

INTRODUCTION

The Natural Accidents of Dancing

And now and then, as they skip and jump,
The giddy couples together bump,
With a crash and a smash and a terrible thump,
That ends at times in a spilling.

—Tom Hood, *The Physiology of the Dance*

A “veritable ‘delirium’”¹ was incited in English society on April 11, 1844, when ballet celebrities Carlotta Grisi and Jules Perrot danced the polka for the first time on the stage of Her Majesty’s Theatre. This polka frenzy stamped its name on clothes, hats, streets, and puddings, while magazines and newspapers carried heated stories about the effects of such dancing on the body and how to do it correctly if indeed it must be done.² The *Times* printed dozens of advertisements daily for polka lessons placed by “professors of the art,” who are described in one article as having to work night and day to keep up with the “polkamania” infecting insatiable young people.³ *Punch* despaired over the ubiquity of polka talk in social circles: “Can you dance the Polka? Do you like the Polka? Polka—Polka—Polka—Polka—it is enough to drive me mad.”⁴ To parody the popular composer and conductor L. A. Jullien for creating a new polka “for nearly every day of the month, which he names after the persons by whom,—or the squares, lanes, or alleys where,—they were first danced,” *Punch* created “The Punch Polka” and printed it as sheet music for public distribution.⁵ A representative from Buckingham Palace reported to the *Times* that Queen Victoria “entirely set her face against the polka and [gave]



Figure i.1. “Royal Marriage Ball Polka” (ca. 1840s), by J. Brandard. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert dance the polka. Used as the cover of sheet music. Victoria and Albert Museum E. 2590-1914.

instruction that it should not be again danced in her presence.”⁶ Nonetheless, several illustrations of Queen Victoria dancing the polka with Prince Albert are on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum along with sheet music entitled “Royal Marriage Ball Polka” (fig. i.1), suggesting that if the queen had indeed been serious in her instructions, the public fervor and her enjoyment of such dancing soon converted her.⁷

Although today we associate the polka with Germanic and Eastern European heritage festivals and Lawrence Welk reruns, seen as quaint and perhaps slightly silly, in Victorian England at midcentury the polka and the repopularized “scandalous waltz” were symbols of modernity: new and fast and threateningly disruptive.⁸ Many books were devoted (not often admiringly) to these romping dances, with one writer equating the severity of the collisions on the dance floor to “driving home from Derby.”⁹ In a mock-chivalric tone, he tells men, “[S]top when you hear your partner sobbing very painfully, or when you observe her gown is coming off,” and he suggests that they always carry a small pincushion in their pockets to repair “dresses [that] are everlastingly coming to pieces.”¹⁰ Although the writer is obviously having fun with his audience, social dances were indeed more physically demanding than those of the previous century and could potentially disrupt powerful contemporary ideologies attempting to define the middle class along gendered and spatial lines of demarcation. As Mary Poovey convincingly argues, the contradictions in the social discourses that relied on binaries of difference for constructing ideology make salient the uneven development of gender, something we see in this example of middle-class women romping alongside their male partners.¹¹ The risks of exposing the incongruities in gender and class construction might explain Queen Victoria’s hesitation about allowing a polka to be danced in her honor. Why would an imperial leader give the nod to an activity that “ends at times in a spilling”?

To better understand the forces contributing to this rather small-scale social phenomenon, we must turn our attention to the Victorian stage and to an entertainment venue that during the 1840s overshadowed the opera in its popularity as stage spectacle: the romantic ballet, whose metropolitan center shifted temporarily during the 1840s from Paris (and before that, Milan) to London, in part because of the work of Benjamin Lumley, the marketer and manager of Her Majesty’s Theatre. Lumley imported the most talented choreographers and ballet divas of Europe to England, offering them tremendous amounts of money to work exclusively for the London opera houses.¹² Jules Perrot, partner of Marie Taglioni in the first *La Sylphide* (1832) and collaborator for the choreography of *Giselle* (1842), acted as artistic director for Her Majesty’s Theatre from 1842 to 1848; during this time, London showcased all of Perrot’s newest ballets and operated as home base for many of the leading European dancers. The London stages were the venues where audiences first witnessed (or read about) the polka, the tarantella, and other new “hot” Parisian dance imports and promptly signed up for dance classes to be well rehearsed in the new steps before the next ball. Classes were often taught by ballet professionals—Princess

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Victoria's first dance instructor was Marie Taglioni, for example—with the caliber of training one received usually being dictated by wealth and social status.¹³ Lisa Arkin and Marian Smith describe the national dance craze affecting London and other major European capitals during Lumley's tenure; this craze involved ballet devotees renting or reproducing the peasant costumes worn by the ballet professionals during performance and emulating these “other” peoples and lands in their private and public dance arenas.¹⁴ A woman might leap a little higher while dancing the polka at a public ball to reproduce the steps of the professional dancers Carlotta Grisi or Fanny Cerrito that she witnessed firsthand on the stage, learned from dance class, or read about in the *Times*. Professional dancers were not bound to the stage and to the shadowy world of the demimonde but circulated the ballrooms of the middle and upper middle classes as guests or as the romantic ideal that the costumed nonprofessionals attempted to emulate in their rented peasant garb. The public and private, professional and domestic worlds of divas and debutantes were interconnected through the practice and popularity of dancing.

