

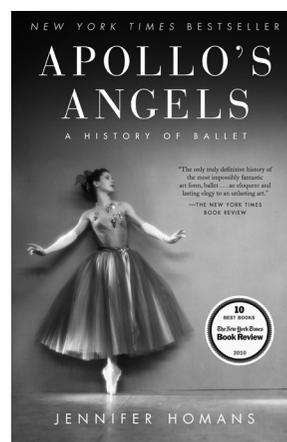
Books

Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet. By Jennifer Homans. New York: Random House, 2010. 672 pp.; illustrations. \$20.00 paper.

I have long thought a social history of ballet would be a good idea—perhaps something modeled after Arnold Hauser's classic *Social History of Art*. *Apollo's Angels* reviews four centuries of ballet history with a focus on technique and styles that are strongly tied to national identity. Stories of the dancers and choreographers are interwoven with plot outlines from ballet libretti and thumbnail sketches of major and minor historical events. But, although impressive for its vast coverage, the book tends to be unreliable in its analysis and contradictory in its methodology. From the geometrical dances of 1581 in *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine* to Nijinsky's American tour in 1916, many claims are compromised by the findings of recent scholarship, which the author has apparently not consulted. An agenda drives this chronicle. Jennifer Homans separates the wheat from the chaff of history by distinguishing what she considers to be "pure" ballet. This leads to value judgments, not social history. It is revealing to understand what Homans means by pure: ballet that does not tell a story, but evokes an essence or a feeling; ballet that exudes a godlike nobility; ballet that is rooted in highly conservative ideologies. Stylistic purity is above all aristocratic, conservative, and, at her own admission, "stuck" in the past: "It *was* stuck, but that also meant that it marked a historical place and fiercely guarded the aristocratic principle that was its guiding force" (264). There is very little room for innovation in this conception despite the advent of modernism, and it is not surprising that William Forsythe has no place in Homans's history. He only appears once in a footnote.

The purity of ballet originates for Homans in France during its early modern period. It eventually moves to Russia (there is "light" in the East, as the title of Part II tells us) and then migrates to the United States, where it is embodied in the modernist neoclassicism of George Balanchine. The Apollo of the book's title nods to Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928) and the angels, as it turns out, are to be found in Balanchine's lesser-known *Adagio Lamentoso* (1981). Apparently, Balanchine spoke of dancers as angels because of what he perceived to be their emotional detachment (528). "Apollo" and "Angels" are code words for Balanchine and the New York City Ballet: "In the years following Balanchine's death his angels fell, one by one, from their heights" (540). Do we need to read Milton's *Paradise Lost* to see what happens to fallen angels? In the post-Balanchine world of ballet, they engage in "unthinking athleticism," and are "ill at ease" with themselves (540). Well, this does turn out to be an evil. Purity, although godlike, is also vulnerable, and it is near collapse in the epilogue: "The Masters are Dead and Gone." The epilogue confirms this book was written for readers who cannot reconcile Balanchine's death with the future of ballet as an art form.

Epilogue aside, what we have here is the trajectory of Tim Scholl's 1994 *From Petipa to Balanchine* backed up into the Renaissance, although the book is not in Homans's bibliography. According to Scholl, Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928) nods to Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890), which itself pays homage to the court of Louis XIV—the birthplace of classical dance in the early modern period. What Scholl brilliantly presented as a theory of retrospective modernism



Homans tells as a story moving forward, providing dance history with a telos. I found the first half of the book infuriating with all its contradictions until I realized the scheme, and that the details were being manipulated to fit this scheme. One would expect from her dancer-centric approach at least a fidelity to the unadorned description of danced movement seen through the dancer's eyes. Yet, in the midst of description we are often confronted by heavy-handed symbolism. Of *The Dying Swan*, she writes: "Pavlova slowly weakened, gave in, and folded into a gentle heap, the old ballet, it seemed, died with her" (295). The questions a social history might alert us to—what social forces are at play to bring about aesthetic change, and how aesthetic change reflects or, in its turn produces, social forces—are not raised.

