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Authors	Levine, Sarah
Citation	Levine, Sarah. "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Dance: Nietzschean Transitions in Nijinsky's Ballets." 2012. Thesis, Georgia State University. https://doi.org/10.57709/3235333
DOI	https://doi.org/10.57709/3235333
Download date	2026-04-10 23:28:12
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/13758

THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF DANCE:
NIETZSCHEAN TRANSITIONS IN NIJINSKY'S BALLETS

by

SARAH LEVINE

Under the Direction of Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

ABSTRACT

This project compares the career of the early 20th century ballet dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky, to Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of the tragic arts. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and elsewhere, Nietzsche argues that artists play the central role in communal mythmaking and religious renewal; he prescribes the healing work of the "tragic artist" to save modernity from the decadence and nihilism he identifies in scientism, historicism, and Christianity. As a dancer, and especially as a choreographer for the *Ballets Russes* (1912-1913), Nijinsky staged a kinetic response to modern culture that not only displayed shared concerns with Nietzsche, but also, as I argue, allow him to be interpreted as Nietzsche's archetypal tragic artist. By juxtaposing the philologist-philosopher and dancer-choreographer as artists, I situate the emergence of Modern Art as a nascent movement still bound to Romanticism even while rebelling against it, and as an attempt to reinterpret art in a mythic (and thoroughly modern) context.

INDEX WORDS: Vaslav Nijinsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, 20th century dance, Modern Art, Tragic artist, Art and religion, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Ballets Russes*

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SARAH LEVINE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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SARAH LEVINE

Committee Chair: Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

Committee: Molly Bassett

Melanie Pavich

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2012

DEDICATION

For my mother, Catherine Levine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could have never been completed without the love, support, and sensitive criticism of my colleagues, advisors, and family. I first wish to thank my peers in the Department of Religious Studies, whose intellectual desires often fueled my own. I most appreciate the bond development by the core group who watched this project—and me—grow and blossom: Rachel Blume, Suzanne Tryon, Jay Vickers, Ashley Gnat-Vickers, Nicholas Newell, Kathryn Yates and especially, John Sullivan: our Wednesday afternoon sessions of constructive criticism, tears, and laughter were invaluable, as were the drinks we shared to wind down.

The advice and guidance provided by my committee advisors, Melanie Pavich and Molly Bassett encouraged me to be confident in this project and forced me to articulate its merit. The hours they spent sharing conversation with me, considering my ideas, reading drafts and offering suggestions are reflected in this work.

I most wish to thank the director of this thesis, Lou Ruprecht, whose faith and trust in my intellectual pursuits has, for several years now, helped not only to sustain, but also grow my reverence for history, art, and most importantly, life. I am fortunate to look to him as a mentor and as a friend, and what is produced here represents many of our shared passions.

Finally, I want to thank my family—my mother, Catherine, and brother, Joshua, for their unending and patient love they have given me through my many academic pursuits; they are my soul, and so they sing here.

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1. INTRODUCTION

*What is it about himself that the tragic artist communicates? Doesn't he show his fearlessness in the face of the fearful and questionable? — This in itself is a highly desirable state; anyone who knows it will pay it the highest honours. He communicates it, he has to communicate it, provided he is an artist, genius of communication. The courage and freedom of affect in the face of a powerful enemy, in the face of a sublime hardship, in the face of a horrible problem, — this victorious state is what the tragic artist selects, what he glorifies.*¹

The noble human being does not sin, the profound poet wants to tell us: though every law, every natural order, even the moral world may perish through his actions, his actions also produce a higher magical circle of effects which found a new world on the ruins of the old one that has been overthrown. That is what the poet wants to say to us insofar as he is at the same time a religious thinker.²

* * *

For here is the very spirit of faun life, presented not at all as the Greeks presented it, but as a Greek might surely have rejoiced to see it represented had he been born again today.³

* * *

In 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), just 28 years old and already a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel, published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. The book signaled his audacious debut into the late 19th century's intellectual conversations that were preoccupied by and centered on the relationships between myth, religion, and history. Such discussions had already produced a seismic shift in the traditional educational curriculum: as a field of study, comparative religion had been liberated from the confines of theological dis-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 24/page 204-05.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), section 9/page 68.

³ On Vaslav Nijinsky's 1912 ballet, *L'après-midi d'un faune*. Geoffrey Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913), 67.

course, freeing it to be investigated as an historical, rather than heavenly, phenomenon. The distinction of the study of religion from the study of theology was part of a proliferation of new academic disciplines that included the development of fields such as anthropology, art history, and archaeology. The theoretical underpinning of these scholastic changes was the new paradigm of historicism, which framed human experience, both past and present, as the object of an investigatory process influenced by the tenets of science. *The Birth of Tragedy* was Nietzsche's first strike at the foundations of this framework; he argued that the reduction of human life to a series of causes and effects outside the control of people ignored the most important product of human ingenuity: art.