With the explosion of dance studies in the past decade or two, we now have theoretical frames for studying dance in relation to corporeality, performativity, and narrative choreography. Susan Leigh Foster's work on these subjects—along with that of Ellen Goellner, Jane Desmond, Ann Daly, Ramsay Burt, and Mark Franco, to name just a few—is substantive and exciting for reevaluating and complicating the effects of movement on subjectivity and identity. Tracy Davis's extensive work on the Victorian theater and the historical attention that such scholars as Ivor Forbes Guest, Marian Smith, Lynn Garafola, and Alexandra Carter have paid to the ballet have been invaluable in terms of opening up the stage and stage lives of performers to permit the study of nineteenth-century popular culture and track the evolution of the aesthetics and forms of classical and modern dance. Literary scholars have studied the Jane Austen ballroom scenes (which, while pre-Victorian, serve as a baseline from which to see the development of the dance craze in Victorian times) and have made interesting connections to narrative plotting¹⁵ and cultural history, while modernist scholars such as Amy Koritz and Terri Mester have studied the interplay of modern dance with literature. But what has not been examined in any great depth, and what I explore in *Dancing out of Line*, is the culture's *response* to stage and ballroom dancing and what that response illuminates about Victorian attitudes toward the feeling, moving, performing body and its malfunctions. Why was dancing such a popular occupation, even preoccupation, at midcentury? What was it about the dance, per se, that provoked disquiet and, subsequently, discourse? And is there a connection between

the culture's response to dancing and the pervasiveness of dance scenes in narrative fiction written during this period and referred back to later in the century? Although poets often used dancing in ways other than metaphoric—the stanza from Tom Hood's very long *Physiology of the Dance* (excerpted in the epigraph that opens this chapter)¹⁶ is one case in point, as is George Gordon Byron's well-known defamation of the waltz, entitled "The Waltz"—in this volume I work primarily with the novel, not only because its rise in popularity paralleled that of the romantic ballet but also because novel readers, like social dancers, transcended class demarcation. The spectacle of ballet, the exhilaration of social dancing, and the lure of novels involved participants from across the Victorian social landscape: dancing and reading were entertainment mainstays.¹⁷ In addition, novelists and the ballet community were both trying to professionalize during the 1840s, as was the medical community, which provides an interesting interplay between the three practices (reading, dancing, and medicine) during the disease-ridden decade of the 1840s. Using the novel as my primary genre, I am able to tap into Victorian sensibility via emotionally potent, contextually rich dance scenes that have been overlooked in Victorian, feminist, and dance studies.

My title is purposefully ambiguous in an attempt to replicate the Victorians' attitudes toward the stage and social dancing. The phrase "dancing out of line" suggests transgression; however, it also begs the question, which line—dance lines as in a stage performance, or written lines as in a novel? Without such clarification, the trajectory of the dancer or the dance is left open, with meaning in the movement dependent on the social or literary particular of the moment. Interpretation of a dancing body, in other words, is always context driven and influenced by multiple semiotic codes not limited to those relating to race, age, gender, class, sex, and religion. Dancing does, of course, involve lines, many of which were carefully drawn by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dance masters to inscribe the steps and movements of popular social dances for public dispersal. Conduct was likewise codified during this period, so that a character's success or failure at navigating the lines of decorum became a prominent plot device in narrative fiction. The speed required of the polka caused many couples to stumble, to fall *out of the lines* demarcated by dance masters as correct patterns, something that the more faint-hearted and less physically fit resisted by pledging abstinence to *stay in line* morally. Of course, by choosing to *not* dance, these resisters inevitably invite commentary, drawing attention to their immobile bodies and fixed minds. The plots of the romantic ballets depend on principal dancers moving *out of line*, their bodies and their gestures setting them apart from the corps dancers to emphasize and propel

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their stories. In other words, the conjoined movement of dance lines, disciplinary lines of social demarcation, and literary lines provides us with bodies (both physical and textual) for studying the ambiguities and complexities of the nineteenth century.

My premise is that the possibility and, indeed, probability of bodies *dancing out of line* in real situations and in fiction provided Victorians with an opportunity to write about things that worried and excited them. For example, health was a serious matter at midcentury because of the pervasiveness of epidemic fever, coupled with the confusion in the medical community as to the etiology of fever and contagion. During these disease-ridden decades, stories appeared in popular journals such as *Penny Magazine*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and *St. James's Magazine* (to name just a few) about young, reckless girls whose passion for dancing weakens their moral resolve, making them susceptible to what we might refer to as a "dancing bug." Convulsed by a mysterious power originating from any number of sources—an insect, a broken pact with the devil, derangement, or a family predisposition (usually on the mother's side)—these infected girls are forced to dance to their death, and no one, not even the family practitioner, can save them.¹⁸ While many of these stories derived from medieval iconography and legend concerning what was known as the "dance of death," the ballet also participated in increasing the visibility of the infectious dancing motif by continuously staging *Giselle* and *La Tarentule* during the decade; both of these ballets involve the idea of uncontrollable dancing caused by outside forces that end, at least for *Giselle*, in death. The appeal of these ballets suggests that audiences were fascinated by the idea of the body overpowering the mind and took pleasure in experiencing the results vicariously through stage performance. What they feared, in other words, was temporarily enstaged, contained, and recast for purposes of not only pleasure but also study.

The *Times* printed a story just a month after the polka's London premiere (and on the same page as the Court Circular, the nineteenth-century equivalent to our society page), telling of a French municipal guard who "blew his brains out with a pistol" during the King's Fete, presumably over unrequited love. The event occurred at 5 a.m., and the last words spoken by the guard were purported to be, "This ball lasts too long—I will put an end to it."¹⁹ As with the ballet's choice of repertoire, the media satisfied the Victorians' love of sensation by making a spectacle of "deviant" behavior but simultaneously assuaging their fears by publicly and, in this case, violently punishing the transgressor. Yet while the news story is safely located across the channel, the notion that suicide was what was required to end a society ball plays off of and reinforces the aura of danger that was already fueling

representations of dancing in the context of late nights, weak-mindedness, and romantic love. Dance stories, in other words, satisfied Victorians' attraction to what they feared, with this particular story safely removed from London and set in Paris, the conventional location for sexual and unlicensed acts.

