



# Whitman and Modern Dance

Joann P. Krieg

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## WHITMAN AND MODERN DANCE

JOANN P. KRIEG

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THE DECADE OF THE 1930s was not a particularly fruitful time for Whitman scholarship and interpretation. A preoccupation with economic and social problems was a major distraction in the United States and in much of Europe, and by the end of the decade the problems evolved into political issues that eventually erupted in world-wide conflict. An earlier scholarship that attempted to emphasize the historical context of American literature, and which had hailed Whitman as democracy's bard, was rather abruptly swallowed up by the onset of New Criticism with its insistence on readings of literary works that were divorced from all such contextual influences. The apparent failure of capitalism in the United States, subsequent to the stock market crash of 1929, caused many progressive thinkers to look hopefully to the claims of socialism, especially Marxist socialism as it was unfolding in the Soviet Union. Among them were those who saw Whitman in a new light, not so much as democracy's bard but as a prophet of an international comradeship of workers. Writers such as Clifford Odets and composers such as Marc Blitzstein (whose 1937 musical play *The Cradle Will Rock* carries in its title a suggestion of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking") were self-styled proletarian artists whose works, unlike much of the Hollywood and Broadway productions of the time, offered not escapism but the reality of economic depression, labor strife, and general disillusionment that characterized much of American society. While their names, and the names of others of equal stature, remain prominent in American cultural history, there were those less known who, while not necessarily advancing the socialist cause, found remedies for the ills of their time in Whitman's deep-felt humanitarian values and strove to give them artistic expression. Among these is one well-documented instance where Whitman, his poems and ideas, served as inspiration for such an endeavor. That the instance involves the translation of his words into an entirely "other" language, the language of dance, increases its significance, meriting an attention it has not yet received.

In the immediate aftermath of the economic crash, little was done on a national level to deal with the widespread unemployment that resulted. With the advent of the Roosevelt administration in 1933, however, and

the institution in 1935 of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federal government attempted to put to work as many people as possible, and in fields of labor for which they were best suited by education or experience. Thus, subdivisions of the WPA came into being, such as the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Dance Project, each designed to employ qualified individuals in federally funded arts projects. While the nation's writers were consigned to such undertakings as detailed descriptions of American locales, large and small, or to the writing of scripts for documentaries on farming and child care, actors, singers and dancers were paid nominal salaries to create and perform in productions that brought theater arts to millions of Americans who had never before experienced them. In just this way Walt Whitman formally entered the world of modern dance via the *Walt Whitman Suite* (1934), choreographed by one of the pioneers of modernity in dance, Helen Tamiris.

When the Federal Dance Project (FDP, also often referred to as the Federal Dance Theatre) formed, in 1936, Tamiris was one of its executive committee members, and she would become FDP's major proponent. She was a dancer strongly influenced by that early genius of modern dance, Isadora Duncan. Scholars have drawn strong links between Duncan (1877-1927) and Whitman, whom Duncan declared to be a source of inspiration to both her life and her art.<sup>1</sup> Though she did not choreograph, other than the dances she created for herself, modern dance began with Duncan—in what then was referred to as “free dance”—and was continued by Martha Graham. What the two embodied in their dances was a type of mysticism strongly akin to that which surrounded the early Whitman discipleship in England and America. And just as early twentieth-century scientific and psychological approaches to Whitman effected a break with this mysticism, so too modern dance in the 1920s sought a sociological relevance that emphasized commonplace life experiences. A split in the dance world began when Graham broke with the Denishawn Company (directed by Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis) in 1923. Graham and two other pioneers of modern dance, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, rebelled against what they saw as a still lingering romanticism in dance and sought to create a new, modern style. When their intentions were realized, a large part of the modernity lay in its revolutionary content as well as in its style, content that dealt with social and political issues including the war in Spain, racism, fascism, and the workers' movement in the U.S. and the world. Issues within the dance world itself centered on economics, primarily the economic dominance of foreign, especially Russian, ballet companies, which depressed wages of modern dancers.