“Through art—life,” Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁴ He imagined a Tragic Age in Greece, predating classical Athens, when art and religion were intimately bound—even inseparable—in tragic drama. The beauty that emanated from ancient Greece, he argued, was the result of the Hellenic will toward a kind of pessimism: a tragic psychology of the Greeks—the instinct to embrace the most terrible elements of life *in order to* beautify them through the production of art—was the necessary precondition for the supremacy of the tragic art form. Art, then, sprung from encounters with pain: the ever-expanding web of Greek myth and even the Olympic pantheon of gods were developed by the Greeks as a positive, creative, and healthy response to pain.⁵ Tragedy, as he conceived of it, was inescapably religious and mythic in nature.

In its will toward optimism, systemization, and secularization, Nietzsche accused modern culture of eschewing the fundamental components of the life-affirming character of art. Rather

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 7/59.

⁵ “The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians...It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need.” Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 3/42.

than immersing themselves in the *creation* of a modern aesthetic sense, Western Europeans attempted to *reproduce* the beauty of the ancient classical arts; these “mythless men” were “eternally hungry,” he wrote, and they achieved nothing more than “the greedy seizing and snatching at food,” as they pillaged through history in a quest for a grand culture to claim as their forebear. Their ravenous appetites devoured ancient Greece and regurgitated its triumphs in their image, thus distorting the unique achievements of the Greeks in the Tragic Age and stifling, according to Nietzsche, modernity’s chance at its own creation of a renewed aesthetic sense. He called for the celebration of the modern tragic artist—an artist unafraid of the pagan religiosity of tragedy and possessing the courage to welcome pain for the sake of pure creation—to lead the declining European culture out of its malaise.

This thesis proposes that the work of the early 20th century Russian dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950), can be seen as an answer to Nietzsche’s challenge. It is my contention that Nijinsky *choreographed* a response to the modern world’s “loss of myth” in a way similar to how Nietzsche *wrote* philosophically about the same loss. The three ballets choreographed by Nijinsky during his time with the *Ballets Russes*— *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912), *Jeux* (1913), and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913)— reflected an aesthetic meditation on the dichotomy that Nietzsche first characterized in *The Birth of Tragedy* between the Apollinian and Dionysian, and each ballet presented familiar religious concepts and images (dreams, sacrificial rites, play) in new and surprising ways.

Like Nietzsche, Nijinsky reacted against modernity, —particularly against its conventional standards of beauty—a charge Nietzsche had first led 40 years before. Nijinsky incorporated in his ballets elements of suffering, gracelessness, and viciousness never before seen in the art. For the first time, the aesthetic of ballet was tied to emotions beyond pleasure or romance; Nijinsky could effortlessly produce *those* sentiments and was even declared a ‘god of the dance’ for his capacity to do so. But it was in his ability to arouse feelings of “anger,” “uncertainty,” as

well as “sympathy, sadness, elation, and even fear”⁶ that Nijinsky proved himself an artistic genius and a revolutionary in the world of ballet. He did not merely choose to recapitulate on stage the delightful aspects of life, but also depicted and transformed through dance the darkest of human instincts. Even when he might have fallen into the trap of attempting to simply replicate the arts of ancient Greece—an indictment Nietzsche levied against his immediate predecessors and contemporaries—as could have been the case in his first ballet, *L'après-midi d'un faune*, Nijinsky never set out to copy his muse. He instead created his Greek-inspired ballet by the “profoundest penetration into their very spirit.”⁷ A will to move beyond the admiration for Hellenic arts toward the retrieval of the impulse that created such art was the sort of action Nietzsche demanded of the tragic artist.

In this project, I will elaborate upon three levels of association between Nietzsche and Nijinsky, each of which I have alluded to above: the first is their perspective of art and what art can/should do. Both men were poets—Nietzsche through word, Nijinsky through dance. The category of tragedy is an explicit concern of Nietzsche’s and an illuminating lens through which we can better recognize the intense creativity in Nijinsky’s choreography. The second level of connection highlights uncanny biographical similarities: Nijinsky became an Artist of the Imperial Theatre by age 17 and premiered his first staged ballet at age 22. Nietzsche, appointed to a professorship in Basel at age 24, published *The Birth of Tragedy* three years later. Both “first-works” addressed the archaic mythic-world of Greece and both were received with lackluster, and sometimes vicious, reviews. With these inaugural compositions, Nietzsche and Nijinsky offered alternatives to the increasingly rational and mythless world surrounding them. Unfortunately, I think, they found few takers. Later, each man eventually succumbed to mental illness

⁶ Hanna Järvinen, “‘The Russian Barnum’: Russian Opinions on Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 1909-1914,” in *Dance Research* 26.1 (Summer 2008): 34.