Yet not all of the representations of late-night dance soirees were so dreadful; in fact, some were written more in the spirit of fun, as if to ridicule fearfulness rather than further agitate the fearful. Albert Smith, a friend and colleague of Charles Dickens, for example, wrote a series of humorous stories about the dance craze for *Bentley's Miscellany*: one is entitled "The Polkaphobia." The story tells of a "young person," Titus Ledbury, who tries to distinguish himself in society by taking polka lessons. He ignores his father's orders not to dance the polka and hosts a polka party in his father's absence. The party gets so out of hand that the ceiling starts to sag, lamps swing recklessly, and the floor buckles to the breaking point.²⁰ A bust of Shakespeare nods in time to the tune before crashing to the ground, and a black-leaded plaster Crusader "chasse[s] from his bracket" only to lie piecemeal, like Shakespeare, on the floor. While the story is certainly funny, it also registers a degree of dread about English history and literary tradition being invaded and ruined by the new. Anticipating the culture's tendency to panic in the face of change, Smith uses the dance metaphorically to critique social rigidity: if society, like a dance floor, lacks the necessary flexibility of a good foundation to support a rapidly changing, moving society, it stands a chance of caving in and destroying the civilization it was built to support.

The 1830s and '40s are understood as the restive decades, completely different in look and tempo from the more stable England of the 1850s. Robin Gilmour writes, "The acceleration of everyday life, and the accumulation of knowledge about a new society which left individuals conscious of crisis but impotent to act, bred a new kind of angst—pervasive but unfocused."²¹ This angst, both exhilarating and troublesome, gave rise to a relatively new abstraction, "the spirit of an age," fueled not only by the tremendous population growth in the urban areas of England but also by industrialization and the railroad.²² Between 1844 and 1849, track mileage and public usage of the railroads doubled, contributing to a new obsession in the Victorian mind with time and speed.²³ Radical efforts were being engaged in by workers to reform the laws and attain universal suffrage, while the first phase of the "crisis of faith" was taking a toll on the institution of religion. How to maintain order in the face of such revolutionary change at the same time that actual revolutions were erupting at every border seemed impossible but absolutely essential. David Newsome

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writes that Jeremy Bentham, Mathew Arnold, and other prominent leaders were concerned “that the pace of the changes tended to be faster than society could assimilate” (15). Re-creating what Bentham might have been thinking, Newsome continues, “In such a state of excessive acceleration, society could easily go off the rails. . . . Civilization would become ‘overheated’” (15).

If we juxtapose these fears of excessive acceleration, going off the rails, and becoming overheated with the Tom Hood poem at the beginning of this introduction, we can see an interesting parallel: the “physiology—internal workings—of the dance” involves an acceleration of speed and heat that could end in “a crash and a smash and a terrible thump”; a couple taking a spill on the dance floor simulates on a small scale the social body going “off the rails.” Dance anthropologists are convinced that dancing contains corroborative material for studying a people’s cultural temperament. Indeed, Frances Rust writes that social dance is not simply related to human experience but “reflects *the spirit of the age* in any particular society with great fidelity” (1; my italics). Following the line taken by anthropologists, we might say that the polka and the fast waltz were popular during the 1840s because they provided an emotional outlet for Victorians, who were both excited about and fearful of the rapid changes taking place. History supports the works of anthropology, considering that after the times became less spirited and more stable, the enthusiasm for dancing waned and ultimately died. In the closing years of Victoria’s reign, dancing in the fashionable world was at its lowest ebb, and dancing well was considered “bad form.”²⁴

Of course, one might say that other practices besides dancing likewise operate as a barometer of the culture’s temperament. Fox hunting, boxing, and rowing, for example, were popular pastimes throughout the century, as was walking—walking, we might say, allowed Victorians to “let off steam” by removing themselves from the disciplinary forces, to think through things alone. What I find fascinating about dancing—I leave fox hunting and walking for others—is its centrality as a social practice and the exuberance in manner and style of the representations of dancing that many times undermine the ideologies professed by Victorians in other contexts. The ballroom, for example, was the architectural center of the large Victorian houses; there, class hierarchies were reified and wealth redistributed within the disciplinary lines of courtship practices. However, with the acceleration of the polka and the waltz, the disciplinary lines governing courtship practices had to relax to allow for the corporeal exertion necessary for executing these “popular” dances correctly. Popularity, in other words, took precedence over tradition and decorum.²⁵ The female body was still

on display for the surveying man in the mating ritual of courtship—a blatant inversion of nature that Darwin would soon rectify—however, stamina and physical deftness came to be included as qualities for determining a woman's fitness for marriage. Both dances involved repetitious turning, at a fast clip, and could last as long as twenty or thirty minutes without stop;²⁶ to keep from “spilling,” male partners had to fully encircle their female partners' waists and hold them tightly, an image that does not exactly correspond with the formalities and corporeal distance we expect in Victorian courtship practices.

