

### When Dance Meets Text: Pascal Quignard's *Medea*

Pascal Quignard is foremost known as a writer. Yet, over the last decade he has increasingly turned to the performing arts. He enjoys writing for the stage, he explained in *L'origine de la danse*, and being on stage represents a space of freedom that allows him to escape social expectations and ascribed roles (Interview on YouTube). Pascal Quignard is indeed a Renaissance man of sorts, with many skills up his sleeve. He is a practicing musician, an organist and a gambist, and in *La Rive dans le Noir*, a play performed at the Avignon Festival in 2016, he both read his text and played the piano. Alongside essays and fiction, he also authored several opera and dance librettos, such as *La Voix perdue* (Marchetti, 7-35) which was adapted as *L'Anoure* and performed by the Ballet Preljocaj in 1995.

But within Quignard's growing body of works for the performing arts, *Médéa* holds a special place because of his own active role on stage as well the length and intensity of the touring with Butō dancer Carlotta Ikeda and musician Alain Mahé. From November 27, 2010 to April 30, 2013, they travelled around Japan, France, and Europe, from Tokyo to Le Havre, the show's final destination, and the city where Quignard grew up amidst the rubble of post-war reconstruction. *Médéa* forms a *pas de deux*, with Quignard reading his own text, "Médéa", a loose rewriting of Euripides' and Seneca's versions of the Greek myth, and Carlotta Ikeda following up with a Butō performance. A show where dance meets text in radical, novel ways, *Médéa* invites questions on the relation between writing and embodiment. Interestingly, as the show toured, Quignard wrote *L'Origine de la danse* (2013). The hybrid text, in part autobiographical and in part essayistic, incorporates an account of the tour, as well as "Medea méditante" (17-24), the text Quignard read on stage, and is followed by a meditation on dance in general and Butō in particular. As such, it offers fertile ground to explore Quignard's views on the arts in relation to the body.

My essay therefore addresses several questions. How is dance construed and constructed as an ideal of embodied writing? How are dance and literature complementary? Or in other words, what can dance, as a non-verbal, silent art form, express what literature cannot?

Writers, be they poets, novelists, or philosophers, have nurtured a long-standing fascination for dance and the figure of the dancer, as they provided ideals their own artistic practice should strive for. Théophile Gautier's muse was Carlotta Grisi, who embodied Giselle in the eponymous ballet for which he wrote the libretto; Loïe Fuller inspired Stéphane Mallarmé to write his *Crayonné au théâtre*, his notes on dance (Mallarmé, 1945); La Argentina inspired Paul Valéry with his Platonic dialogue *L'Âme et la danse* (Valéry, 1924), to limit ourselves to the Romantic and Modernist period. More recently, philosophers have also turned to dance and the figure of the dancer to examine their own practices as philosophers. Jean-Luc Nancy's

*Allitérations* (2006) reflects on how writing, thinking, and dancing exchange characteristics. The dialogue with French choreographer Mathilde Monnier is the opportunity for the philosopher to reflect on more general questions about the relation between body and mind, the subject's experience of space and time, one's sense of self and altered states of consciousness, like trance.

Interestingly, Quignard has described Carlotta Ikeda as a shamanic sorceress whose performance constitutes a trance. Her dancing, he explains, has held him spellbound one performance after another and has inspired him to write *L'Origine de la danse* (see below). If Carlotta Ikeda is an inspirational figure, their encounter is special, since Quignard, is not merely relinquished to a passive role, but an actor of the show himself. *Médéa* and *L'Origine de la danse* construe dance as an ideal of embodied writing – a writing that captures what language cannot: the unspeakable of affect, the pre-linguistic core that defines us both as humans and animals and which Quignard calls “le Jadis”.

*Médéa* has been analysed as a variation on the myth of Medea as passed on by Euripides' and Seneca's tragedies. (Lapeyre-Desmaison). The show indeed gives shape to the agonies of jealousy and love turned into hatred. Both *Médéa* and *L'Origine* are haunted by obsessive leitmotifs: the figure of the ambivalent and aloof mother, the fear of abandonment, the pangs of grieving and mourning, the nostalgia for infancy and an unmediated union with the world or the melancholy elicited by fragmented languages. Yet if these leitmotifs are folded into the show and the text, their kaleidoscopic layering gives a new meaning to them. For ultimately, I will argue, *Médéa* and *L'Origine de la danse*, despite their melancholy *ressassement* of the themes of mourning, do provide a channel for both personal and cultural mourning - of the ambivalent mother and of the ruins of World War Two.