⁷ Marie Rambert, *Quicksilver* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 62.

and oddly enough, it was the same servant who worked for Nietzsche who later recognized his former master's symptoms in Nijinsky 30 years later.⁸

The history of Nietzsche and Nijinsky's ideas and biographies serve to support a final claim: I believe that one of Nijinsky's legacies can be that of the Tragic Artist. Nijinsky remained terse most of his life and as a result, biographers and critics have determined much of his historical meaning. These range from judgments that he was a 'great dancer, bad choreographer', to demanding tyrant, and more recently to his canonization as a gay icon. I am suggesting another way of remembering him. Much of his existence was a fragile balance between contradictions: feminine and masculine, Eastern and Western, artist and medium, of the old and of the new. When monetary circumstances prevented him from continuing to dance, schizophrenia set in. Art was what saved him, "and through art—life." At their cores, Nietzsche and Nijinsky were conflicted artists, grasping onto a fading Romanticism, aware of its excesses, but more concerned with the excesses of modernity. Historicism, scientism, and rationality: these were death to the spiritual realm. And in this view, the tragic artist was a savior. In this final component of the thesis, I take Nietzsche's insistence on the engagement with myth quite seriously.

In chapter two, "Nietzsche's Tragedy," I provide a detailed analysis of Nietzsche's theory of the intersection of art, religion, and tragedy. By focusing primarily on the arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Twilight of the Idols*, an understanding of what Nietzsche terms the "metaphysics of art" will be illuminated, as will the illness he diagnoses in modernity and the standards he requires of a tragic artist to usher in a movement toward modern salvation. Chapter three, "Nijinsky, Artist of the Future," compares the life, career, and aesthetic ideals of Nijinsky to Nietzsche. The comparison reveals that both men were staging creative interventions in what they perceived as stagnation and degeneracy in their respective mediums. For this, they were

⁸ See pp. 115 of this thesis.

ostracized by their peers and by the public at large, but today they are understood as artists living before their time and are named as primary instigators in the burgeoning of Modern Art.

2. NIETZSCHE'S TRAGEDY

2.1 *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music and the artistic sacrament*

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche famously proclaims, "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*."⁹ I take this claim seriously, and will use this simple proclamation as a basis through which to understand the type of argument he crafts in *The Birth of Tragedy* as well as in some of his later works. As we will see, he is indeed making an ironically metaphysical claim that praises illusion and creativity: for Nietzsche, existence is not justified by 'truth' content and certainly not by its moral quality; on the contrary, it is vindicated as a creation alone.¹⁰ And with this, salvation cannot be a product of prayer or faith in some other-worldly fantasy, but rather only as the outcome of a life's creativity. Furthermore, creation is not an activity reserved solely for the gods, but instead is the highest expression of humanity. "We are merely images and artistic projections for the true author... we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art," Nietzsche advises.¹¹ We might well read *The Birth of Tragedy* as announcing the birth of the tragic artist, Nietzsche himself.

⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 5/page 52.

¹⁰ It seems contradictory that Nietzsche might deem his maxim—"the existence of the world is justified as only an aesthetic phenomenon,"—a metaphysical one. However, he does just that. In his later 1886 "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," which was added as a new preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche reminds his reader that "already in the preface addressed to Richard Wagner, art and *not* morality, is presented as the truly *metaphysical* activity of man... Indeed, the whole book knows only an artistic meaning and crypto-meaning behind all events." By using the term *metaphysische*, Nietzsche grabs hold of vocabulary normally reserved for philosophers and theologians and employs it as an artist. Unlike the philosopher and theologian, however, who were concerned with the duality between the 'real world' and the 'apparent world,' Nietzsche expressed his interest in *the world* as a whole. In his view, art should be humanity's exercise in participating in its mythic narrative, thus alleviating any separation between the 'god' and 'morality' theorized as part of a higher level of truth and the everyday, mundane activities of worldly embodiment. See "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5/ 22.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5/52.

Part of the difficulty for the reader of *The Birth of Tragedy* is in avoiding the temptation to de-aestheticize Nietzsche. Any well-trained student is wont to verify his references (he provides no footnotes), to check his timelines, to cross-reference his history. But Nietzsche's underlying argument is *to get away from history*; modern historicism is a suicidal endeavor that kills the spirit, myth, and creativity. In section 10 he cautions,

it is the fate of every myth to creep by degrees into the narrow limits of some alleged historical reality, and to be treated by some later generations as a unique fact with historical claims...for this is the way in which religions are wont to die out: under the stern, intelligent eyes of orthodox dogmatism, the mythical premises of a religion are systematized as a sum total of historical events; one begins apprehensively to defend the credibility of the myths, while at the same time one opposes any continuation of their natural vitality and growth; the feeling for myth perishes, and its place is taken by the claim of religion to historical foundations.¹²

This passage is indicative of Nietzsche's position in popular scholarly conversation during the 19th century. His love for myth, concern for religion, and his disposition against the discipline of history are responses to—usually against—the contemporary vogue of historicism in the humanities.¹³ Nietzsche argues that historical thinking undercuts traditional religion by forcing stasis through the subversion of dynamic myth. For Nietzsche, David Strauss's work perhaps served as the paradigmatic example of this kind of religio-historicism; most notably known for his *Life of Jesus* (*Das Leben Jesu*, 1835), Strauss was among the first theologians and historians to separate the historical life of Jesus from the religious/mythical meaning of Jesus as presented in the New Testament. In this way myth, which was supposed to convey an overarching narrative, became subject to—and of—the discipline of historical science.

¹² Ibid., 10/75.

