

The dance of conspiracy: the survival of Jane Avril

*Retracing my steps, I realise that I have crossed an era fluttering
in the swirling throng of the most diverse individuals without
having given a glimpse of anything of my deepest nature. But isn't
it better this way?*

Jane Avril

But isn't it better this way? – wondered Jane Avril when, having reached the end of her autobiography, she thought back on how she had managed to conceal her deepest nature. What would have happened, had she confessed her most intimate plots? What risks would she have taken? To what trap would she have consigned herself and what made her the happiest (was it dancing)?

Inspirational muse of Toulouse-Lautrec, Tersicore and the embodiment of dance in Arsène Houssaye's literary arrangements, Jane Avril did nothing to arouse the fantasies and admiration of men, giving her whole self to dance alone. None of the men in her life, not even those chosen few by whom the Moulin Rouge dancer had allowed herself to be loved and cared for for short periods, could have replaced the place of dance: 'I totally belonged to dance, nothing else existed for me' (Jane Avril, *La ragazza del Moulin Rouge. Le mie memorie*, Roma, Castelvechi, 2015, p. 29; translation is ours).

Jane had had to live for some time with Charcot's patients when she older than a child and with that 'diva' attitude they employed to receive the master's attention. But she was certainly not inspired by that mise-en-scène. Quite the opposite, in her heart, she even felt sorry for the tenants living in Salpêtrière and for those eventful attempts to please the clinic masters by faking and simulating non-existent symptoms.

The relationship between the dancer and Charcot's patients was an ambivalent one, it was marked by a twist that, prevented one from recognising the signs of inheritance as much as those of total strangeness.

There is no doubt that Jane Avril had found at an early age an escape route in dance, breaking her relationship with the world of hysterics. On the other hand, the way Jane Avril responded to the call of dance was different from the way hysterical divas responded to the call of medicine. Whereas Jane did not please her spectators by performing conventional, broadly codified dance steps, Charcot's patients strove to reassure their spectators, the doctors, by giving them exactly what they expected to find. However, something of that relationship would recompose itself whenever Jane felt herself caught up in the desire for dance: 'As a matter of fact, I was a person full of love and with an immense need to give vent to all the tenderness and treasures of delicacy and sweetness that nature had placed in me, and which I had to hold back as I would have to distribute them wisely, and there were not many opportunities to do so!' (p. 40).

One might say that the cadaverous face of the star of the Moulin Rouge, portrayed in Toulouse-Lautrec's work, corresponded to an attempt to dissociate, to disintegrate, that unity which could have led to a knowledge of her deeper nature, if she had not got rid of the complicity, the expressive alliance between face and feet. All the more so because when the occasion arose for a portrait, Jane preferred to use a stand-in.

It was only in this way and from these ingenious stratagems that Jane Avril's dance was able to resist the coherence of certain interpretations, remaining as illegible as her deeper nature.

This is what the assumption and transfiguration of the bridge arch, the rainbow, must have done: to shatter that authorial uniqueness of the hysterical gesture and to scatter its clues where one would not have expected to find them. We do not believe that Jane Avril's gesture was intended to dress hysteria in stage clothes, as this would have meant taming the creative instinct and reducing it to a genre. Rather, by retracing her (dance) steps – which in Avril's perspective would coincide with the way she 'entered the world' and trodden it for quite some time – we discover that dance is a trace of a tampering with the dialectical tensions within power dynamics and, therefore, that which, by escaping this tension, can definitely go down other paths, other desires. His dance, then, is probably the infinite task of one who surrenders himself to the death of the symbolic without, however, making this death another, extreme form of the symbolic. Rather, precisely, a dance step, a distance, an interminable dying.

It is possible that Jane Avril's mimetic activity, through which the bridge arch and a series of other gestures that can be traced back to the script interpreted by Charcot's 'divas' were reworked on stage, did not intend to rewrite a history of hysteria by making a dance performance out of her best-known 'moves', but rather served the enterprise of rewriting a history of dance freed from tradition and canons. Once liberated, dance becomes for Jane Avril the space of an invention: a secret fold, within which she jealously guards her own deeper nature. Rather, we suspect that a gesture such as hers can only come about on the

condition of its prior and necessary dis-embodiment. In other words, in order for it to take on a meaning, each time different and responding to the needs of individuals, the dance – like any other gesture of destitution – must first of all lift itself up, disengage itself, from the field of forces that generated it, and always translate itself into an unprecedented act of incorporation.

Observing Jane Avril dance, Francis Jourdain wrote: ‘dance loses its abstract character to become language, it stops being purely decorative art to assume a human accent; the arabesque traced in space by an inspired leg is no longer an empty sign, but a writing’ (in François Caradec, *Jane Avril au Moulin Rouge avec Toulouse-Lautrec*, Paris, Fayard, 2001, p. 71). The empty space, generated by the interval of space and time between one movement and the next, translates gesture into language and, more precisely, into writing. While the relationship between body and language would seem to bring the theme of incorporation back into play, those empty signs transformed by Jane Avril into writing cannot but generate an estrangement linked to the fact that, after all, in our eyes they remain unreadable and difficult to interpret.

Jane Avril’s hypothesis of dance as an absolute and universalisable gesture is not, however, intended to bend the intentions that precede it to an apprehension of the universal, but rather to deliver, if anything, an inventive potential to dance: to be able to respond to instances that travel in parallel times and spaces and, therefore, outside of traditionally understood time and space.

Taking advantage of the parallel established by Frantz Fanon between the hysterical and the colonised, that of Jane Avril is a strategy that could be traced back to the ‘great camouflage’ of Suzanne Césaire, who wrote: ‘If my Antilles are so beautiful, then it means that the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded’. Strategy of pretense and dissimulation, explosive plasticity of bodies and gestures in the implementation of a programme that, like any deconstructive movement, says Derrida, necessarily operates from within, ‘drawing from the old structure all the strategic and economic resources of subversion’ (Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage. Writings of Dissonance (1941-1945)*, Milan, Jaca Book, 2011, p. 80).

What would have happened if Jane Avril had revealed her deeper nature to individuals? Perhaps they would have tried to heal and heal her wounds using those cosmetic tools they had at their disposal: religion, medicine and family.

But in doing so, those wounds would have stopped practising the art of dance and we, almost certainly, would not have had Jane Avril. There is no doubt, then, that it was for the best.