Into this world of art and strife came Helen Becker (1905-1966), born of Russian Jewish parentage on the lower east side of New York

City. (Tamiris, her stage name, derived from a line of Persian poetry.) A brother, Maurice Becker, was a painter in the Ashcan school of John Sloan and George Bellows, and it was he who first encouraged Helen's dance efforts. She studied a free-form style of Duncan-inspired dance in a neighborhood settlement house and later had to unlearn it when she studied ballet. Four seasons with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet proved to her that she was unsuited to the form, and she turned to cabaret performance, all the while becoming more involved with the social protest aspect of the dance world. Tamiris, whose dance photos show her as a vibrant red-haired woman, athletic and strong, was an organizational person who in the 1930s tried to create a dancer's union and earlier had worked to repeal "blue laws" that lumped dance with burlesque and prohibited dancers from performing on Sunday. Though she never lost the emphasis on the individual that she claimed to have acquired from Isadora Duncan's philosophy, Tamiris believed an artist had to be a citizen and an active one.<sup>2</sup>

Descriptions of Duncan's dance movements, as compared to those of Tamiris, offer insight into the temperamental and artistic differences between the two. Duncan's dance was most often spoken of in terms of long, sinuous and undulating lines of great breadth, and, as one observer said, "She circles [the stage] in curves of no less jointless beauty," whereas Tamiris's movements were described as intense, forceful and energetic.<sup>3</sup> Duncan was the mystical Whitman; Tamiris was the gritty New York City Whitman—appropriate to her time and place, as modern dance in America was a localized phenomenon centered in New York City, and it was the combination of that city and the depression years that made it into a movement.

In 1929 Tamiris formed her own dance company in New York City, a group made up mostly of women. She choreographed their dances and joined in performance, stressing individualism in dance expression and emotion, not abstraction, which led to her desire to have dancers see their work as originating within themselves. As an aid to expressivity, Tamiris invited the acting master Lee Strasburg to teach her dancers the Stanislavsky method of acting. When combined with the notion of dance as an exploration of social issues, the result was a choreography in which the dancer drew on individual reactions to exterior social forces. That she was moving toward her Whitman choreography seems evident in a desire Tamiris claims to have felt in the 1920s, to create "a dance glorifying health and vigor—the general idea being—"The Body is Beautiful"—How to bring it about?"<sup>4</sup>

From this, one may conjecture that Whitman was already an influence in her life in the 1920s, especially since in a 1960 radio broadcast Tamiris claimed that the poet was more than an inspiration for her dance: "he is a spirit renewer, he is a part of my life."<sup>5</sup> This sense of renewal

flowed into the choreography she created for the 1934 concert piece, *Walt Whitman Suite*, six dance movements set to Whitman poems, first performed in New York's Booth Theatre on January 14, 1934. Two years later Tamiris's first production for the Federal Dance Theatre was *Salut au Monde*, an extended version of the suite, which received a two-week run (July 23 to August 5) at the Henry Street Playhouse. *Salut* consisted of five dance episodes, performed by six women and three men to music composed by Genevieve Pitot (a frequent Tamiris collaborator) and with a textual adaptation of Whitman's poems read by a member of the Experimental Theatre, Arthur Spencer (Tish 339). The work consisted of dances denominated "Salut au Monde"; "Song of the Open Road," or, "These yearnings, why are they?"; "I Sing the Body Electric" (danced by Tamiris); "Song of the Open Road," or, "My call is the call of battle"; "Halcyon Days," or, "Dance of Nostalgia"; and a final movement also called "Song of the Open Road."