### **The performance of *Médéa*: from text to shamanic trance**

A few prefatory remarks need to be made about the show *Médéa*. By his own admission, Quignard has always been fascinated by the figure of Medea, whether it be the Pompei frescoes he commented on in *Le Sexe et l'effroi* or the reworking of the myth from Euripides to Pasolini (Quignard 1994, 171-181). What interests Quignard in the mythological figure is her inherent ambivalence as a mother. As Chantal Lapeyre-Desmaison pointed out, Euripides's and Seneca's version tended to psychologise the infanticide mother, explaining away her act as jealousy, as the unbearable pain that turns love into destructive hate. Likewise, she recalls, Angelin Preljocaj's version also seeks to humanise Medea, showing her as a loving and caring mother who plays with her children. (Lapeyre-Desmaison 2013, 18). Quignard's *Médéa*, by contrast, shuns all psychological narrative, and focuses instead on the irrepressible, furious anger that takes possession of Medea at being scorned and betrayed by her husband, who abandoned her for Creusa. The intensity of the drama is conveyed by the sparseness and pared-down text that Quignard reads on stage before Carlotta Ikeda starts her minimalist dancing. Quignard's text forms a close-up or temporal freezing of the moment when Medea's love tips into hatred, when

reason tips into madness. 'Midi Médée Médite' (2013, 20). Médée, Quignard recalls, is the daughter of Time. 'Médée est Midi veut dire: elle est le temps arrêté en elle.' (2013, 18) The dilatory process of mulling over her rage and her revenge are conveyed in Quignard's brisk series of oppositions that make her the very figure of ambivalence.

Elle n'a pas encore d'intention. Elle hésite. Elle aime ses petits. Elle hait son époux. Quelle est la plus grande joie pour une femme? Se venger de son époux? Préserver ses petits? Elle est partagée: elle médite. Elle est déchirée: elle médite. (2013, 20)

The crescendo of either/or options that culminates in murder reminds us that her destiny could have unfolded otherwise. Divided, torn, she is ultimately possessed by her murderous impulse more than she is making it her choice. Furthermore, Quignard extends Medea's ambivalence to the mother figure at large. The opening of the text is indeed prefaced by a childhood memory: "La petite amie de mes douze ans, /sa mère/ voulait la tuer dans la baignoire" (2013, 17). This violent memory brings infanticide, whether perceived as a drive or not, from myth into reality, from fiction into autobiography. Quignard's paratactic style then continues to juxtapose Medea meditating and Mary at the foot of the cross, thus debunking the *Stabat Mater* figure and injecting the foundations of Judeo-Christian culture with an infanticide urge (2013, 22). The chapter closes with another generalisation: that the mother who holds the power of life also holds the power of death, as if these were two sides of a same coin.

[C]elle qui a l'unique pouvoir de la naissance, du temps, du soleil, de la fécondité, du sang mensuel, de la vie, possède dans un mouvement inverse, [...] la toute-puissance de la mort, du désert, de l'esseulement, du désespoir, du sang mortel, de la nuit. (2013, 24)

As the essay further builds up, the figure of the infanticide mother is then extended to society as a whole.

Toute nation est une Médée. [...] Little Boy (petit garçon) tel est le nom de la bombe que la Mère (la société américaine) lâcha au-dessus de la population civile de Hiroshima... [...] Toute nation adore sacrifier ses enfants les plus jeunes, le plus beaux quand ils arrivent à l'âge de l'adolescence'. (2013, 124)

Quignard's extrapolation thus brings back mythology within the historical reality of World War II and of his own personal journey. Indeed, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, a historical landmark geographically distant from the Western World, has found personal resonances with Quignard, as he grew up in Le Havre, a city flattened by allied bombings in 1944, after D-Day. This shared experience with Carlotta Ikeda, who like him grew up amidst rubble, is what gives special meaning to the performance.

Quignard's fifteen-minute reading contains an ultimate, fraught question: "Qui est cette femme dont je tombe?" (2013, 23). Nothing more is said about his relationship with his mother, but a sense of estrangement is wholly contained in the demonstrative adjective "cette".

Quignard's reading is followed by a moment of silence and total darkness that points to an impossible answer. As Alain Mahé starts playing the pebble stones and koto, a Japanese string instrument that could be loosely compared to a cittern, Carlotta Ikeda emerges out of the darkness:

[A]lors que le noir se densifiait autour de moi attendant l'irruption de la chamane qui devait surgir du fond de l'obscurité, peu à peu sous les yeux, dans un rayon de lumière, pour commencer sa transe. (2013, 10)

Carlotta Ikeda thus starts what Quignard calls her trance, a forty-minute improvisation made of slow contorsions, spasmodic movements, controlled falls and extensions, crawling and raising movements, which appear at once as an expression of a primal affect and a rediscovery of archaic movement. Her dancing is not narrative or illustrative of the text. Instead, her Butō performance seems to prolong the text, a response spelled out in movements to Quignard's reading of Medea's dilemma. It is a bodily translation of the violence of her choice, the suffering she has been inflicted by Jason's betrayal, the suffering she inflicts on herself, her children, and her husband by her vengeance. Her convulsions and contorsions, which form movements that hardly take off from the floor, convey the pangs of jealousy and anger that transform into murderous madness.