While the close physicality required of such romps no doubt triggered sexual concerns in the minds of parental bystanders and added to the titillation of the moment for the participants, the constant turning fueled debates in medical circles about the effect of dizziness on the minds and reproductive bodies of women. Sweating bodies, tight embraces, and closed rooms provoked medical concerns about air ventilation and whether open windows were a good thing or something to avoid at all costs. Not only was the dance central to the private institution of courtship and marriage and the top-of-mind concerns in medical science, but also its stage equivalent, the romantic ballet, offered the mechanical sciences a site for innovative application of new lighting and staging techniques. Even the mathematician Charles Babbage, pioneer of the computer, appears in the dance archives. Babbage designed “The Rainbow Dance” for Benjamin Lumley's consideration—the idea was to light the stage with powerful limelights emitting red, yellow, blue, and purple colors.²⁷ Because of the fire hazards already threatening London stages, Lumley wisely declined Babbage's “Rainbow Dance,” even when the design included two fire engines and the fire brigade positioned on the stage during the entire production.²⁸ According to Mary Poovey, Babbage saw the factory as a paradigm for an efficient, productive society, with all working parts subordinated to the “productivity of the whole, discipline triumph[ing] over disorder, and regular procedures compensat[ing] for individual failings, inattention, and variations in strength or skill” (*Making*, 38). To find Babbage in the ballet archives is understandable when we consider that precision is a fundamental of ballet choreography, with lighting a necessary component for spectators to escape their disorderly worlds and triumph temporarily in the imaginative realm of the *fantastique*.

My point here is that dancing, unlike other popular activities of the decade, transcended class, gender, and geographic lines of demarcation and provides us with a more inclusive template for studying the Victorian social body. As Peter Bailey argues, there was remarkable vitality in the popular recreations of the working classes, as well as the middle classes, during the 1830s and '40s, despite (or perhaps because of) the cramped space and

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time of urban conditions. The pub “remained a centre of warmth, light and sociability for the urban poor, a haven from the filth and meanness of inadequate and congested housing, a magnet for the disoriented newcomer and the disgruntled regular alike” (Bailey, *Leisure*, 10). During annual feasts, revelers engaged in footraces and dancing out in the streets, while year-round, inside the pubs, participants sang, danced, and watched tricks presented by traveling shows and popular theater.²⁹ Between 1829 and 1849, applications for music and dancing licenses increased eightfold, which is evidence of the growing commercialization and regularity of dancing entertainment within the working classes. In *Sketches by Boz*, Charles Dickens contrasts the splendor of the gin shops situated right around the corner from the “filthy, miserable” homes of the poor, who for a shilling could temporarily escape their misery by entering the “blazing arcades of light” (217). The new pubs built in the 1830s, the so-called gin palaces, were different in scale and layout from the earlier pubs and could accommodate as many as five hundred people. Managers did away with seats, which provided more room and the necessary space for dancing the new fast dances. In one of the illustrations by Florence Claxton that accompanies Tom Hood’s *Physiology of the Dance* (fig. i.2), we see crowds of people in such a palace; in the center are couples of assorted ages and sizes “fast dancing.” The activity is not sectioned off but is part of the crowd scene, which includes families with children, shoppers, and leering men. No one is sitting down—nor, for that matter, is anyone drinking, despite the association of working-class



Figure i.2: “Dance al Fresco,” by Florence Claxton, one of many illustrations accompanying Tom Hood’s extended poem *The Physiology of the Dance*, appearing in *London Society* (1868).

leisure with drunkenness. While I concentrate primarily on the middle classes in this book, it is important to note that the same dances scheduled for private balls were practiced in the gin palaces with the ballet professional operating as a mediating agent (see chapter 3).

Editors of *Victorian Studies* Andrew Elfenbein and Andrew Miller make reference in their respective annual overviews in *ELH* to the number of books that adopt as a critical formula the ambivalent tack referred to by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic.”³⁰ Miller writes that while literary texts do “have a special ability to contradict and specifically to entertain contradictions of judgment, endorsing and contesting, concealing and exposing, interrogating and mystifying,” such books “display a kind of strangled ambition, narrowing their contextual field but making hyperbolic claims within that field” (Miller, 967). I must confess that it was difficult to refrain from following this trajectory in *Dancing out of Line*, considering that the disciplinary apparatus of ballroom culture does help to sustain hegemonic forces as well as provide dancers with a suitable setting for resisting them. But this critical model I found to be too restrictive for working with something as abundant and multivalent, not to mention physical, as dancing. So rather than adhering to this more predictable and manageable model, *Dancing out of Line* steps into the heart of ambivalence that Victorians (and we, I might add) loved to wallow in discursively. For one thing, dancing is an ambivalent practice, both psychologically and historically, so that by stepping into its discursive and theoretical mass (with the terms *hegemonic* and *subversive* operating as bookends), we become privy to the messy middle of that structure, where meanings abound but are not, in actuality, bound. In fact, one of my primary arguments is that ambivalence in the context of dancing is generative, capable of producing new meanings that slip out of and in between the structural lines that partner in their manufacturing.

Florence Claxton’s illustration “The Dance Domestic” (fig. i.3) allows us to visualize more clearly what I mean by “messy middle” and the generative power of ambivalence. The scene and the moment are packed with action, but time is temporarily arrested: a couple is dancing, servants are moving furniture, a child is executing her ballet steps, a dog is barking, a woman is playing the piano, children are examining sheet music (presumably with their music instructor), and two lovers gaze at each other longingly from behind the piano—something might soon happen, though, because the man is removing his gloves. Bodies are spilling out of the frame (or lines), and a little imagination will release the arrested scene into multiple plots and trajectories occurring simultaneously. The mayhem, in fact, may provide the cover for the lovers to participate unnoticed in the exchange of



Figure i.3. “The Dance Domestic—The Carpet-Frisk Modern Extemporaneous,” by Florence Claxton. Note the action packed into this one dance scene. Tom Hood, *Physiology of the Dance*, in *London Society* (1868).