¹³ For insight into the ways that 19th century philosophers and biblical scholars utilized the early Christian narrative to achieve their 19th century aims, see Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Nietzsche intended for *The Birth of Tragedy* to be a reprisal of a mythic presence lost to modern historicism. He attempted to achieve that goal by constructing his own myth of the origin of the tragic drama and the account is a stunning example of a philosophical position narrated as mythology. Thus, the innumerable academic violations cited by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff in his famous critique of *The Birth of Tragedy* are ill-placed. His charge that Nietzsche's "imagined genius and impudence are directly proportionate to ignorance and lack of the love for truth," is an empty attack; had he understood Nietzsche at all, he would have understood him as an artist who was questioning the authority of historical truth.¹⁴

Artistry, though, was an attribute that Nietzsche considered neither easy to cultivate nor without rules. Note this important qualifier:

Only insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of the world, does he know anything of the eternal essence of art; for in this state he is, in a marvelous manner, like the weird image of the fairy tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator.¹⁵

Art, either through the act of creation or through the spectator's experience, should force us to relapse into the collective unity of life: through art alone, according to Nietzsche, do we reach communion. In their study of Nietzsche's intellectual development, Silk and Stern note that in the classicist's early notebooks (1869-1870), aesthetics "is not confined to art, not even to 'art as a whole'. It runs into history, psychology and moral philosophy, into life itself."¹⁶ In fact, they argue

¹⁴ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, "Future Philology! a reply to Friedrich Nietzsche's *birth of tragedy*," trans. and ed. B. Babich, G. Postl, and H. Schmid, *New Nietzsche Studies* 4, nos. 1&2 (2000): 4. See also Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., "Wilamowitz versus Winckelmann: On the Romantic Roots of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*," in *New Nietzsche Studies* (forthcoming). Ruprecht demonstrates that Wilamowitz's reliance on J.J. Winckelmann as support in the critique against Nietzsche is actually a product of Wilamowitz's immature understanding of Winckelmann's work—and Nietzsche's.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 6/52.

¹⁶ M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 35.

that Nietzsche's first major work was an attempt at a "total philosophy of life"¹⁷ that would integrate his three major preoccupations of music, philosophy, and the Greeks—and to those we might also add religion and myth—into a coherent whole. In an 1870 letter to a university friend, Paul Deussen, Nietzsche remarked, "I observe how my philosophical, moral and scholarly endeavors strive towards a single goal and that I may perhaps become the first philologist ever to achieve wholeness."¹⁸

With this in mind, I think it necessary to read *The Birth of Tragedy* as Nietzsche's first *artwork*, however flawed it may be. In 1886 Nietzsche changed the subtitle of the book to emphasize his interest in an anti-progressive theory of decadence ("Hellenism and Pessimism"), and added his new prologue, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism."¹⁹ In it, he is critical of the work he completed as a young man, but one assessment stands out above the rest. "What spoke here," he says of *The Birth of Tragedy*,

was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself. It should have sung, this 'new soul'—and not spoken! What I had to say then—too bad I did not dare say it as a poet."²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Letter to Deussen, Feb. 1870 in Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1975), II/1/98. Quoted in Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ The original 1872 edition titled, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* was amended in 1886 with the new title: *The Birth of Tragedy or: Hellenism and Pessimism*. The title change reflects the shift away from Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner toward a concern to diagnose the ill-health of modernity.

²⁰ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a self-criticism," in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Kaufmann), Section 3/page 20.

Becoming an artist takes practice.

Below is an introduction, detailed summary and analysis of the major components that define Nietzsche's prescription of tragic myth as it is stated in this inaugural work. Only after arriving at a better understanding of Nietzsche's commitment to the necessity of dissonance in music and myth, will we be able to trace the lines of influence from this seminal text in the biographical and artistic details of Nijinsky's life and artistic career.

2.2 Mythologizing Ancient Greece

Many of Nietzsche's personal and scholarly interests were not unique, especially for a German: he studied Theology and Philology in school and eventually abandoned the former to focus more intently on the latter. Winckelmann, Lessing, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer had each taken Greek drama, literature, and/or poetics as their object of study before Nietzsche and there was, in the German intellectual tradition of the 19th century, a sense that the philosophy of religion and the metaphysical claims of the Greeks were uniquely related to the German sense of the world and the human's being in it.²¹ Much of the German infatuation with Greece was tied to the broader Romantic movement, which by Nietzsche's time was somewhat in decline, or at least in transformation into the modern interest in primitivism. In brief, the Romantics sensed an acute inadequacy of the contemporary human's place in the world: s/he was alienated from nature and from god, and from also her/his fellow human beings. Greece, in particular, offered a promise of the past and a possible premonition of the future for the Germans in the way that it (and Rome) had for the Italians during the Renaissance. Nineteenth century Romantics revered ancient Greece as a Golden Age of dewy sunkissed youth. Alternatively, the 19th century academic appropriation of Greece was historicist, dressing the Greeks as stoic rationalists, like the academics themselves. Nietzsche's criticism of these ap-

²¹ Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, 2.

proaches was that they both presented themselves as participating in the historical discipline. Contrary to both of these approaches, Nietzsche *knew* he was creating a new myth—the tragic myth—of the Greeks as a culture shaped by a pessimism of strength, not superficial cheerfulness.