If ballet has been the dance of physical elevation and embodied the subject's capacity for spiritual elevation and lightness, modern dance, and Butō even more so, is a dance, as Quignard remarked, that stays close to the ground and refuses elevation: "Les feuilles des arbres tombent mais la musique ne civilise pas, l'art ne sublime pas", he writes in *Pour chercher les enfers* (10). There is no sublimation in art; to the contrary, if there is a Sublime to be sought – a Sublime that elicits the same awed joy as the Kantian Sublime but does not reconcile reason with what it cannot encompass - it is consigned for Quignard in a gesture, however impossible, that attempts to recapture pre-linguistic affect. (Korthals Altes). Butō epitomises the privileged art form that embodies that attempt, in Quignard's view.

Butō, which could translate as "the dance of utter darkness" (Quignard 2013, 33), is a Japanese art form that emerged in 1959, throwing off the constraints of Western dance and the codes of the Nō tradition. It aimed at being subversive and the founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, both claimed influence from German expressionist dance as well as from Jean Genet and Antonin Artaud. Broadly speaking, from the Romantic period, with Novalis and Gautier, to the Modernist period, with Mallarmé and Valéry, dance was considered a practice embodying an ideal of grace and beauty and thus a vehicle for the sublimation of affect and emotions. Based on athletic mastery, dance was construed as an overcoming of the human bodily condition. By contrast, for Quignard, dance, and Butō in particular, is a full endorsement of human physicality, a return to a silent, pre-linguistic mode of relating to the world. Quignard defines dance as a return to what he calls the moment of birth, "l'instant natal" (the native moment) (2013, 43), as rediscovering the world as first experienced by a newly born.

## The prenatal dance

Quignard indeed associates dance, and especially Butō, with the prenatal dance of the foetus in the mother's womb. Butō is a gesture that seeks to recreate the foetal swimming movement”

Il y a deux danses comme il y a deux royaumes. La première danse précède la naissance où elle tombe. La seconde danse reproduit, joue, mime, transpose, rechiffre, traduit comme elle le peut, dans l'air, la natation perdue dans le liquide amniotique [...] (2013, 38)

Dance is inherently nostalgic of a foetal state of weightlessness. Yet dance has also to do with birth, the capacity to stand up, like the child who progressively rises to a standing position and is able to put one foot in front of another. Butō, in that sense, is a lost dance or dance of loss, with its nostalgic desire for a return to a uterine primal home:

Il y a une danse perdue (dans le corps tombé, natal, désorienté, souillé, atterré, vagissant) lors de la nativité des enfants. La cérémonie de la voix perdue, en grec, c'est la tragôdia. La cérémonie de la danse perdue, en japonais, c'est l'ankoku butō. (2013, 33)

Quignard further elaborates that Butō imitates what is our fundamental human condition at birth, that of having been rejected from the dark uterine waters which no light can reach, that of crawling and progressively learning to stand up and walk subsequently. In reference to this original darkness, Butō is called “la danse des ténèbres”:

Tel est l'ankoku buto, la danse obscure qui agite les naissants qui cherchent à se déplacer et à survivre à la surface de la terre, poussant les os des morts qui les ont engendrés [...] (2013, 33)

If Butō is very much the expression of our existential plight – in that it expresses a longing for a pre-lapsarian state – this original fall it seeks to hark back to has no moralising connotation but is purely physical. Quignard repeatedly insists that Butō is also a cultural manifestation linked to the historical precedents set by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Butō was indeed born in the aftermath of Japan's devastation resulting from the two atomic bombings. It stemmed from the horrors and traumatic aftermath left by mass destruction and mass death achieved in unprecedented scale and within unprecedented swiftness. And one understands why the founders of Butō, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, found inspiration in Absurdist authors such as Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet.