Figure i.4. “Natural Accidents in Practicing Quadrille Dancing” (1817), by George Cruikshank. Victoria and Albert Museum E. 503-1955.

erotic and possibly unlicensed desire. If we juxtapose this illustration with George Cruikshank's "Natural Accidents in Practicing Quadrille Dancing" (fig. i.4), we see mishap not waiting to happen but featured in the center of the frame, suggesting that built into the preparation rituals necessary for executing the dance properly, for disciplining the body, are opportunities for "natural accidents." The partnership of discipline and play make possible the (un)expected mishaps, and this potential for something unexpected to happen is what keeps dance potent as a social practice.

Before turning to history to better frame an understanding of the interrelationship of dancing, dance discourses, and cultural ambivalence, I would like to pause for a moment and examine the psychological properties of dancing that contribute to its recreational appeal during times of social unease. The circle dances so popular at midcentury—the waltz and polka—replicate the fort/da game of Sigmund Freud's grandson, who used the game as a displacement mechanism to achieve mastery over the psychic loss of his mother (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 13–15). But the waltz, unlike the child's game, involves repetition with a difference, because each rotation carries the couple to a new place on the dance floor. Unlike the game, too, dancing involves the entire body moving in like rhythm with another body, which not only satisfies the instinct (or compulsion) to repeat and take pleasure in the mastery of each return but also permits the dancer to do so within a disciplinary practice that involves—indeed, requires—the temporary relaxing of boundaries between self and other. However, tapping into the libidinous reservoir to compensate for one's loss/lack can be dangerous, because once opened, libido can spill out and destroy the community or propel the death drive it was meant to create or assuage. While the waltz involves a repetition of steps, much can happen in the middle of the execution to break or maneuver beyond the continuum: a couple might fall down, the music might unexpectedly stop, a dress can tear, or the couple might rotate toward an exit with no one the wiser. The same practice that provides a compromised pleasure contains properties (read as libido) that enable novelty and disruption. Such potential for erotic excess opens up the moment by moving "between things" temporarily; just as the dance itself might be pleasurable, so too might be all of the feelings experienced before the dance, as well as those experienced while remembering the dance the morning after.³¹ Dancing allowed Victorians to tap into their libidinous reservoir to fuel their bodies for a workout and possibly take a "spilling," without really getting hurt.

If we agree that dancing provides an outlet for achieving a compromised form of pleasure, then the historical evidence of culture's ambivalence toward dancing makes sense: desire must be channeled toward socially

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sanctioned aims for the purposes of efficiency and order, but moving bodies fueled with desire have a habit of disregarding social dictates. If you cannot control these mobile bodies, at least you can write about them, which the English did with comparable frenzy. For example, the “scandalous waltz” of the late eighteenth century was fueled by and helped to fuel the revolutionary spirit spreading through Europe, but its utility as a social practice was its ability to generate debate. For some commentators, the waltz symbolized a more democratic national dance than the minuet because it derived from the peasantry rather than the court and because of its inclusiveness: it did not require the training that the more intricate minuet did, for rhythm rather than training kept the turning bodies in line for the waltz. For others, however, the waltz was disruptive, pagan, and profane—the emphasis was more on individual pleasure than on national pride, and the rhythm that mobilized it was threateningly reminiscent of revolutionary disorder. Like the Victorians, eighteenth-century doctors worried about the velocity with which dancers whirled around the room, fearing that such speed might produce euphoria or vertigo, especially in young women prone to irritability. To counter such concerns, the popular dance master Thomas Wilson and others like him defended the waltz by promoting it as an elixir of vigorous health and as being “productive of an hilarity of spirits.”³²

George Cruikshank’s view “An Allemand” (fig. 1.5) emphasizes the perceived licentiousness inherent in this early version of partnered dancing; the man’s leg is suggestively opened out, with his hip pushing against the interior of the woman’s lower torso. They both have goatish characteristics reminiscent of Dionysus, the god of frenzy and lawlessness. The waltz was often referred to by the English as “the German,” so that Cruikshank might be displacing English fears onto the German “other,” particularly apt during the Georgian era when this early Cruikshank work was created. However, the feminine allemande was also a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century court dance developed in France from a German folk dance and characterized by elaborate intertwinings of a couple’s arms and joined hands. In either case, the illustrator is more interested in the individual pleasure gained from dancing the waltz than in its inclusiveness as a more democratic national dance. If the close embrace and touching legs required of these revolutionary dances shocked Anglo-Europeans, it also provided a cover for moralists to express their own titillation. Note the following near-pornographic description of the waltz by a German, Ernst Moritz Arndt: “The male dancers grasped the long dresses of their partners so that they would not drag and be trodden upon, and lifted them high, holding them in this cloak which brought both bodies under one cover, as closely as possible against each other, and in this way the whirling continued in the most



Figure 1.5. "An Allemand," or "The German" (1797), by George Cruikshank. Victoria and Albert Museum E. 1170-1963.

indecent positions: the supporting hand lay firmly on the breasts, at each movement making little lustful pressures; the girls went wild and looked as if they would drop. When waltzing on the darker side of the room there were bolder embraces and kisses."³³ Arndt's heightening of the libidinous atmosphere of the ballroom allows (forces) readers to think scandalous thoughts and imagine scandalous actions. Lord Byron, under the pseudonym Horace Hornem Esq. in "The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn," criticizes the waltz and the blatant sexuality it occasioned, referring to "hands which may freely range in public sight where ne'er before."³⁴ What seems to be at issue, considering what we know of this poet's moral code, is not morality per se but the public exhibition of sex that was out of line with his romanticized pathos of the private pleasures and pains of sexual love.