Jennifer Homans is a dance critic and a former ballet dancer. *Apollo's Angels* begins autobiographically with the story of the author as a young girl in ballet school amidst an intellectual family at the University of Chicago. The dancer-centric thesis of her narrative gives her license to stage herself at the start and to establish her authority on the basis of her own experience as a dance student (she never refers to her professional activity). Her extrapolation of this experience as a paradigm for the professional dancer serves to assert that dance exists primarily in the present. It has no history, in the sense of documents; it has only the transmission of memory through oral tradition: "Ballet, then, is an art of memory, not history" (xix). Nevertheless, Homans spent over a decade doing research in European archives. It is difficult to digest her claim that ballet by its very nature is "unconstrained by tradition and the past" (xviii). In the epilogue she contradicts herself by saying this lack of constraint is precisely the problem contemporary ballet now confronts, and the cause of its decline. She criticizes contemporary dancers for lacking "an accurate grasp of the past" (545). (There is no cultural analysis to explain why this may be so.) But, it seems as though none of this book's claims are to be taken seriously as they are consistently turned on their head.

Another programmatic sentence gives me pause: "Ballet has no texts and no standardized notation, no scripts or scores, and only the most scattered written records" (xviii). There may be no standardized notation in use since the 18th century, but what of the many notational systems devised for ballet in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Franko 2011)? Claudia Jeschke and Ann Hutchinson Guest reconstructed Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun* in 1989 using Nijinsky's notational system. What of the manuals of technique such as those of Carlo Blasis from the early 19th century? What of the thousands of ballet libretti from the 17th through the 19th century? What of the memoirs of dancers, and the writings from the first 15th-century Italian dance treatises to the publications of Serge Lifar's technical treatises of the 1940s? What of the historiography of dance starting with François Ménéstrier in the 17th century to Lifar, Fernand Divoire, Maurice Brilliant and others, if we want to restrict ourselves to the French realm (see Cramer 2008)? And, what of the writings and notes of August Bournonville for which to deal with adequately one would have to read Danish? (Contradicting her own methodological position, Homans writes later of the wealth of documentation of ballet training in the 19th century, [127].) Finally, what of the critics, and what of dance criticism beginning with Romantic ballet in the 19th century? And, regarding memory, what of the institutions themselves—the ballet companies—that represent their own form of institutional memory? Homans would have us think the archive does not exist, a gesture designed to dramatically underline the apparent uniqueness of her book, which feigns to burst upon the scene to offer us the textual traces dance itself lacks.

Dance history is not only an act of transmission, but also an act of translation. Yet Homans rejects historical relativism—the idea that a step in 1630 might not have looked the way it does in 2011—calling relativism a "rigid and anachronistic part of our contemporary fascination with instability" (xxxiii). Yet ballets were and are performed by bodies, and bodies change with respect to morphology, physical capability and type of training, and the socially sanctioned view of aesthetics across time. For example, a film of the Royal Danish Ballet shot in 1909 looks almost nothing like Royal Danish Ballet today. On the other hand, there is a great deal we can

learn from the analysis of texts about how people did move in 1630. We can never know for sure, but I would argue that a healthy relativism is not “rigid and anachronistic”; it is the better part of wisdom. In Homans’s view, it is necessary to idealize the origin of ballet in order to insure the transmission of its aesthetic values through time. The Baroque period is godlike for Homans and Romanticism inherits the essence of this nobility, something that is associated more with a general comportment than with the specifics of a technique. Homans’s descriptions of the core aesthetic values of the noble tradition are left sufficiently vague to be able to resurface in Romantic ballet.

Homans claims the historian can still salvage a critical perspective despite the lack of coherent documentation. But, for her this means “to say that this ballet was better than that one, and why” (xxiii). She practices aesthetic evaluation of the past, and in this sense she operates as a dance critic who tours the past rather than as an historian who reconstructs it. Yet she concludes that history does have a role to play: “how ballet began and what it became is best appreciated in light of the political and intellectual upheavals of the past three hundred years” (xxiv). The question remains whether it is possible to write the history of an art form as complex as ballet with the aim of simply telling a story—especially if that story is not backed up with responsible historical and theoretical analysis.