Tamiris's copy of the 1900 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains her notations for *Walt Whitman Suite* as well as indications of other poems that she had considered for inclusion. They are "Dalliance of the Eagles," "Warble for Lilac Time," "Look Down, Fair Moon," "Eidólons," "Gliding Over All," and "The Sobbing of the Bells." The dances presented in the final work centered on various races of the world's peoples, as viewed by a male speaker representing Whitman. Tamiris danced the opening segment, in which she greeted the poet and joined him in his salute to the world and its inhabitants. The theme was the commonality of work among these peoples, principally the work of planting and harvesting, whether by Chinese peasants or "Negroes" in the American south, and their common humanity. In the final segment Tamiris returned, first as soloist and then uniting the workers of all races in a dance of shared and peaceful labor.

The press release for the 1936 presentation by the FDP of *Salut au Monde* may in fact have been written by Tamiris herself. It identifies the work as bringing "vividly to the audience the message of Walt Whitman's famous poem," and continues:

This theme is particularly fitting, and expresses the attitude of America, in these days of racial distrust. It is significant that the dance is the vehicle for the expression of a vital social concept. "Salut au Monde" illustrates the aim of the Federal Dance Theatre to bring the concert dance out of the realm of the esoteric and introduce it to the wide mass of people as an expressive medium for presenting living ideas. (Tish 340)

Tamiris, or the press writer, refers to "a vital social concept" expressed by the work, using the then current sociological terminology. For Whitman the "concept" was democracy, and though in 1881 he dropped from "Salut au Monde!" many lines describing his views of America, it is in his country's name that he makes his final salute to the world. So, too, the Whitman figure in the concert dance salutes the working men

and women of the world, offering “Health to you, / Good will to you, / From Me, / And America!”

Regrettably, there is no available film of the original *Walt Whitman Suite*.<sup>6</sup> What we do have is a University of Utah film from 1958 of a later work, *Dance for Walt Whitman*, created by Tamiris for student dancers. By that time the choreographer’s work would have been influenced by various trends in modern dance, including the contributions made to the form by Agnes de Mille, who brought modern dance into the world of ballet in the 1940s, and most especially by Tamiris’s own work for musicals in that decade, notably *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Up In Central Park*, two enormously successful Broadway productions both produced, remarkably, in the same year, 1946.

The 1958 University of Utah film reveals a work of deeply moving intensity. A female voice reads Whitman’s words from “Salut au Monde!” beginning with, “Each of us inevitable, / Each of us limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth” (a text used in the first production in 1936, which may have been included in all of the work’s later permutations), and a portion of the Prologue to “Out of the Cradle.” A company of seven men and nine women perform a vibrant dance conveying the strong affirmation of the first of these quotations, and, in an adagio movement, six women in a circle, often on their knees and with arms entwined, move in gentle, swaying motions to the second quotation. The men return in a work dance that clearly suggests strenuous labor, though it is executed in joyful exuberance. At the conclusion, the men and women reunite in a final demonstration of Whitman’s broad salute to all of the world’s peoples. The overall impression created by the work is one that aptly parallels Whitman’s own joyfulness, inclusiveness, openness of body postures and gestures, and, in an expansiveness of arm and leg movements, suggests the Whitman hallmark, an extended length of poetic line. In essence, the choreography translates Whitman’s words into the language of body motion in a way that is particularly appropriate to the poet’s body-emphatic purposes. The evidence provided by the film bears out critical impressions registered by contemporary viewers of the various forms that Tamiris’s Whitman *homage* took over the years. Her own expression in dance of the poet’s spirit was so lingeringly inspirational to dancer and choreographer Daniel Nagrin that many years after seeing her perform “I Sing the Body Electric” he created (in 1950) a concert dance to Whitman’s “Faces.”