« Le seul être que je vois complet est le fœtus à la veille de naître, qui nage encore. » Il y a dans cette phrase de Colette, elle-même danseuse nue dans l'entre-deux-guerres, quelque chose qui annonce les danses étranges, elles aussi nues, recouvertes de cendres,

du buto, qui suivirent les bombes lancées sur Hiroshima, sur Nagasaki, et les sept années d'occupation américaine sur le territoire des îles du Japon qui interdisaient de les mentionner et d'en pleurer les morts. (2013, 33)

Quignard thus forcefully reminds us how Butō also came out of the interdict imposed by the American occupier on the Japanese who were not allowed to mourn their dead publicly. As a result, muted grief could only find expression obliquely in the silent movements of dance. Butō is fundamentally a dance of mourning, a repressed mourning that could not find its way into words. And yet Butō is also construed as a dance of resilience, of reconstruction and rebirth.

« Ankoku-buto » veut dire exactement ‘danse-issu-des ténèbres-qui-monte-à-ras-du-sol’. Qui re-naît. Danse qui tente la renaissance. Vie qui cherche à renaître au cours d'une motricité originale. (2013, 33)

As a dance of rebirth, Butō is an invitation to experience the primal movements that follow birth or rebirth after catastrophic survival. As such it has little in common with dance forms based on techniques of physical elevation that would therefore correspond to the spiritual sublimation of our bodily and somatic existence. In that regard, Butō is totally at odds with the ideal of classical ballet, which is based on muscular and skeletal control, and works towards overcoming natural posture with artificial turnouts and point shoes. By contrast, Butō attempts regeneration by re-experiencing the simplicity of an infant's movements.

### **A dance of awkwardness**

Quignard gives a radically new definition of what is at stake in the practice of dancing: an impossible return to a prenatal state that can only be captured by gestures that mimic it. If Quignard often holds music to be a primary art, *L'Origine de la danse* tells another story:

Le rythme n'est pas premier. Les gestes sont là longtemps avant les pas comme chez les petits [...] C'est la raison pourquoi aucune technique ne doit présider à la danse qui cherche l'origine. (2013, 54)

Butō dance should not be deemed a form of regression, however. It seeks, instead, to imitate or recreate a pre-linguistic state of immediate relation to the world, what Quignard calls “le Jadis”. One understands better the author's special affinity with Butō, as Quignard's overt aim throughout his essays and fiction is to make all art forms, from music to painting through to writing, a locus of reunion with the *Jadis*. It is no surprise then that the author who pledged to undo all genres also undid the traditional European system of arts:

[J]e suis devenu incapable de distinguer Danse, Mime, Musique, Masque, Tragédie. Je

suis devenu incapable de les arracher à la transe chamanique. [...] Il me faut désormais renoncer au système des arts qui a fait notre tradition. J'inclus dans la définition de la danse les gestes, haut et bas, obscurité et lumière, les silhouettes, les ombres projetées [...] les pas, mais jamais les visages. (2013, 39)

Quignard's definition of dance is at the opposite end of classical ballet, with its will towards elevation and sublimation. For him, dance has to do with the very simple, archaic, if not infant-like gesture of learning to inhabit the world with one's body or inhabit one's own body with the most elementary steps, like walking or crawling. Interestingly, according to him, dance should reject what identifies us as individuals and bears the signature of our unique identity, namely our face. How to absorb this statement is a moot and complex matter, but it may be understood as a renunciation of individual identity – a renunciation which is inherent in trance but also in an unmediated relation to the world. It may also point to another dimension of Quignard's "Art du Jadis", if one may coin such a phrase, associated with a professed will to return to the asperities of our animality. Through art, Quignard has claimed, he wishes to reunite with our savage origins and relinquish the superficial varnish of culture: 'Je cherche encore à m'é-érudir. Je ne suis pas encore assez *rudis*.' (Lapeyre-Desmaison 2002, 113). Appropriating a quote by Colette, Quignard suggests that what attracts him to Butoh is the beauty of what is untamed:

Je me dis souvent que j'aimerais vivre au sein d'une espèce autre que l'espèce humaine. Il y a une beauté naturelle plus belle que l'esthétique. Il y a une beauté dans les cataclysmes, la tempête, les orages, les bondissements des fauves dans la jungle, les galops des chevaux sur les causses et les landes, les méandres des fleuves dans les plaines, la gracilité des jeunes qui jouent. (2013, 31)

Quignard sees Butō, and perhaps dance more generally, as a return to the uncontrolled forces of natural phenomena and the biological miracle that is the capacity to stand up, run and play which characterises young mammals. "La beauté est liée à la maladresse de l'origine. Le premier pas que fait l'enfant est un pas qui trébuche, qui titube, et c'est le plus beau des pas" (2013, 55). Beauty therefore is no longer associated with physical mastery but with the clumsiness of a child who learns to inhabit the world physically. It demands giving in to the natural energy that guides and inhabits the newly born who makes his first steps but it also a moment of freedom and emancipation.