While the Romantics looked to Greece as the paradigm of the ‘whole’ man, the ether of the Age of Enlightenment would not easily dissipate. Just as the greatest literature, poetry, lyricism, and relationship to nature were traced back to the Hellenes, so too was the advent of logic, reason, the proto-state and proto-science. And so the ancient Greeks were at once pulled into two opposing (modern) directions. By injecting himself into this battle, Nietzsche was no different than many of his contemporaries but his source of admiration for the Greeks, as we will see, was neither the idyllic vision aroused through the Romantics nor the hope of reason guaranteed by the Enlightenment. In fact, he would later condemn both characterizations as a failure of the will.

Before moving on to the argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*, I think it necessary to highlight just two of the many at whom Nietzsche took implicit aim in this first book because their theories aid in the proper historical contextualization of Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory. Nietzsche’s designation of Apollo and Dionysus as the only true art-gods in Greece was his introductory salvo in an indictment against traditional definitions of art.²² Notably, he targeted Winckelmann and Lessing—both of whom had hailed ‘beauty’ as a significant trait of Greek art and as the source of the fervent hunger with which Western Europeans indulged in Romantic philhellenism. According to Lessing, ‘beauty’ was the ultimate *telos* of the Greek work of art; Nietzsche, too, believed in the beauty of Greek art, but he redefined ‘beauty’ as something dissonant and unsettling. And though Lessing was correct in recognizing a contrast between Greek forms of art, Nietzsche believed he misidentified those forms: while Lessing emphasized an essential dichot-

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

omy between classical poetic and visual arts, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche shifted his own distinction between musical and visual arts by dichotomizing the dissonant music of Dionysus against the calming, visual tendencies of Apollo.

Nietzsche's relationship to Winckelmann is more complicated. Winckelmann, in 1755, famously remarked that Greek sculpture expressed a "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur."²³ He was speaking specifically of the Laocoon, but any viewer of that sculptural group might be surprised by Winckelmann's conclusion. If *this* agonized depiction of death-in-process—a priest and his sons strangled by a sea serpent—is an image of 'quite grandeur', what could one say of a much more serene sculpture like the Apollo Belvedere? In fact, Winckelmann had not yet seen the Belvedere sculpture group when he remarked on the Laocoon, and when he finally gazed upon the Apollo Belvedere, he was moved to silence. "It is indescribable," he wrote to a friend.²⁴ With this, he determined that Greek sculpture could radiate two characteristics: The Laocoon was *beautiful* but the Apollo Belvedere was simply *sublime*. Ruprecht embeds in a note that, "[Winckelmann's] judgment, 'the sublime' symbolizes the decisive superiority of the visual over the textual arts, confronting us with a kind of aesthetic inspiration *impossible to put into words*."²⁵ Nietzsche would later revise this formulation by introducing, as previously stated, the new aesthetic variable of music. If any sort of art was capable of externalizing inspiration 'impossible to put into words,' Nietzsche argued that it was the most abstract of the arts—music. Beyond Winckelmann's preference for the visual, his theory was that the Laocoon, and all Greek (visual) sculpture, was meant to inspire heroic nobility in its viewer; even in violent death, Laocoon re-

²³ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (La Salle, IN: Open Court, 1987), 32-33.

²⁴ Letter 235 to Francke dated March 20, 1756 in Rehm, *Briefe*, I, 213. Quoted in Ruprecht, *Winckelmann and the Vatican's First Profane Museum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 40.

²⁵ Ruprecht, *Winckelmann...*, 207, n.18.

mained “quiet and grand.” And with this view, Winckelmann ascribed to Greek sculpture a moral and didactic dimension.

A decade after Winckelmann’s remarks, Lessing responded in his essay, “Laocoon” (1766), arguing that the creator of the Laocoon group was not interested in “teaching” the viewer; rather, the sculptor desired to create a work of art that represented a whole range of emotion and time bound into a singular moment. So Laocoon, his mouth only emitting what appeared to be a resigned moan rather than a death-cry, was part of the sculptor’s skill in capturing the essence of Laocoon’s death. “The master,” suggested Lessing,

was striving to attain the greatest beauty under the given conditions of bodily pain. Pain, in its disfiguring extreme, was not compatible with beauty and must therefore be softened. Screams must be reduced to sighs, not because screams would betray weakness, but because they would deform the countenance to a repulsive degree.²⁶

The artist could only depict a moment in time and chose a moment of restraint in order to retain the beauty of the sculpture. Though Lessing disagreed with Winckelmann’s assessment of the Laocoon and designation of the primacy of visual arts over and above poetry, it is important to note that neither questioned the supremacy of Greek art over all other ancient and modern cultural achievements. Nietzsche began his career with Winckelmann and Lessing’s *conclusion* as *his* premise; the beginning and end of art was not with Greece *but* Greece did represent the greatest cultural achievement to date and was the model that Nietzsche felt modernity should strive to surpass. Nietzsche was profoundly, and maybe naively, hopeful that Germans (and he initially had Wagner in mind) might resurrect the artist spirit embodied in so-called Tragic-Age Greece.