The first version of *Walt Whitman Suite*, in 1934, had no reader for the poems; rather, the texts were printed in the program and the dances were meant to be interpretations of Whitman’s words. When the later FDP production was planned, however, a male reader was incorporated into the work and, in what appears to have been an attempt to consoli-

date Whitman's ideas into a tighter format, an adaptation was made of "Salut au Monde!" The adaptation was done by two New Yorkers, John Bovingdon and Winthrop Parkhurst. The latter wrote on music and is best remembered for his 1930 work, *The Anatomy of Music*. Bovingdon (1890-1973) was a dancer, listed in dance encyclopedias as the creator of "Mono-Drama in the Dance," a kind of dramatic dance solo. Originally an economist and linguist with a Harvard degree in economics (1915), he taught in Tokyo from 1920 to 1922 where he became interested in dance. From 1924 to 1928 he studied and worked at the International Theatre in Moscow, specializing in dance. When he returned to the United States he created dances that combined breathing techniques taught in Asian schools with 1930s political philosophy.

Tamiris's choice of Bovingdon to paraphrase the Whitman text would seem to flow from sentiments he expressed in 1929 when he is said to have compared all of humankind to a dance group, with everyone "swayed by kindred emotions of awe and wonder, expressing themselves through plastic bodies moving rhythmically." When he left dancing, Bovingdon returned to economics and, with an impressive knowledge of Asian culture, became the chief Asiatic economic analyst with the Office of Economic Warfare in Washington, D.C. In 1943 he was fired from that post when the Democratic Representative from Texas, Martin Dies, chair of the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, "accused" him by claiming that his "record and career as a ballet dancer is well known."<sup>7</sup> A decade later Senator Joseph McCarthy, chairing the same Committee, would use the same phrase, but substituting for "ballet dancer" the phrase "Communist sympathizer" to destroy the careers of numerous other Americans.

The (inaccurate) reference to Bovingdon as a "ballet dancer" also served as a coded reference to a male dancer's presumed homosexuality, an assumption and prejudice that Tamiris typically did not shrink from confronting. Early in her choreographing career she became aware of the disproportion of male to female dancers, and when she created the *Walt Whitman Suite* was forced to cast it with more women than men. As late as 1965 she complained of the same problem in staging the *Whitman Suite* at Indiana University, and she told how she took advantage of a lecture presented to a class of graduate physical education students to urge them to combat the "puritanical" notion prevalent in America, that dance was not for men.<sup>8</sup> Not long after this she explored the topic with dance critic Walter Terry in a radio program where she argued that fear of homosexuality among male dancers began in American families, and that "homosexual men are everywhere—as salesmen, clerks, cowboys, I've been told they are even in the State Department."<sup>9</sup>

In the copy of *Leaves of Grass* that was Tamiris's guide, the first three lines of "Song of the Open Road" are circled, and the last three lines of stanza sixteen—beginning, "My call is the call of battle"—bear deep, multiple check marks. That these lines held great meaning for her is evident from her response, years later, to a review written by Walter Terry that served as an appreciation of her entire career. Terry had attended a 1964 program of junior and senior dancers at New York City's School of Performing Arts, where Tamiris served as an adviser. She had contributed a choral work for the occasion, *Dance for Walt Whitman*, originally created for the Juilliard Dance Theater five years earlier. In writing of this work to Terry she emphasized that she truly felt she was doing the dance "for him" (Whitman), and commented on the way in which the imaginations of the young dancers for whom she had choreographed it were "stirred" by Whitman so that she was able to get their "complete commitment."<sup>10</sup> When Terry wrote in praise of the work, he spoke of its movements in decidedly Whitmanian terms, as "broad and free," its emotions "projected with unashamed fervor," and claimed that in it "the questing, questioning spirit of the pioneer is re-asserted."<sup>11</sup> Then, locating that Whitmanian pioneer spirit in the choreographer herself, he asserted that "no one of the modern dancers of the 1930s issued such ringing manifestos or created so many dances of protest" as did Helen Tamiris. Tamiris's response to this (found in a draft letter written the day before Whitman's birthday in 1964) was an admission to Terry that she had "always viewed my interior life, in terms of the day to day struggle, as a series of continuing battles, with the zest for it the most precious part."<sup>12</sup>