N'obéissez pas à la musique. Ne soyez plus relié à rien. Songez à naître, c'est cela l'essentiel. Pesez soudain de tout votre poids sur le sol comme font les bêtes dans la forêt. Prenez appui sur la douleur humiliée du sol. Puis abandonnez-vous au mouvement qui jaillit. (2013, 54)

What is at stake is the simple joy of embracing one's own body, to reconcile oneself with simple muscular movement and give into the natural energy that animates it and let it grow without controlling it.

Why does Quignard call Carlotta Ikeda's dance a "trance"? And what does trance mean for Quignard, as an altered state of consciousness? The intensity of Ikeda's performance is almost unbearable to watch. Perhaps this is because the infinite nuances of vibration she embodies seem to point to affect that is irrecoverable, that even the body cannot express. As such her movement can only gesture towards the scars left by trauma and they dramatize the very alterity of pain, its untranslatable nature. Psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony explains how Butō is particularly receptive to this this play with the smallest variation and exerts fascination.

Ce jeu de la polarité, de l'infime différence, la danse Butō en est éprise, et fascine. La différence naissante mais productive de grands changements, elle en joue jusqu'à l'hypnose. C'est encore la naissance, mais pour cette danse, on naît des cendres.  
(Sibony, 80)

For Sibony, as for Quignard, dance, and Butō even more so, is a form of rebirth insofar as the dancer's movements are a will to inhabit their own body anew, to give it a new lease on life, and to feel the body from within. As such, dance is an event – un "évènement". Yet for Sibony dance allows for transcending the body in a sort of trance as he argues, perhaps paradoxically, in that "la danse est une sortie du corps" (Sibony, 93).

This view is echoed by Mathilde Monnier and Jean-Luc Nancy in their conversation. The dancer talks indeed about "la sensation (...) de s'approcher d'une mini-transe" (Monnier & Nancy, 58). This is the opportunity for the philosopher to establish etymological links between dance and trance: "Être en transe, c'est être traversé/ Le danseur est traversé (« *transi* ») par sa danse" (Monnier & Nancy, 58). Psychoanalyst Sibony, dancer Monnier and philosopher Nancy agree that dance as trance gives access to enhanced subjectivity. And yet trance is only achieved when the subject is passive, traversed by his dance and thus, to a degree, dispossessed.

### **Trance, dance and the letting go of identity**

This echoes very much Quignard's views. *L'Origine de la danse* also associates dance and trance with the human capacity for renewal, reconstruction, regeneration, and rebirth. Yet, Quignard has his own idiosyncratic reading of dance as a form of trance. Carlotta Ikeda is described as entering a shamanic trance, just as is the Sybil of Quignard's *Requiem* (2006), both figures being intermediaries between the human, the natural and supernatural worlds. But trance is foremost associated with self-oblivion, or auto-hypnosis, a letting go which is not abdication but a form of trust in oneself and others. This form of positive abandonment is inherent in the silence of dance, as Quignard's indeed suggests in the following reflections: "La danse n'appartient pas au langage. Elle n'appartient pas au jugement. Elle est sans visage" (2013, 75).

Dance, as an art form that is freed from the constraints of language and its inevitably alienating web of identifications and associations, allows an escape from the limits of one's own identity. This would explain Quignard's enigmatic formula: "la danse est sans visage". If the face is the signature of our identity, then dance frees us from it. But this freeing is possible because dance, and Butō especially, represent a return to childhood awkwardness: "La danse fait appel à la maladresse natale. Elle fait appel à tous les gestes enfants. Elle ne sait parler" (2013, 76).

Quignard also quotes one of Plato's last letters: "Il faut savoir quitter le mot, puis le nom, puis la définition, puis l'image" (2013, 39) as if to remind that his will to silence partakes in a much larger imperative. Plato's recommendation may be read as an apophatic silence that gestures towards the infinite alterity of an entity beyond the reach of human knowledge. And one can see how such a gesture resonates with Quignard's ideal to return to a state of infancy, a pre-linguistic unity with the world. Through trance, the dancer achieves a form of impersonality that goes hand in hand with Quignard's ethics and aesthetics of abandonment that he has most clearly formulated in *Les Désarçonnés* (2012). Being able to let go of one's identity is not seen as a passive renunciation but as a capacity for being regenerated, a capacity for self-transformation that is epitomised in Paul the Apostle's fall on the road to Damascus, a figure that he returns to in *L'Origine de la danse*. Quignard indeed extends and renews his praise of abandonment and makes Butō an art of letting go: "Car aimer l'abandon – et il faut aimer l'abandon – c'est savoir aimer la mort" (2013, 63). This aphorism should be read in context, in which the author enrolls the figure of Medusa to recall how fascination is a renunciation to full comprehension and a submission to an ever-elusive alterity. This form of abandonment is not so much a death drive, a desire for stasis as an acceptance of our mortality. Death – "mort" – should perhaps be read as a little death – "une petite mort" – with its sexual connotation of regeneration. For trance and the ensuing state of impersonality thus also allow for an experience of ecstasy. Saint-Paul, as he is "unseated" and falls, has a vision, which Quignard tells us, makes him a dancer of sorts.