²⁶ Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, *Laocoon: an essay on the limits of painting and poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 13.

It should be noted, though, that Winckelmann and Nietzsche also had quite a bit in common: Ruprecht explains that already in the mid 18th century Winckelmann was ushering in a new classicism that “privileged the visual over the textual.”²⁷ As the father of so-called Art History, Winckelmann was interested in creating a modern pilgrimage site full of (Greek) sculpture. In this project, Greek art could be divorced from its original Greek religious context in order to create the *mouseion*, a “shrine to the muses” that uniquely served modern existential needs. Winckelmann, and in the following century, Nietzsche, viewed art as spiritual inspiration and spiritual salvation; this likely explains Winckelmann’s move to Rome and his conversion from Lutheran Protestantism to the image-laden religiosity of the Catholic Church.

Both men also built their aesthetic theories on “the assertion of a vast gulf separating the ancients from the moderns.”²⁸ Nietzsche, like Winckelmann, championed the Greeks’ natural instincts. But the two diverge in that Winckelmann *preferred* the ancients: According to Ruprecht, Winckelmann insisted that, “all the modern artist could really hope to do was imitate, however imperfectly, the vast achievement of the ancient Greeks.”²⁹ As we will see in more detail later, Nietzsche (and Nijinsky, after him) felt that the obsession with imitation was precisely the *problem* with modernity. Nietzsche lamented, “Our art reveals this universal distress: in vain does one depend **imitatively** on all the great productive periods and natures;... in vain does one place oneself in the midst of the art styles and artists of all ages, so that one may give names to them as Adam did to the beasts: one still remains eternally hungry.”³⁰ Where Winckelmann di-

²⁷ Ruprecht, *Winckelmann...*,31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 18/114. Emphasis my own.

rected his energies toward preserving Greek aesthetics because of their unmatched quality, Nietzsche focused on diagnosing modernity's malaise by way of analyzing Greek aesthetics.

While Winckelmann and Lessing each had several swirling aesthetic oppositions inspired by the arts of ancient Greece (poetical v. visual arts; painting v. sculpture; beauty v. sublime; modern v. ancient), Nietzsche developed his own dichotomy—parts of which echoed the characteristics named by Winckelmann and Lessing—between the visual arts and *music*. Maintaining Greece as his source, and religion as a central aspect to his aesthetic theory, Nietzsche designated Apollo as the god of visual arts and Dionysus as the god of music. Apollinian art was calm and noble, like Winckelmann's *Laocoon*, while Dionysian art was dissonant and primal. When the Greek artist forced these opposing tendencies into a single form—tragedy—it surpassed both the beauty and sublimity of any poetry, painting, or sculpture. The primary difference between Winckelmann's or Lessing's distinctions and Nietzsche's was the formers' outright neglect of abstract forms of art like music and absolute rejection of the notion that anything "Greek" could possibly be dissonant or *ugly*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche would announce a Greece unrecognizable to those classicists who came before him. In an 1869 letter to university friend Erwin Rohde, Nietzsche exclaimed that, "the thing above all is to get beyond Lessing's *Laocoon*."³¹ Nietzsche's first book was his attempt to consolidate his aesthetic perspective of Greece that went beyond the traditional discussion of poetry and visual art and introduced music as a foundational category of both art and religion. Tragedy, he thought, as an art beyond all previously argued dichotomies, was the ultimate representation of human creative achievement that engaged all of the arts. An all-encompassing totality was the hallmark of Nietzsche's own philosophical aims and Nijinsky's entrée into the choreographical world of ballet announced a similar reckoning in his new aesthetic of dance.

³¹ Letter to Rohde dated October 7, 1869 in Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1975), II/1/63. Quoted in Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, 34.

2.3 Apollo, Dionysus, and the achievement of the Greek affirmation of life

Later in life Nietzsche disavowed himself of much of what (and how) he wrote in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, but it was there that his initial thoughts on the relationship between tragic myth, music, religion, and art emerged. I will spend some time discussing the foundational views that Nietzsche posed in this inaugural text because they recur time again, both in Nietzsche's subsequent works as well as in Nijinsky's personal philosophy and artistic output. *The Birth of Tragedy* is also representative of the complicated paths each of Nietzsche's texts laid out for their readers: on a surface-level, the text is about the source of the much-admired "cheerfulness" that historians and philologists identified with the ancient Greek world. Nevertheless, Nietzsche allows the work to penetrate more deeply into discussions of the nature of life-affirming religion, the salvation afforded by creative enterprise, as well as symptoms of cultural health and disease.