As a doctoral candidate in history at New York University, where this book was apparently first developed as a dissertation, the author seems to have steered clear of the field of dance studies that has developed apace over the past 30 years. Perhaps her project was to do dance history without dance theory or critical theory. Dance critic Clement Crisp bestowed his blessing on the book for its deft avoidance of the accursed jargon. What use, after all, has critical theory been beyond making dance studies a legitimate and burgeoning academic discipline alongside literary studies, visual culture, even history itself? There is no discussion of this disciplinary positioning or the reasons behind it. This is the time to mention that I found the overdetermined publicity for this book offensive, which made its author out to be a new breed, a dancer who researches dance! A dancer who thinks about dance’s past! A dancer who actually *thinks*, no less! As a former member of the New York Study Group in the 1980s I participated along with Susan Leigh Foster and Cynthia Jean-Cohen Bull (we three were professional dancers, but Susan Manning and Ann Daly were also members) in the common project of bringing dance studies into existence as an academic field. Many professional dancers now have a PhD, or are currently doctoral candidates in dance studies departments in the US and abroad. The dancer-scholar today is no longer a rare breed. The publicity for this book spotlights Homans as a former dancer and current dance critic with academic credentials in the discipline of history, but one who feigns ignorance of what should actually be her own discipline: dance studies. Random House presents Homans as a trailblazer, but the trail has already been blazed.

But, one learns by the end that Homans does know about the field of dance studies. In her epilogue—that nasty and self-indulgent little diatribe that contains the key to so much that is erratically incomprehensible in her historiography—she blames dance studies for the ills of dance. “Dance today has shrunk into a recondite world of hyperspecialists and balletomanes, insiders who talk to each other (often in impenetrable theory-laden prose) and ignore the public” (548). Her attention to the public exemplified in this book through the fabrication of a history to match her own fantasy, and to blazon her allegiance to Balanchine, is hardly a model of intellectual honesty or clarity. It is symptomatic of the anti-intellectualism that has long plagued American dance criticism.

By the time I reached the end of the book I became suspicious of the immense amount of media attention given *Apollo’s Angels*: why has it met with virtually no criticism? Its title combines mythology with hagiography. Homans explains that the title indicates the two major sources of ballet: physical perfection (the classical) and spiritual elevation (the pagan-Christian) (xxii). She equates a major conceit of Romantic ballet—being airborne—with the angelic. Romantic ballets are filled with a highly differentiated cast of elementals, some of whom fly.

She recasts them all as angels: they are “closest to God” (6). Her view of dance history is deeply theological. She understands 16th-century French Humanism as an attempt to “remake the Christian church” in dance spectacle (5)! The Neoplatonism of the Humanists in the circle of Antoine de Baïf’s *Académie de Musique et de Danse* from which issued the theory of *musique mesurée* is described as an attempt to instill “a transcendent love of God” (6). I thought it was generally agreed since Jacob Burkhardt ([1860] 1990) that the art of the Renaissance was a return to man as the measure of all things. Does it matter at all that in a period of religious wars in France the meaning of religion and hence of God may have been in dispute? Homans presents the bloody 16th century as a period of purity—the past to which contemporary ballet must adhere throughout its innovative evolution—and God and angels occupy the stage of cultural history to make us mindful of that purity.