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In other words, the “scandalous waltz” was politically progressive, but it was also lewd, suggestive, and immoral; its rhythm tamed the spirit but also aroused it; as a means of fun, it was irresistible, but as a space for structuring class decorum it was excessive, unruly, and disruptive; it was injurious to one’s health, but it benefited well-being and physical fitness. In fact, as far back as Homer and the Greek tragedians, we find the dance operating as both an agent for building a civilization and a provocateur for breaking it apart, an oppositional force that contributes to its provocative power. When Homer goes into great detail to describe the shield that Hephaistos builds for Achilles to fight the Trojans, he includes a dance floor on two of the rings, suggesting that as far back as the ancient Greeks, the dance has been understood as a strengthening, stabilizing component of Western civilization. But conversely, in Euripedes’ *Bacchae*, the dance is the central element of ritual for worshipping Dionysus, the counterforce to organization, structure, and law. In fact, it is through the act of wild, uncontrollable dancing induced by Dionysus that the bacchantes destroy the civilization they helped to engender. Such contradictory uses of the same cultural practice appear throughout history. During the reign of Elizabeth I, for example, advocates of dancing eulogized the activity as a reflection of heavenly forms and physical splendor, while adversaries defamed it as “an introduction to whoredom, a preparative to wantonness, a provocative to uncleanness, an [entry into] all kinds of lewdness.”³⁵ Representatives of the medical community during the Renaissance argued that dance was beneficial because it stirs up natural fluids and preserves healthy spirits, while the religious community countered that dancing inflames the heart and releases the evil within. Dancing was believed by some to be the best means of teaching young people the classical virtues of social decorum, but others worried that the intermingling of heated bodies might give license to deviance.³⁶ These same debates over dance’s relation to class and gender harmony, health, and God resurfaced in the nineteenth century, suggesting that the ambivalent component of dance is embedded in the narrative conventions that have accrued around it over time, an ambivalence that not only structures the stories but also motivates them.³⁷

Victorians did indeed generate and presumably abide by an inordinate number of rules to keep the dance floor civilized: a schedule of events for the evening was fine-tuned and affixed to a printed program and sent out as an invitation so that when guests arrived, they had an idea of how the evening was to be organized; the arrangement of couples into quadrilles was often based on class rank, such that the titled participants were placed at the “top” of the set, with the remaining dancers following in a more loosely determined hierarchical order; conduct manuals and dance manuals

described in excruciating detail the manner in which a man should ask a woman to dance and how to interpret the manner in which she responded. What to wear to the dance, when to take off one's gloves, how to manage the intricate semiotics of introductions, and how to eat, drink, laugh (or not), and walk—all of these minutiae for determining how best to conduct oneself in the ballroom were to be rehearsed before the fact, to structure the dance and ensure its "social" success.

Not surprisingly, many scholars have turned to Michel Foucault to better understand the disciplinary work of ballroom and classical ballet training to mold docile bodies into ideologically approved forms.³⁸ Foucault's theory of power would resonate with anyone who was classically trained and who, as a result, understands the emotional and physical work involved in attempting to replicate some preordained aesthetic ideal—mirrors on every wall of the studio and photographs of ballerinas in various poses facilitate this replication work. However, while the dance cards, schedules, rules, and chaperones no doubt helped to create "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (Foucault, *Sexuality*, 45), they also packed the social scene with so many signs that misreadings, mishaps, and surprise acts were inevitable. Many things happen in a ballroom, in a dance studio, or on stage that are politically significant, even libratory, and not necessarily planned; they happen in spite of, or indeed because of, the preliminary discipline preceding the event. For example, in 1790, a male soloist missed his entrance at the Paris Opera, and Marie Camargo took advantage of the moment to leap on stage and "dance like a man."³⁹ Up until that time, male danseurs performed the pirouettes, leaps, and vigorous steps, while such technical tours de force were considered improper for women. Of course, Camargo could not have risen to the occasion and overturned conventional attitudes of femininity without rigorous training and discipline beforehand. As Michel de Certeau explains it, the working of a tactic in expanding a subject's independence with respect to circumstances "depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (xix), which is literally what happened when Camargo seized the moment and thereafter changed the gendering of ballet practices.

As useful as the theories of Freud and Foucault are as tools for studying the relationship of sexuality, power, and culture, they fall short in the context of the German cotillion, a Victorian compilation of party games orchestrated by a designated leader that often concluded an evening affair. One game required men to dance around the room with pillows, waiting for women sitting in the center to choose them. As a man places the cushion at the foot of the choosing woman, she might twitch it away just as he is about to kneel, "to the great endangerment of his nether garment."⁴⁰

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Some games involved kissing, not unlike later eroticized innocent games such as spin the bottle or post office. Props such as chairs, fans, and mirrors were often required for the game, as were less conventional—to our minds, anyway—props such as balls, hoops, ropes, whips, and reins. “The Rope” dance required that the gentleman leap over a rope to regain his partner; “The Race” provided each couple with whips and reins, whereupon the ladies would “drive the gentlemen, who race from one end of the room to the other, obedient to the whip and rein.”⁴¹ The German cotillion did not arise spontaneously from the evening’s mounting enthusiasm—in this case, the dance tapping into and releasing the suppressed libido—nor was the pleasure gained by diverting the panoptical eye or tactically deviating from the evening’s plans. Indeed, the German cotillion was prearranged, part of the disciplinary apparatus used to fulfill the expectations of the dance participants, who wanted something romping to conclude the evening events. The scheduling of events functions less as a repressive measure in this example than as an excuse or cover to release the potential for unexpected occurrences and sexual expression as the night’s finale. And while such play with gendered order in these games is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on carnival during the medieval period, the fact that Victorians planned spontaneity suggests a partnership between the forces utilized during the night rather than that the party games operated as a means of temporary escape from the official realm.