The central thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that the Greeks' highest achievement, and the reason they are to be lauded by modernity, is because they were able to represent religious reality through their art. In other words, that surface-level cheerfulness was actually the result of something quite deep that the Greek was able to aesthetically release to the surface. Their most potent 'total work of art' (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), Nietzsche argues, is tragedy—a historically unique and necessary response to the terrifying ugliness revealed through truth—ultimately because it was a religiously life-affirming response to the harsh reality of existence. The argument is expansive and perhaps heavy-handed, but much of what Nietzsche argues in this text is the spring from which his later work arises. It is also, as I have suggested above, a fledgling attempt by the philological artist and myth-maker to experiment in a creative work that might marry his divergent interests in the Greeks, music, philosophy, religion, and modernity.

As I noted in the previous section, Nietzsche argues “in the Greek world, there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollinian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music.”³² Supremely concerned as Nietzsche was with both the ancient as well as the modern, he imagines Apollinian visual art and Dionysian aural art in Athenian tragedy and anticipates their revival in his friend and mentor Richard Wagner’s contemporary sanctuary of Bayreuth. At the time of *The Birth of Tragedy*’s publication, Wagner served as Nietzsche’s singular salvific modern figure; Bayreuth is *his* Tragic Age Athens. But more importantly for our purposes now—as well as for the posterity of Nietzsche’s argument—it is in their ancient context that the deities Apollo and Dionysus emerge as the apotheosis of the “art impulses of nature”³³; in other words, the Olympian Apollo and the invader-god Dionysus are *not* the source of the characteristics attributed to them. On the contrary, Nietzsche argues, the gods are the product of the Greeks’ creative yoking of certain natural, aesthetic qualities into a deified and anthropomorphized god. Nietzsche does not make much of this point, but it is the center around which the rest of the arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy* are nested. *The gods do not make the Greeks*; the Greeks, because they were “uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering,” created these forms of the gods.³⁴ I will say more about that creation through suffering later in the chapter. For now, however, simply resting a moment with a people fashioning their own gods will prepare us for what is to come.

Centuries of scholars of religion have argued that religion is a tendency of the powerful to develop ‘divinely-sanctioned’ control over the weak (Marx); that religion codifies a narrow image of social stability (Durkheim); or that religion is necessary in order to provide metaphysical

³² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1/33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2/38.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7/59.

orientation (Eliade). Nietzsche's admirable conclusion was radically different from each of these popularly-held explanations. For him, religion should not have been cynical theater, but rather the noblest *artistic* construction humans can endeavor to create. Religion and human creativity are not at odds in Nietzsche's conception of Greece; rather they are intimately bound and necessarily re-engage each other for the celebration of life. That ongoing engagement between (human) art and (divine) creativity allows for continuous mythic renewal.

More narrowly, Nietzsche argues that the birth of tragedy was found in the collision of Apollinian and Dionysian tendencies in a singular art form. He describes Apollo as the "god of all plastic energies," the "soothsaying god," "deity of light," "ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy," as well as one of "measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions, the calm of the sculptor god."³⁵ He likens Apollo to the image-filled dream-world in which "we delight in the immediate understanding of figures" and where "there is nothing unimportant or superfluous."³⁶ In our dreams we feel joy, terror, sadness—all the emotional trappings of waking life—but with the haunting knowledge that we *are only* dreaming. That specter is a function of Apollinian restraint whereby we can at once indulge in the real-ness of the dream while also recognizing that the dream is merely an appearance veiling a deeper reality.³⁷

Positioned at the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum is the Dionysian. In an early essay entitled "The Dionysiac World View" and predating *The Birth of Tragedy* by two years, Nietzsche describes Dionysian art as "based on play with intoxication, with the state of ecstasy.

³⁵ Ibid., 1/35-6.

³⁶ Ibid., 1/34.

³⁷ Shielding us from reality is a concept that Nietzsche borrowed from Schopenhauer, the *principium individuationis*. According to Schopenhauer, the principle of individuation explains how objectivation and differentiation occur among existence. He claims that the multitude of distinct things in our world is only recognizable when viewed from relative and subjective spaces and times. Remove those subjective positions, and there is no longer any base to claims of individuality. In this view, humanity is originally a collective, undifferentiated being and out from that, individuals release themselves into subjectivity. See Book III of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*.

There are two principal forces that bring naïve, natural man to the self-oblivion of intense intoxication: the drive of spring and narcotic drink. Their effects are symbolized in the figure of Dionys[us].³⁸ If Apollo is the god of the dream world, then Dionysus is the god of intoxication whose presence incites the feeling of “tremendous terror” that humans feel when the *principium individuationis* breaks down.³⁹ Subjectivity is lost under the influence of Dionysus and “not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man.”⁴⁰

Because Nietzsche associated Apollo with the differentiation and individuation of forms (i.e. phenomena), he considered sculpture the ultimate Apollinian art because of its obvious boundaries and representation of embodiment.⁴¹ Popular imagination, quite mistakenly Nietzsche thought, was full with visions of a wholly Apollinian Greece: the modern museum, dreamed of and executed by Winckelmann, is full of whitewashed sculpted marble that stands as a synecdoche for Greece itself. Apollo was the indigenous art-god of Greece, and Dionysus, “storming in from Asia,” introduced his tradition Dionysian music.⁴² While the Greece of Homer had known music, it was only “as the wave beat of rhythm, whose formative power was developed for representation of Apollinian states”.⁴³ The music of Dionysus, on the other hand, was

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and other writings*, ed. and trans. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Section 1/page 120.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1/36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1/33.