C'est ainsi que l'extase n'est pas une vision : c'est la danse même. Et c'est ainsi que cette danse est une danse des ténèbres puisqu'un bandeau opaque se glisse sur ses yeux de l'apôtre et les voue à la nuit. C'est exactement la même danse que dans le puits de Lascaux, lors de la première figuration humaine de l'Histoire, peinte dans la nuit, dans le puits d'une grotte, dans le lieu le plus caché et le plus obscur. (2013, 74)

Dance, as a vision that surges from darkness, thus harks back to prehistoric art and the dreamlike painting drawn in the obscurity of caves. Quignard further adds that this primal activity is further defined as an act of falling: "C'est surgir en tombant. Qu'est ce que naître? C'est surgir en tombant" (2013, 74). Danse and its transe, the apophatic vision it elicits, are in the same paragraph associated with ecstasy. Thus transe and ecstasy are not so much a death drive as a capacity for life and self-transformation.

## The consolations of Butō

How then is the transformative process of dance a reparative process? And how does that play out in *Médée* and *L'Origine de la danse*? As Daniel Sibony remarks in *Le Corps et sa danse*, the body is the locus of somatisation, that is the locus where trauma and affect transform into physical traces.

Le corps est le lieu où se rappellent les traumatismes, les chocs qui furent vécus, puis classés invivables ; c'est là que des paroles et des fantasmes se convertissent en termes physiques. (Sybony, 69)

The body has its own memory which runs parallel or against the memory more commonly conceived of as a series of images or a narration in words. Yet, the body, Sibony continues, is also the locus of events, new encounters and phenomena that are not just repetitions of a past event, whether traumatic or not:

Mais [le corps] c'est plus que cela : c'est la source de phénomènes qui ne répètent rien, qui sont en eux-mêmes l'appel à dire autre chose, avec des gestes et des actes mouvementés. Ces appels sont uniques : chaque corps a ses appels, ses origines, ses sources récurrentes qui ne ressemblent à celles d'aucun autre. En tant que ces appels sont initiaux, initiatiques, ils ne se laissent pas réduire [...] (Sybony, 69)

Thus the body, with its movements and dance, is not only a locus of memory turned towards the past – repeating trauma or to the contrary transforming it – but it is also turned towards the present and the future with its capacity for new experiences and encounters.

This double movement echoes Quignard's description of Butō as an imaginary return to a prenatal state as well as a process of renaissance. For Quignard this takes on special meaning as he sees the performance of *Médée* as a *pas de deux* during which the dancer and the writer share their common grief over having grown up in a landscape flattened by bombs, however different the magnitude between the atomic bombings perpetrated in Japan and the allied air raids perpetrated in Le Havre.

Quignard's special affinity with Ikeda is to be understood in the context of the war and post-war reconstruction, as the dancer, who was born in 1941, grew up like him amidst the ruins of World War II: "Nous n'étions pas des 'post-modernes'. Nous étions des 'post 1945'. Nous avons passé notre enfance dans les ruines. Enfants cherchant à renaître" (2013, 10). Crucially, the last performance of *Medea* took place in Le Havre, where Quignard grew up amidst post-war rubble but also amidst the hope of reconstruction. Jean-Louis Pautrot sees Le Havre as an 'ancrage fondateur', a foundational, formative place that was at the origin of Quignard's oeuvre: a wasteland paradigmatic of moral desolation and of the most brutal and destructive impulse of which humankind is capable (Pautrot, 35-50).

But mourning, like desire, has its indirections, and one work of mourning may hide another. *Médée* discreetly points to the unending mourning of an aloof and ambivalent mother who has never managed to love her son enough. The show does so obliquely through the appropriation of the mythical figure of Medea while *L'Origine de la danse* does so both obliquely and retrospectively, as Quignard then places his artistic encounter with Ikeda in the historical context of the WWII and the reconstruction years. Quignard's work can be interpreted as the melancholy mourning of an unattainable mother: melancholy, because ultimately impossible, unending, fragmented and dispersed over his essays and fiction. And one can see how fragmentation is a defining act of Quignard's writing that would have sprouted out of the rubbles of his childhood experience. Chantal Lapeyre-Desmaison thus reads *Médée* as a mosaic of fragments drawn from several myths, Medusa and Perseus as well, for the author to give shape again to the impossible relationship to his mother. This fragmentary, mosaic-like composition, Lapeyre-Desmaison shows, corresponds to a practice of cutting up that points towards the unbearable representation of maternity, motherhood and the awkwardness of the filial relation, thus confining these to a reality that can only be grasped sideways.

