

DANCE IN LITERATURE

A REVIEW OF WEIJIE RING'S MONOGRAPH *TANZ IN DER LITERATUR**

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At first glance, Weijie Ring's monograph *Tanz in der Literatur* might appear to promise a philological survey of dance in literature between 1750 and 1850. From the opening pages, however, the book makes it clear that for Ring, dance is much more than a decorative motif or an occasional social scene. Dance, the author argues, constitutes one of the most sensitive cultural indicators of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—an intermedial formation capable of registering, with particular precision, the subtle shifts that accompanied the emergence of modern European culture: new forms of social mobility, the reconfiguration of gender identities, transformations in the understanding of emotion, changes in body culture, and the loosening of boundaries between aesthetic forms. Drawing on the concept of the *Sattelzeit*, Ring approaches literature between 1750 and 1850 as if dance were a kind of “surface of sensibility” through which the period attempts to understand its own modernity.

The theoretical strength of the introduction lies in its refusal to treat dance as a sequence of thematised scenes. Instead, Ring describes dance as an intermedial problem. In her interpretation, dance is a threshold phenomenon that translates experiences of movement, rhythm, corporeality, and spatiality into the verbal medium. This approach distinguishes her work from traditional dance-historical or choreographic studies: Ring does not reconstruct choreographies but investigates how dance becomes a poetic, social, and symbolic organising principle within literary texts. Dance does not merely “appear” in literature; it operates within it, transforming narrative rhythm, emotional temporality, the interpretation of social situations, and the self-perception of characters. One of the most significant contributions of the introduction is its sharp distinction between the categories of “dance and literature”, “dance in literature”, and “literature in dance”. Ring's monograph consciously aligns itself with a primarily literary orientation: it examines dance as a literary phenomenon that shapes even the deeper layers of textual formation.

Accordingly, the four major chapters construct a cumulative horizon of interpretation. The first chapter presents dance as a social seismograph. In Ring's reading, the ballrooms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are

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miniature social spaces in which the positioning, movement, and interaction of bodies sensitively reflect the loosening of estate-based structures and the advance of bourgeois modernisation. In Zachariae's *Der Renommist*, the figure of the *Stutzer* becomes an overdrawn caricature of social role-play: his dancing stems not from pleasure but from the compulsive need to display status. The mannered quality of the movements is both an aesthetic and a social phenomenon, revealing how performative and calculated social self-representation had become. In contrast, in Goethe's *Werther*, the sequence of the minuet, the contredanse, and the waltz forms an allegorical order: the minuet, which expresses older hierarchies, gradually yields to the more horizontal contredanse and finally to the waltz, embodying modern emotional intensity. The ball in the novel is not merely a setting but a micro-social laboratory in which the emotional and social movements of the characters are organised according to the same rhythm as the dance itself. Ring's interpretation is compelling because it enriches well-known literary scenes with a dimension of movement aesthetics without resorting to the superficial topos of "dance as metaphor"; for her, dance functions as a genuine structural principle.

The second chapter examines the gendered dimensions of dance. In Grimm's *Aschenputtel* (*Cinderella*), the ball appears as a ritual space of female visibility, selection, and social positioning. Ring demonstrates how the legibility of the female body in the form of dress, shoes, the shape of the foot, or the lightness of movement becomes a performative code of gender identity. Arnim's *Hollin's Liebeleben* and Dorothea Schlegel's *Florentin* offer more nuanced perspectives: here dance is no longer part of a social ritual but an alternative space in which female characters temporarily step outside their assigned roles and experiment with different forms of bodily presence. Dance becomes a transient space of freedom that does not abolish social constraints but allows for their temporary suspension. Particularly memorable is Ring's reading of Hoffmann's *Olympia*: the mechanical dance of the automaton becomes a metaphor for modern alienation, the projection of desire, and the emptiness of gendered communication. The "perfect dance" turns grotesque precisely because it lacks human presence and emotional responsiveness. This insight has important implications for pedagogical and social interpretations of dance, as it highlights the danger of the mechanisation of learned gestures.

The third chapter treats dance as an aesthetic and poetic organising principle. Here, Ring shifts her focus from represented scenes to the ways in which dance is integrated as a formal model into the deep structure of texts. In Goethe's idyll *Alexis und Dora*, dance does not appear explicitly, yet it permeates the rhythm of the text: approaches and withdrawals, slow and rapid movements, the rhythms of nature, and emotional oscillations all form part of a "poetics of dance". Harmony here is not a static state but the delicate balance of constant shifts. Ring demonstrates with particular sensitivity how movement becomes not merely a metaphor but a poetic model: dance is not about what the text says, but how it says it. In Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina*, the same logic assumes a ritual form. The entrances and exits of the chorus, the repetition of spatial arrangements, and the choreographic ordering of scenes create a law of movement that makes the inevitability of the tragic end perceptible. The characters seem to pass through the stages of a pre-composed dance, with the tragic structure thus appearing as a mechanism of fate in motion. In Fouqué's

Undine, dance becomes the aesthetic language of supernatural identity: Undine's undulating, direction-changing movement simultaneously symbolises her ontological otherness, bound to water, and the emotional intensity of Romanticism.

The fourth chapter describes dance as a model for the temporality of affect. Ring begins with Kleist's classic essay *Über das Marionettentheater*, in which the perfection of the marionette's movement embodies the ideal of a body freed from consciousness, unburdened by reflection and doubt. The marionette's dance is both a metaphysical and an affective form, signalling a state in which movement reflects the most elementary dynamics of the soul. In contrast, Eichendorff's Romantic dance scenes represent spaces of emotional ambivalence: desire, happiness, melancholy, and fear coexist in those moments when characters step out of ordinary time and enter emotional states that verbal communication struggles to capture. One of Ring's most original observations is that nineteenth-century dance scenes can be read as psychological compositions: changes of rhythm, accelerations, decelerations, and repetitions form affective patterns that render the movement of inner emotional processes perceptible. Dance thus not only expresses but structures: the pattern of movement organising the temporality of emotions.

One of the greatest strengths of Ring's monograph is its refusal to treat dance as a thematic motif. Instead, she describes it as a medial paradigm: a nodal point at which body, society, aesthetics, and emotion converge. This approach proves particularly productive from the perspective of dance and arts education. Implicitly, the book suggests that dance is not merely a performable or teachable form of movement but a form of knowledge that shapes culture, subjectivity, and perception alike. The historical functions of dance, such as the learning of social roles, the performance of gender identities, the development of a sense of rhythm and form, and the regulation of emotion, remain present in contemporary dance pedagogy. Ring's argument makes clear that dance as a formal principle "thinks": it does not merely express but interprets, models, and organises. Within a text, dance creates an order of movement just as it does within the body; choreography produces structure in the same way that narration does.

Tanz in der Literatur is thus significant not only for literary studies but also more broadly for reconceptualizing dance as one of the central media of cultural knowledge and education. Ring's book offers a perspective in which dance becomes one of the most original documents in the formation of the modern European subject, the reconfiguration of social order, and the refinement of emotional culture. For this reason, the volume will be of interest not only to specialists in dance but to anyone concerned with the historical relationships between body, movement, emotion, and aesthetics.

Ring, W. (2021). *Tanz in der Literatur: Zum kulturgeschichtlichen und ästhetischen Wandel in der Sattelzeit (1750–1850)*. De Gruyter. (*Germanistische Forschungen, Neue Folge*, 157). 359 pp.