As she moves ahead to 17th-century France the angels are not left behind. Divine Right is said to place the monarch “closer to the angels and God” (11). Here we see the close connection between ballet aesthetics and political power, but not in a critical sense whereby power would be negotiated in and through ballet culture, but in that ballet aesthetics are historically determined by a kind of *pure* theology “that never really died in ballet” (9). Hence, we see that the dancer is indeed an angel, a paragon of religiosity and moral perfection. Ballet is sweetness and light and its decline in today’s world is truly a fall from grace. Developments in the ballet of the 17th and 18th centuries become blurred in Homans’s account, adding up to nothing more than an aristocratic tradition that was not overturned until 1831! Although there is a chapter on the French Revolution, during which, let us recall, the bourgeoisie displaced the aristocracy by sending many to the guillotine, it did not, for Homans, affect dance technique in any lasting manner. (Compare this with her account of the political pressures on dance and dancers in the Soviet Union in the 20th century.) For in the next chapter, we find the famous Romantic ballerina Marie Taglioni in 1821 still stripping away “a century of aristocratic affect” (139). Which century’s affect was she stripping away? Homans claims Taglioni’s dancing “had a strong aristocratic cast” (142). Romanticism’s famed rejection of classicism is nowhere in evidence. Baroque dance is the holy ghost of romanticism. For Homans the 18th century contributed nothing to ballet history, and the French Revolution did little to interrupt the noble tradition.

Homans devotes ample attention to the life of Jean-Georges Noverre and to his ballet reform in the 18th century but winds up limiting his ballet-pantomime to “a series of static tableaux and irregularly posed groups” (75). Noverre’s expressive gesture, as well as that of Gasparo Angiolini, is not explored, and its place in history virtually erased. For Homans it seems as though the entire 18th-century ballet reform—not only Noverre’s, but also that of Hilverding, Angiolini, and Gardel—accomplished nothing.¹ All this is quite against empirical evidence as well as against her stated principle that ballet reflects historical and intellectual upheavals. Because Homans wants early-19th-century Romantic Ballet to inherit the noble style, she must keep that style visible on Parisian stages well into the 19th century even as she erases the influence of the bourgeoisie on ballet. “The French Romantics *invented* ballet as we know it today” (170).

To assure the longevity of the noble style from the 17th to the early 19th century, Homans omits the existence of the bourgeois public sphere in the 18th century: “The word public did not even refer (as it does today) to an agora or external arena where discussion or debate might take place; it simply described general or universal truths [...] and the King (next to God) possessed them. He *was* the public” (104). This is storytelling as sheer fantasy, and it is time for her to read Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* ([1962] 1989). It is not easy to encompass centuries of the history of this art in an intellectually responsible man-

1. Susan Leigh Foster’s *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire* (1996) could have been useful to Homans for the way it explains that the turn to narrative in choreography forced changes in the conception of how we view bodies and how those bodies moved.

ner if one chooses to ignore major monographs in dance studies *and* the relevant critical theory of society.

This book does not claim that ballet reflects culture but that it runs counter to culture (it holds back the clock, is stuck in the past). Put otherwise, in order to substantiate the ultimate claim that ballet has now run its course (an argument she put out in *The New Republic* prior to this book's publication), she must substantiate an enduring aristocratic-spiritual influence flowing from the early modern to the modern. To do this, she finds it necessary to minimize the importance of the 18th century and relate the early 19th century quite closely to the 17th century. It is also necessary to keep the look of 17th-century noble style vague (to say that it was highly regulated in every detail tells us nothing) in order to make it appear to survive for at least a century after it had become ideologically and artistically defunct. To see a reconstruction of Baroque dance today is to be struck by how unlike 19th-century ballet it was. Finally, she must make the narrative ballet an aberration of the 18th century that disappears in the 19th century for a nascent modernism. This is a very counter-intuitive argument, and the controversial aspect of it is not even acknowledged.

Why would one want to place the advent of ballet modernism in the early 19th century? One would want to do this if Taglioni were arguably the hinge figure: "Thus for the first time since the seventeenth century the steps, poses, and movements of ballet had acquired a new intrinsic meaning" (170). *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841) are said to break "the hold on dance of words, pantomime, and the story ballet" (170). Romantic ballet of the 19th century, usually thought of as the apogee of story in dance, was apparently not that at all for Homans. But, wait: "Pantomime was not gone. To the contrary, it continued to thrive" (170). Plots, however, were not to be believed, and dances became "visual poems or living dreams" (170).² The characters were wooden. What of the popularity of melodrama in the 19th century?