In relation to the question of how *Médée*, as both a dance performance and a reflection on dance, may have been therapeutic, or at least un "exil de la mélancolie" to use a phrase by Julia Kristeva,<sup>1</sup> my take on Quignard's fragmentary writing is slightly different. I would argue that the performance may also be perceived as a form of extreme concentration of meaning and emotion because of the tightness of Quignard's narrative and the intensity of Ikeda's dancing. I would argue that another type of mourning of the impossible relation with the author's mother takes place during the performance of *Médée*. Indeed, the melancholy *ressassement* of Quignard's many narratives of loss turns here into physical expression. It is directly relayed by Ikeda's dance, which channels, with almost unbearable intensity and grace, Quignard's anger, sadness and dismay, all the pre-linguistic affect reminiscent of his notion of *Jadis*.

This is a powerful transformation of pain, rather than a sublimation of it, because it takes place in the time-space unit of the stage. The stage can be seen as a safe space at once playful, where identities break down and are exchanged, an almost sacred space because cut off from social interaction. Lapeyre-Desmaison remarks how Quignard's work is populated with characters in search of a refuge, a substitute for a maternal and familial home or an erotic unity that has been lost: Charles Chenogne and Edouard Furfooz are nervously travelling the world without finding respite; Sainte Colombe finds respite and creative inspiration in his shed, so does the symbolically named Ann Hidden from *Villa Amelia* to name only a few. (Lapeyre-Desmaison 2014, 104-118) The stage, I would argue, corresponds to what Foucault has termed a heterotopic space, a space where habitual rules are reversed, one that has the ability to juxtapose several places and has a temporality of its own. The stage here merges several places – Le Havre and Hiroshima, Eastern and Western traditions, conjoined in the Butō and reading performances – and several functions: the mythical reconsideration of humanity and motherhood as well as personal and cultural mourning. But as Foucault remarks, heterotopias are also linked to

“heterochronias”, a temporality that runs parallel to the daily world. Quignard does indeed associate Butō dance, through the musical accompaniment of the koto played by Alain Mahé, with the Latin notion of *otium*, a vacant time of retirement from daily practices.

Le temps consacré au koto est le *furyu*. Au Japon le *furyu* est exactement ce que le monde romain appelait *otium* : le temps consacré au désintéressement de l'art. Le temps consacré au vide. Le temps consacré au vide entre deux soleils. (2013, 10)

*Otium*, leisure, here takes up a new meaning, which has been forgotten, that of focusing on emptiness and nothingness, a pure enjoyment of time. And it is significant in that respect that in *La Leçon de Musique*, Pascal Quignard also describes music as “du narratif vide” (Quignard 1987, 64). This absence of discursive meaning, as it allows for better rejoicing in pure form, introduces another temporality of musical experience. Reflecting on the notion of *langweile* in German, Quignard continues to argue that music is “de l'ennui qui jouit”, an acquiescence to what he translates as “la longueur du temps” (Quignard 1987, 71). Music, and dance by association, are thus related to the Latin notion of *otium* defined as form of vacancy but also of vacation from the daily business of life which allows for an enhanced presence to oneself.

*Médéa*, as a show which brings together myth, music and dance, seems to point to a special temporality in other ways too. Wendy Doniger, in her preface to Lévi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning*, argues that “[the latter] has taught us that every myth is driven by the obsessive need to solve a paradox *that cannot be solved*” (Doniger, x). In *Médéa*, what is beyond understanding is both the personal and cultural mourning of an ambivalent mother and the destructive force that drives society. The harmony of myth, music, and dance are based on repeating, with a difference on subtle variations which form an *ars combinatoria*, a process during which meaning is renounced in favour of a reconfiguration of the question that cannot be solved. As Darian Leader would argue enlisting Lévi-Strauss, myth and music make it possible to work through an unsolvable problem: “Myth provides less an answer, in terms of meaning, than a new configuration of the initial problem” (Leader, 110). Myth, music or dance, are not about closure or an end point but rather the journey that consists in exhausting all the possible ways to revisit trauma. As such, they go against non-linear temporality. Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss has further argued that music and myth suppress time as they engage a physiological temporality that pertains to the body:

