras* welcoming the audience and orienting its gaze, to a smiling face standing out in sovereign hauteur, to legs turned out—still obeying Louis XIV's injunction : « show your ribbons ! » meaning « look here ! »—the classical dancer's body is entirely focused on the symbolic movements of the limbs and face, while the pelvis and abdominal wall remain taut, tight. Indeed, the trunk of the body is never invited to participate in this codified language; its unique task consists in remaining bound. The head and limbs thus acquire privilege by owning the expressive coding of the body, offering a common frame of reference within a given society and participating in predefined semiotic ground. As instruments capable of sensing and recording, with prehensile power over the outside world, the head, arms and legs are also surfaces inextricably layered with strata of meaning. The head's specificity, its exceptional status among body parts, has to do with its many orifices. These openings keep it from blending in with the compact, self-organized and enclosed mass of the body. As French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy insists in *Corpus*:

The head sets itself apart from the body—no need for decapitation. The head detaches itself, removed. The body is whole, articulated and composed, organized. The head is merely a collection of holes, its empty center representing the mind, a point, an infinite concentration towards the self. Pupils, nostrils, mouth, ears are all holes, escape routes out of the body¹.

This bodily differentiation is even more finely cut out in Deleuze and Guattari's chapter 7 (*Year Zero - Faciality*) of *A Thousand Plateaux*; the authors radicalize the boundary-line by offering a break between the *face* and the rest of the body (and *not* the head and the body). Faces remain fundamentally coordinated within a language-based system. They appear within an “abstract machine of faciality”, which forever keeps them from being apprehended as a mere body part. However, though the face may be detached from the body by virtue of being an overly coded surface and not a volume, of being first and foremost a politics, the head remains a part of it. If the mutiny of the dancing body is to be successful, it must strive to reintegrate the head by summoning its potential as mass.

Your amoeba begins by breathing in its center. Breathing in, water penetrates your navel, here and there filling your insides. Breathing out, you empty, as if pouring out of a wineskin. With each in-breath, water burrows a little further, reaching the roots of your four limbs and head, budding branches. Allow them to grow.

You are now a starfish. Your travel along the ground, moving from your center. Your five branches initiate no movement, they only follow².

By obliterating semic areas of the body, contemporary dance, in accord with its initial project, advanced in its attempt to spatialize the body from the torso, where gravity and asemic territory coincide. In his work dedicated to modern dance theorist François Delsarte, (1811 – 1871), Ted Shawn highlights the fundamental discoveries of the avant-garde thinker, beginning with the importance of the torso³. As a source for motoring, the torso rapidly becomes new choreographers' chosen sanctuary ; for Laurence Louppe, it is this

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris, éd. Métailié, sciences humaines, 2006, p. 149.

² The process of inviting dancing bodies to revisit certain morphological and locomotive steps to evolution, beginning with the single cell (amoeba), is common in Contact Improvisation training. This pedagogical support is borrowed from the practice of *Body-Mind Centering*®.

³ Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement, a Book about François Delsarte*, Dance Horizons, 1974, p. 79-90.

« animal within us, for too long captured in a void of meaning⁴ », which in removing its ballet corset will liberate its poetic agency and deepest significance. Just as a tuning fork aligns an entire orchestra, the torso reinstated its function : to attune the entire body. It does not control a discourse, but rather commands the place of *being*, so crucial to the twentieth century body, a body « historically marked by the abandoning of empowerment over things⁵ ». From then on, the advent of an aseptic body—of a neutral territory, freed from semantic governance and divested of its worldly imperialism—is acquired by a redistribution of importance among body parts, a balancing from the limbs to the torso by centripetal force. By eradicating parts of the body too heavily charged with symbolism and empowering neglected areas by orienting towards the torso, a transfer of power takes place. Upending the general tendency, this leads to the homogenization of bodily zoning. The body becomes global or, to be more precise, is made global and democratic with its new-found compacity.

Within this newly elected regime, the torso becomes a dense chamber, containing and resuming the dancing body's most archaic felt sense – a most consistent and structuring image, whose architectural avatars flower under Jean-Luc Nancy's pen :

« body » as distinct from « head » as well as from 'limbs » or even « extremities ». In this way, the body is the trunk, column, pillar, the build of a building. The head is reduced to a point, lacking a true surface, made up of holes, orifices, apertures from which a variety of messages enter and exit. In a similar way, the extremities gather information from the environment and execute certain operations within it (walking, reaching, grasping). The body seems to remain foreign to all of this. It rests on the self, within the self : not decapitated, but its shrunken head stuck onto it like a pin⁶.

In the phylogenetic leap between the amoeba and the starfish as suggested in CI training, there lies the image of a more diffuse and more primordial center, born prior to the architectonic metaphor (torso as central beam). Before any structuring or perceiving of articular alignments, the notion of a nucleus at the heart of the body surges, a nucleus without definite contours, containing pulse and breath, vital organs and the core centers which animate our body, magnified by the to and fro of respiratory undulation. The kinesthetic solicitations of the starfish concentrate at the center of the body, aiming to enhance its dynamic strength, unencumbered by limbs or skeletal imagery. In other words, a relaxed, balanced tone, with no accents or superfluous tension. In essence, this renews with Laban's distinction between « free flow » (unimpeded) and « bound flow » (impeded), and concurs with him that « movement originating in the trunk, in the center of the body and then flowing gradually out towards the arms and legs generally flow more freely than movement for which the center of the body remains still while the limbs are moving.⁷ ». This also corroborates with Merleau-Ponty's intuition, according to which we could demonstrate :

[...] that in the dance the subject and his world are no longer in opposition, no longer stand out one against the background of the other, that in consequence the parts of the body are no longer thrown into relief as in natural experience: the trunk is no longer the ground from which movements arise and to which they sink back once performed; it now governs the dance and the movements of the limbs are its auxiliaries⁸.