Giselle is the most dramaturgically sophisticated of all 19th-century ballets. Its characters are still studied by dancers today to unlock new angles of interpretation. The story involves social class as well as love rivalry, madness, and redemption. It is most definitely a story. Part of its innovation, however, was to integrate dancing with the action in such a way that dramatic action itself became dancing. But, rather than credit a particular ballet with modernism, Homans prefers to credit a dancer. Taglioni, she says, was the first modernist. She inaugurates the modern era in ballet by making dance into its own subject matter. She also adds that dance becomes an essentially feminine art at this time (think of Balanchine's ballet as woman). Homans's insistence on seeing the *ancien régime* in Taglioni is the key to her agenda with the cartoonish references to God in her discussion of the 16th and 17th centuries. French aristocracy and Italian virtuosity, saintliness and perversity, can be embodied in ballet history through Taglioni. Noverre and company must be eclipsed, and the bourgeois influence in ballet must only pass through the so-called "grotesque" Italian contribution to dance technique, which enhances the noble tradition with virtuosity but cannot overwhelm the aristocratic aesthetic.

But, does any of this really matter? The author contradicts each one of her own methodological premises and ignores important research. The recourse to godlike or angelic essences stands in for the movement of historical bodies in time and space. Balanchine's choreography is called "godlike" (507). This is not just a confused and a-disciplinary treatment of ballet history, it is just another pro-Balanchine tract masquerading as history, perhaps the last gasp in the Balanchine-as-the-be-all-and-end-all version of ballet history. It brings with it a peculiar amalgam of nostalgia, mourning, and arrogance. Once the methodological morass and the

2. In the epilogue, Homans calls this recourse to "the inner world of dreams" a bourgeois characteristic of ballet (547–48) as if to make up for the fact that she had erased both action ballet and the bourgeoisie from her narrative. In chapter 12 she makes Noverre the progenitor of Antony Tudor (482–83); in the epilogue she states we know very little about Noverre's ballets (546).

gross historical distortions are penetrated and the agenda unearthed, there remains an appealing assortment of images and a large if still quite blinkered bibliography.

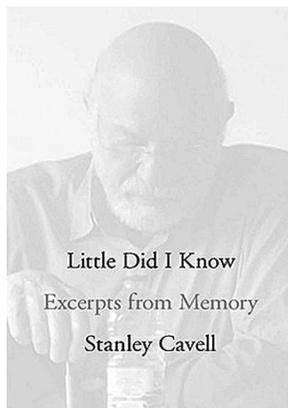
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Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory. By Stanley Cavell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010; 557 pp. \$34.95 cloth, e-book available.

Stanley Cavell begins his autobiographical volume *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*, with the recollected proclamation that his heart would soon be catheterized; that *we* (he and his cardiologist) *must look at what is going on inside the heart*. To the reader immediately absorbed into the concern of the narration's moment, the subtleties of philosophical thought underlying the words can elude attention altogether, as when Henry David Thoreau's surveying of the depths of the pond in Cavell's beloved *Walden* masquerades as nothing more than that. On the surface of this monumental work, an aging American philosopher faces his own mortality with an attempt to trace in writing the worthy occasions, deliberate or accidental, of his life. Imbedded within that surface, a more complex weave and investigation play themselves

out over the work's 548 pages. The date on the initial entry reads "July 2, 2003," as all the entries are dated, and before we arrive at the promised cardiological procedure, we have taken a long detour through childhood in Atlanta, a mother's musical career, a father's failed pawn shop, a family's relocation to Sacramento, a second relocation back to Atlanta, and a semi-remembered car accident that forever damaged the inner workings of the author's left ear. The writing oscillates, or retreats periodically, from the advances of the narration into extended passages of contemplation, and before long Cavell takes the time to elucidate the parallel proce-