By applying the ontological ambivalence of dancing and the various works of cultural theorists to dance scenes in fiction, we can identify gaps in theoretical paradigms as well as unveil the particularities of the Victorians as manifested in the nuances, details, and emphases that writers employed in their dance stories. Dickens’s Mr. Pickwick exhibits pure pleasure and wild abandon as he “pousettes” at the Wardles’ Christmas Party, and while of course he needs to be trained in the steps of the “Sir Roger de Coverley” to participate in the dance, he adds his own style, tempo, and (we might say) excess to the exhibition.⁴² The previous disciplining, in fact, enables the excess. The dance scene in *Our Mutual Friend*, published nearly thirty years after *The Pickwick Papers*, however, shifts from the Dionysian atmosphere that enables Mr. Pickwick to experience wild abandon to an over-regulated workspace-equivalent made salient by Dickens’s comparison of the dance steps to the hours of a workday: 1, getting up at eight; 2, breakfasting at nine; 3, going to the city; 4, coming home at five; 5, dining at seven. Nothing is to be expected, nothing new will happen—these are automatons moving to spiritless music. Such difference not only speaks to the versatility of dancing in narrative fiction but also suggests that Dickens’s attitudes about the health of family relationships in terms of business and recreation altered in

the thirty-year interim. The manner in which writers such as Dickens use the dance to respond to topical concerns of both a worrisome and an exciting nature provides us with pressure points for examining the thoughts and feelings of this unique and highly various cultural group and for tracking patterns of change. Each of my chapters investigates a particular social vexation during the nineteenth century and points to the complexities of Victorian sensibility manifested in the ambivalent commentary coursing through the language of debate. In applying these mixed responses to “the problem” to dance scenes in fiction, I show how novelists participated in social debate and used the uncertainty in the cultural milieu for purposes of invention.

While *Dancing out of Line* focuses primarily on the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it begins with a step back into the eighteenth century to establish the triad relationship of social dancing, cultural codes, and literature. I first examine the role of the dance master in codifying dance practices and then apply the irregularities I find in such codification to the Austen canon. After centuries of vilification, from church and medical authorities in particular, these dance masters wanted to vindicate their profession by celebrating the naturalness and safety of dancing. Their writings were initially published in the form of dance manuals to extend the rituals of court dancing to members of the middle and upper middle classes. However, the portions of these manuals dedicated to the histories and philosophies of dancing were reprinted in other genres to serve readers’ interests in dance history, including its debates. The eighteenth-century dancer and dance master John Weaver, for instance, writes that Socrates considered dancing as “among the serious disciplines for the commendable beauty, for the apt and regular motion, and for the skillful and elegant disposition and fashioning of the body.”⁴³ The preeminent nineteenth-century dancer and dance master Carlo Blasis reminds his audience that Captain Cook kept his sailors healthy by making them dance to the violin every night.⁴⁴ Juices circulate in plants and animals, planets revolve around the sun, blood circulates through figures and forms—what could possibly be more natural than human beings dancing (Weaver, 87)? Skillfully, dance masters such as Weaver and Blasis made a niche for themselves in middle- and upper-class circles by determining that the problem was not dance per se but the manner in which people dance. Using historical acumen and connections to court royalty to legitimize themselves, these scribbling “professors of the art” assured society that with themselves at the helm, the dance would be a reliable and safe means of uniting English families and maintaining their link to the royal family.

By the time of Austen’s writing, however, the exterior performance of manners that was part of the curriculum of dance masters was being questioned as a reliable gauge for determining a person’s character. With the rise of the

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individual came an interest in interiority, the perceived repository of the more authentic self that is hidden behind the outer mask of manners. In fact, manners, in some instances, were believed to be suspiciously convenient as a means for the Mr. Wickhams of the world to manipulate others for their own gain. The ballroom is gendered by these professors of the art, as dance participates in the construction of the masculine ideal. But because the construction is anything but stable, Austen uses the dance—a scene of semiotic profundity and instability—to teach her female readers the art of close reading. Hence, Austen the novelist takes advantage of the confusion in dance lines to do something new and culturally relevant: help women protect themselves in the potentially dangerous field of courtship and marriage by investing them with the authority to read male bodies.

While Austen represents the ballroom as a light and joyous social scene, the nineteenth-century ballroom became more threatening, capable of framing acts of wickedness, transgression, and death just as easily as celebrating life and communal oneness. As the dances pick up in speed and physicality, so too do the stakes involved for participants. Indeed, the very scene in which young, wealthy women were expected to make their debut into the fashionable world was cast in conduct books and moral tracts as dangerous and seething with sin and licentious men. Women were understood rhetorically as the embodiment of dance spirit in the eighteenth century, but by the mid-nineteenth century, a “spirited woman” had come to be often considered, at least on the surface, a potential deviant or susceptible to the emotional lure of this most spectacular of social scenes. In other words, young women faced an enormous challenge: to “come out” as adult women, as potential marriage partners, and as representatives of family and social class without falling prey to the temptations or succumbing to the obstacles of the dance environment. The associations of the ballroom with moral and medical danger and the inherent properties of dancing—embraces, spinning, speed—on top of the culture’s rhetoric that cast women as weak-minded and impressionable created a social scene of impending mishap or potential. Dance scenes in novels by Anne Brontë, Charlotte Yonge, Catherine Gore, and Anthony Trollope feature young female neophytes dropped without proper training into a ballroom, where they are forced to sink or swim, their personal resources (or lack thereof) determining the outcome. Much like Ralph in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*, readers watch with interest as women in this uncharted space between the schoolroom and marriage navigate their life courses without first being given a map. The outcomes are surprisingly protofeminist.

