Emily Dickinson and Fanny Elssler: Crossing Transatlantic and Artistic Boundaries

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Abstract

In Emily Dickinson's time, ballet was a relatively new art form in America, and it was definitely a European importation, with French and Italian stars touring the country since the end of the 18th century. This paper will examine the permeability between the two art forms – poetry and dance – and interrogate to what extent the American tour of European ballerina Fanny Elssler in the early 1840's may have influenced Emily Dickinson's representation of ballet dancing and female performance in her poems. When Elssler arrived on the East coast in 1840, she was an immediate sensation, and reviews of her performances as well as articles about her steadily appeared in many magazines and newspapers read by the Dickinson family. Although Dickinson probably never saw a ballet, she would have heard of Elssler, and I want to argue that this striking ballerina – a great artist whom Théophile Gautier called the "pagan" ballerina as opposed to her "pious" rival Taglioni – became one of the female performers, along with singer Jenny Lind or actress Fanny Kemble, who influenced Emily Dickinson's conception of performance. Replacing the image in its nineteenth-century context and comparisons frequently used in the press – both in Europe and America – to depict ballerinas, I will for example focus on the dancing spider of Fr 513 "The Spider holds a Silver Ball". Contrary to her fellow Paris Opera ballerinas Taglioni or Grisi, Elssler's dancing was more quick and powerful than ethereal: her explosive and fiery cachucha (the dance that made her famous in Jean Coralli's Le Diable Boiteux) might very well have served as a model for the liberating dance of the soul in Fr 360 "The Soul has Bandaged moments", whose action parallels the alternation of adagio and fast movements in the course of Romantic ballets.

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