This sense of herself as an embattled dancer may seem a doubtful reflection of Whitman's influence, until one examines Tamiris's battles and the way in which she conducted them. A remembrance of her by a fellow dancer refers to her diplomacy, her ability to listen patiently and to speak excellently, so that she "represented the Project [the FDP] with great dignity and conviction both in New York and in Washington" (Tish 339). In her years with FDP, Tamiris fought for better wages and working conditions for dancers, for greater recognition for dance as an art form, and for choreography that would convey American and humanitarian ideals. Her own choreography was often set to Negro spirituals, and racism, a source of profound sorrow for her, was frequently the subject of her dances. As to her manifestos, a draft autobiography (never completed) offered one example, in which the dancer may have summed up her creed. Among its tenets are the following, parallels to which can readily be found among Whitman's pronouncements on poetry:

The dance of today is plagued with exotic gestures, mannerisms and ideas borrowed from literature, philosophy, sculpture and painting. Will people never rebel against artificiali-

ties, pseudo-romanticism and affected sophistication? The dance of today must have a dynamic tempo and be valid, precise, spontaneous, free, normal, natural and human.

A new civilization always creates a new form of art.

Art is international, but the artist is a product of nationality and his principal duty to himself is to express the spirit of his race.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly the “divine rapport” that Whitman imagined he had established with “equals and lovers . . . in all lands” was realized not only in his own time, with a select few, but in succeeding years whenever the human spirit was needful. It was the privilege of Helen Tamiris to share that rapport and serve as a translator of Whitman’s words into the new language of modern dance.

*Hofstra University*

## NOTES

1 See Ruth L. Bohan, “‘I Sing the Body Electric’: Isadora Duncan, Whitman, and the Dance,” *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 166-193.

2 Pauline Tish, “Remembering Helen Tamiris,” *Dance Chronicle* 17 (1994): 327-360.

3 H. T. Parker, quoted in *Motion Arrested*, ed. Olive Holmes (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 59.

4 Helen Tamiris, *Selections from the First Draft of an Uncompleted Autobiography*, ed. Daniel Nagrin (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Press, 1989), 40.

5 “Walt Whitman and the Dance,” sound cassette of radio program in series, “Enjoyment of Poetry,” 1965. Tamiris may also have been influenced by a “festival” production in New York’s Neighborhood Playhouse in April 1922, based on “Salut au Monde!” and using music, lighting, oratory, chorus and dance. The work’s emphasis on Greek movement, however, places it within the Duncan-inspired dance era rather than modern dance. See Kenn Pierson, “Reaching ‘The Audience Beyond’: The Re-enactment of Whitman’s Poetry on Stage and Screen,” *Mickle Street Review* 15 (2004), [http://micklestreet.rutgers.edu/archives/Issue%2015/features/Pierson\\_files/Pierson.htm](http://micklestreet.rutgers.edu/archives/Issue%2015/features/Pierson_files/Pierson.htm).

6 The *Whitman Suite* was recorded in Labanotation, though I have not found this recording. Labanotation, the creation of Rudolf von Laban, is a system of movement notation also used for dance notation. Since it was introduced only in 1928, the notation of Tamiris’s 1934 work is another indication of her ready embrace of the modern.

7 Both quotations, from Bovingdon and Dies, appear in “The Yawn Quality,” *Time* (August 9, 1943), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,766894,00.html>.

8 Tamiris in a tape recording of Round Table No. 21, Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, Sardi’s Restaurant, New York, May 27, 1965.

9 Sound cassette of radio program, “Interview with Helen Tamiris,” by Walter Terry, 1965.

10 Tamiris in a draft letter to Walter Terry dated May 30, 1964. The draft, along with all other materials referenced, can be found in the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

11 Walter Terry, "Tamiris and the School Kids," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 13, 1964.

12 Draft letter, May 30, 1964.

13 Tamiris, *Draft Autobiography*, 65-66.