L'une et l'autre [La musique et la mythologie] sont, en effet, des machines à supprimer le temps. Au-dessous des sons et des rythmes, la musique opère sur un terrain brut, qui est le temps physiologique de l'auditeur ; temps irrémédiablement diachronique puisqu'irréversible, et dont elle transmute pourtant le segment qui fut consacré à l'écouter en une totalité synchronique et close sur elle-même. L'audition de l'œuvre musicale [...] a donc immobilisé le temps qui passe ; comme une nappe soulevée par le vent, elle l'a

rattrapé et replié. Si bien qu'en écoutant la musique et pendant que nous l'écoutons, nous accédons à une sorte d'immortalité. (Lévi-Strauss, 24)

For Lévi-Strauss, the experience of listening to music and myth are analogous, as they are at once diachronic and synchronic. One can see how this phenomenon may apply to the experience of dancing and watching it. Lévi-Strauss's conclusion, that one has access to a form of immortality through the temporality of music, may be interpreted as poetic enthusiasm. Yet, such immortality may point to an experience beyond time and space where the embodied nature of music and dance is, all the more, intense. In relation to the consoling and reparative nature of dance, the body thus offers an ultimate harbor in which the self finds both freedom and enhanced intensity of existence. Ikeda's performance, which follows Quignard's myth-retelling, indeed abdicates narrative meaning and points to the unmediated relation of the body with the world and, in that respect, he concurs with Jean-Luc Nancy:

L'enjeu de la non-signifiante (...) est plus sensible, plus impérieux aussi : tout de suite, le corps est là, c'est là que ça se passe, c'est-à-dire que l'on est, si je peux dire, simultanément dans l'ordre d'un médium, d'une médiation, et dans celui d'une... 'immédiation', pour essayer de ne pas dire 'immédiateté'. (Monnier et Nancy, 34)

Michel Foucault has emphasized how the body is at once inescapably ours, the very medium of all our experiences, and yet our own body is also what we are most alienated from; as such it is "utopic"; we never really inhabit it, as it is highjacked by social and linguistic meanings that are imposed on us. Dance – and sexuality – are the few means through which we repossess our alienated body, according to Foucault (Foucault, 30). Writing is often seen as the ultimate refuge for those who have no longer a country and are torn, like Quignard, by too many languages;<sup>2</sup> yet, here, it is the body of dance and music that provides such harbor in *Médée*.

In conclusion, I would like to return to my initial question. How is dance construed as a consoling practice in *L'Origine de la danse*? If *Médée* forms a piece of mourning, both personal and cultural, Quignard's recrimination against a mother who, in his experience, has not managed to love him or love him enough, is intensified for being obliquely expressed. The mourning of a mother who was never sufficiently present is folded into the rewriting of the Medea myth and a meditation on dance and humanity's capacity for self-destruction. Mourning, and melancholy mourning, in particular, has been an obsessive theme in both Quignard's fiction and essays. Yet, a shift seems to have operated in *Médée* and *L'Origine de la danse*, where mourning as a process of sense-making and giving meaning to loss seems to come to fruition.

Le Havre, Hiroshima, Fukushima, Tokyo, ces ports détruits se rejoignaient. Sur scène, dans l'obscurité, face à Carlotta Ikeda, ma vie avait un sens. Carlotta tournait sur elle-même et ma vie tournait sur elle-même dans l'obscurité à laquelle cette rotation ajoutait son vertige. (2013, 144)

The *pas de deux* performed by Ikeda and Quignard may well be, for the author, a renewed, and this time successful, attempt to enact a silent dialogue with an ambivalent maternal figure and thus accomplish a cathartic function. More generally, dance appears to be consoling as it is an attempt to reconnect and express bodily affect, pain and grief in particular, in ways that articulated language does not allow. In that sense, dance accomplishes what the German lied did for Roland Barthes, that is, “jouir fantasmatiquement de mon corps unifié” (Barthes, 255). Perhaps then, this illusion of a unified body, that lasts the time of a performance, allows for an overcoming of the melancholy inherent in fragmented language and a reconciliation between affect and self-expression, however temporary.

**Henriette Korthals-Altes – Maison Française d’Oxford and University of Oxford, UK**

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<sup>1</sup> “Vivre c’est s’exiler et c’est d’abord s’exiler de la mélancolie”, an interview of Julia Kristeva by Eva Bester. <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/remede-a-la-melancolie/remede-a-la-melancolie-25-novembre-2018> accessed 22 December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For Quignard’s difficult relation to bilingualism, see Blandine Mitaut in “Works Cited”.

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