Moving from the ballroom to the stage, the centrality of the ballet figure in the Victorian popular imagination transcended the stage performances

and slipped into middle-class consciousness and domestic space. The most pervasive image from the romantic ballet repertoire was the sylph of the ballet *La Sylphide*, first performed in 1832 by the ballet diva Marie Taglioni. Taglioni incarnated all of the characteristics of the sylph ideal—beautiful, playful, and unattainable—but she was elevated in reviews as the embodiment of femininity. Hence we experience with Taglioni and other ballet divas of the 1840s a vexed site of cultural ambivalence: as a cultural icon, the ballet dancer embodied femininity, a noble investiture, yet one that was tempered by associations with the demimonde and prostitution; in performance, the ballet dancer was both angel and sylph, peasant and princess, victim and rogue, contradictory roles further complicated by her real-life social mobility in and between the ranks of debutantes and prostitutes, aristocrats and dressmakers. Social reformers investigated the haunts of the ballet dancers—the dancing saloons, the music halls, the pleasure gardens—in their crusade against sexual deviance, the assumption being that the private ballroom of the middle and upper middle class was free of sexual contaminants and was thus libidinally contained. Of course, while such assumptions might have been reassuring for moralists, novelists needed some of that libido to stimulate or “excite” the middle-class parlor so that readers would recognize it, rather than the stage or the saloons, as the desirable end location in narrative fiction. Because the ballet dancer was a mutable figure, one who migrated in and between class lines of demarcation, novelists could use her as a catalyst in their stories without threatening the sanctity of domesticity: she was both of the middle class and not. In novels by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens, for example, the ballet figure is more than an agent of scandal or a potential threat to the domestication and stability of the middle class—instead, she is part of middle-class domesticity. Novelists used her as matter/material by which to expand the parameters of the parlor.

The polka and ballet manias coincided with one of England’s most disease-ridden eras, with epidemics of cholera and influenza alone killing over 100,000 people in the course of two years. Narratives circulating during the time concentrate on young people, primarily women, who either are infected with disease or weaken in “spirit” and eventually die as a result of excessive dancing. Although social and medical scientists wrote excessively about the diseased body, little was actually known about the etiology of disease, making infection and contagion all the more critical as subjects of inquiry. Everything was considered relevant, even the medieval legends about dancing plagues and spider bites causing mass hysteria; such legends were revealed as a result of archival work by medical and dance historians. Thus, we see science circulating alongside legend at the verge of

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medical professionalism, with dance functioning as the medium and matter for both types of discourse. Novelists also contributed to this medical exploration by using the dance in their fiction to speculate on the psychological and emotional forces that might affect a character's health. Not only does dancing in a weakened condition cause pathological disturbances in these stories—heart attacks, hysteria, consumption, death—but the causes often overlap and contradict in ways that make visible the gaps in scientific understanding. In other words, the debates about the pathological body, compounded by the panic created by the rash of epidemics in the 1840s, turned the dance into a scene of medical import. Bodies moving together in close quarters in an atmosphere purposefully amplified to excite the hearts and minds of dance participants provided concerned Victorians with a petri dish—equivalent for practicing the scientific method. The uncertainty and severity of the situation allowed the expansion of possibilities that we see novelists generating and then tracking in their stories of dancing bodies breaking down.

Dance exerts a powerful hold on the modern memory, and that hold affects temporality: dance generates excitement that becomes the material of memory-making; it preserves the feelings connected to the past by framing moments of import for future recall; and it triggers that recall, for the constancy of dance components over time are powerful enough to transport participants to their dancing pasts. How dancing is remembered in narrative fiction speaks to the relationship of writers to their national and personal past, a relationship that is ambivalent but subsequently generative. For example, George Eliot celebrates peasant dancing in *Adam Bede* as “real” English dancing, with the dance steps operating as the repository of the English past; but her commitment to scientific positivism causes her to ridicule these presumably unspoiled yet “primitive” dancers and tap into the conventions of genre to stage Hetty's exposure to Adam as a sexual transgressor. Thomas Hardy, in contrast, uses dance to erase the distance between the past and present, leaving little if any room for nostalgic indulgence. His peasants dance so vigorously that the past merges with the present, and this creates a space for escaping rather than tapping into memory. While Eliot spoils the dance scene that she initially praises and Hardy accelerates his dance scenes to the point of carnival, Virginia Woolf uses the dance as a talisman to reconnect with her past to loosen its grip on her personal and professional present. Although this chapter moves beyond the mid-nineteenth century, it returns to these “fast” years via the represented memories of writers and their protagonists. By tracking the evolution of the modern memory through Eliot, Hardy, and Woolf, I show how dance participated in the creation of the modern aesthetic.

While Freud argues that ambivalence generates guilt as an expression of the external struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death, *Dancing out of Line* opens up many forces, forms, and potent moments other than guilt that are by-products of such ambivalence. As these analyses of dance practices and discourses make clear, ambivalence has the power to generate ambiguous meanings that can nonetheless function as a form of self-protection and enhancement: it allows the disenfranchised to experience pleasure and to fashion a subject position dictated, at least partly, by choice; it provides scientists and novelists with moving bodies from which to make predictions and theorems that move toward an understanding of the complex interrelationship of the interior body and the exterior environment; it creates a desire for something otherworldly, for someplace or somebody not yet attainable or known, out of which new paradigms for living might be imagined and sought; and it allows the subject to use the past without necessarily being controlled by it. Rather than arresting development or compromising pleasure, ambivalence keeps culture and its literature emphatically mobile.