The victory of the torso over all extremities wins unanimous approval among the ranks of dancers right from the early years of the modern era ; however, they did not always agree on the specific location of

⁴ Louppe Laurence, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, op. cit., p. 65.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, op. cit., p. 154.

⁷ Rudolf Laban, *La maîtrise du mouvement*, op. cit., p. 45.

⁸ *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Colin Smith, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 335.

its center. To each his torso, to each her center—depending on the particular style of choreographic art underlying each generation's (usually implicit) body image. Depending, also, on the dancer's relationship to psychic, imaginary and cultural bodily motifs, and not just an understanding of anatomy (anatomical geometry). To summarize the great inflexion of the 20th century, let us say that the very notion of center has traveled down the torso, from top to bottom, before dispersing in other parts of the body and finding its most original expression in Contact Improvisation, which simply exported it to shared physical envelopes. The pioneers of Modern dance tended to place the center of their movement impulses high within the thoracic cage, where Duncan's emotions, finding the site for their expression, sculpted the torso into a kind of funnel open to the sky. Isadora Duncan, asserts Sally Banes, "believed that the source of human movement and emotion lay in the solar plexus, a principle that dictated the use of the whole body in dance, from the center outward, in contrast to the balletic, peripheral deployment of the arms and legs." After WWII and under the influence of new Eastern philosophies on young American dancers, the center of the dancing body migrated towards the pelvis—specifically towards the area between the navel and the pelvis, where Eastern martial arts and Chinese medicine situate the primary center of Chi (Ki in Japanese): the vital breath we may translate, for lack of a better term, as an energy principal. Here is where the primacy of gravity and full consent to that which lies 'below' can be expressed: the dancer's torso flips the funnel and embodies an imaginary pear shape. Signaling gravity's pull, receiving digestive and reproductive organs, sculpting lordosis between the thoracic cage and the pelvis, between the diaphragm and the pelvic floor, a crossroads of forces where muscles weave to connect upper and lower body—this center established by the lumbar spine plays an important role for the dancer, well beyond its anatomical and physiological relevance in the body's economy. Indeed, although mobility is reduced in this area of the body where, it gains in qualitatively larger effects produced by the slightest motor inflexions.

While securing this lower center, the contemporary dancer discovers its very relative nature, thanks to which it becomes possible to grant other parts of the body similar qualities. Here begins a polycentric view of the moving body; without denying the existence of a gravitational center, it capers with its multiplication and erratic displacements, such as displayed by Alwin Nikolais as he toyed with his notion of a *traveling center*. A living tribute to the teachings she received from him, Carolyn Carlson fiercely insists, according to Laurence Louppe «on the circulation of the center [...] which makes of each limb an entire body, or rather, concentrates within each limb the intensity of a whole body⁹».

But we must conclude with the radicalization of the question of a moving center in the extreme case presented by the practice of *Contact Improvisation*. If a *contacter* develops a polycentric body, ready to redefine the localization of its intra-corporeal nuclei in any situation, he nevertheless rivets his sensing on the one considered to be of most importance: the co-center shared at skin level with a partner. In CI duets, the point of physical contact traces pathways in a spontaneous, involuntary cartography. Dancers in contact listen to this point, this moving center from which their dance must emerge, which belongs to no one, co-negotiated moment by moment as if it were an autonomous, exterior phenomenon, a primary guide deconstructing the very question of power. A CI duet exudes an undefinable charm when neither of the two dancing beings is guiding the center of touch; when both are following it, giving the impression that their own centers are going about their lives freely in the spaces between bodies; where, fundamentally, this becomes the only legitimate emanation of power.

⁹ Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine*, op. cit., p. 73.

« Choose a partner. One person points their right index towards the left index of the other person. Your fingers are barely touching. Now close your eyes. Bring your awareness to this point of contact and let yourself be surprised by all the information it offers. Perhaps this point wants to move, but is that's not what you feel, let it be still. This is not about leading or following. It's not a juggling exercise. It's wonderful when you both feel like you're following. Don't make it happen, simply allow the movement to happen. Enjoy ! You have two minutes¹⁰ ».

Exporting motor centers outside the body is not a given experience. On the contrary, it points to the deconstruction of our socio-cultural body, attained only by repeated efforts of tonic reduction. Only then can one reach a low tonic baseline, articulated within the eloquence of the torso: an unstable line able to condition the redistribution of corporeal valences. And because this de-potentialization of the self is not just a question of musculature, a dancer may only achieve it by the sweat of the imagination. By letting one's self be traversed by a new body politics that goes against inherited models. Indeed, this territorial becoming requires the obliteration of a body-schema based on *doing*, directed by the head and activated by the limbs. It calls for the equalizing of ruling forces within the body itself. By defacialization, overturning, neutralizing and decentering semic zones, the contemporary dancing body redeems the power of its torso. CI has taken the plunge: this newly established equipotency liberates the dancing flow outside of—or rather, in the sharing of—the boundaries of self-hood.

[Translation : Mandoline Whittlesey, October 2016]

¹⁰ This fundametnal exercice– *the rolling point of contact* – is well known by any contacter. Here is a translation extracted from a performance-demonstration by Dieter Heitkamp, intituled « *Schule der Sensibilität* ». The text composed in 2008 is available here: http://www.hfmdk-frankfurt.info/fileadmin/Dateien/FB3/handapparat/Schule_der_Sensibilitaet_red.pdf (seen 05-15-2011).