⁴² Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” 1/121.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2/40.

emotionally powerful and his song was the dissonant dithyramb.⁴⁴ “The singing and the expressive gestures of a mass stimulated in this manner, and in whom nature acquired a voice and a movement, was something new and unheard-of in the Homeric-Greek world,” Nietzsche argued.⁴⁵ Speaking of the ultimate contrast between Apollinian and Dionysian music, Nietzsche notes that “cautiously, [Apollinian music] holds at a distance precisely the element which defines the character of Dionysiac music (and thus of music generally), the power of musical sound to shake us to the core and the quite incomparable world of harmony.”⁴⁶ Whereas Apollo enjoined the Greeks to be measured and deliberate, Dionysus at once compelled them to embrace the depths of music, whatever those depths revealed, and also liberated them from the constraints of individualizing reality.

It was Dionysus’s invasion of Greece from the east that occasioned the birth of tragedy. Nietzsche describes that in Asia, Dionysian festivals were unrestrained celebrations “centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness;... the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty.”⁴⁷ The scene was one of transformative frivolity: “in song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community... His very gestures express enchantment. Just as the animals now talk, and the earth yields milk and honey, supernatural sounds emanate from him too: he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams.”⁴⁸ Apollinian

⁴⁴ Ibid. “In the Dionysian dithyramb man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties; something never before experienced struggles for utterance... we need a new world of symbols; the entire body is called into play, not the mere symbolism of the lips, face, and speech but the whole pantomime of dancing, forcing every member in rhythmic movement.”

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” 1/122.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2/39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1/37.

Greek nature tended to this untamed ugliness in a way never seen before. The dithyramb transformed from merely the dance and song of Bacchantes into the tragic art form that married the terrifying truth revealed through Dionysus to the beautiful veiling of Apollo. It was the entwining of formerly separate elements that produced a creative and mythic experience. Apollo and Dionysus, visual and aural, west and east, male and female: from individuated parts tragedy reconstituted the whole. Nijinsky himself was a figure pulled by oppositional forces but was nevertheless able, at least for a time, to harmonize those contradictory tendencies through his artistic craft. To be tragic meant to be total and totalizing. Nietzsche and Nijinsky both longed for that sort of wholeness.

The first six sections of *The Birth of Tragedy* serve as Nietzsche's mytho-poetic 'ancient history' of, and prelude to, tragedy. In these sections, he describes what I have recounted above—mainly the nature of Apollinian and Dionysian art as separate and opposing tendencies. It is in section 7 that Nietzsche finally provides an account of the origin of tragic drama: In that early, primitive tragedy, he tells us, there was only the Chorus, "a living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to close off itself from the world of reality and preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom."⁴⁹ In these earliest festivals, the Chorus lost themselves in the role as the satyr-attendants to their god. Nietzsche describes the situation as thus:

It is indeed an "ideal" domain, as Schiller correctly perceived, in which the Greek satyr chorus, the chorus of primitive tragedy, was wont to dwell. It is a domain raised high above the actual paths of mortals. For this chorus the Greek built up the scaffolding of a fictitious *natural state* and on it placed fictitious *natural beings*. On this foundation tragedy developed and so, of course, it could dispense from the beginning with a painstaking portrayal of reality. Yet it is no arbitrary world placed by whim between heaven and earth; rather it is a world with the same reality and credibility that Olympus with its inhabitants possessed for the believing Hellene. The satyr, as the Dionysian chorist, lives in a religiously acknowledged reality under the sanction of myth and cult.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7/58.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

This passage, in particular, represents what would continue to be Nietzsche's lifelong fascination with myth. Here he imagines the Greeks fashioning themselves as satyrs who serve as attendants to their god Dionysus. This manifested dream is not yet at the level of codified tragedy seen in Aeschylus or Sophocles but rather exists at a level of dream-like—Apollinian—reality. There is no sense that the Greeks are merely acting—and for whom? There is no audience—because Nietzsche describes this dream as supremely serious. The chorus, inside the newly constructed world, plunges itself into myth and lives the myth with greater veracity than everyday life. According to Nietzsche, it took an instinctual *courage* in order to create a *safe* space for myth to govern, and as we will later see, both he and Nijinsky felt that modernity's masked cowardice (in the forms of history, war, science, and rationalism) took the place of myth's primal role.

Evolving into the period of Attic tragedy, added to the Chorus was a theater with room for a larger viewing audience as well as a masked actor who was to portray Dionysus. In the presence of the chorus on stage, “the audience could feel its civilized surface annulled and replaced by a consoling sense of unity with nature.”⁵¹ Everyday reality (culture, social status, etc.) disappears in the audiences' trance so that in viewing the Chorus of satyrs—“the archetype of man, the embodiment of his highest and most intense emotions”-- “the Dionysian reveler sees himself as a satyr, *and in turn, he sees the god.*”⁵² It is in the Attic period that tragedy takes on a dialectic nature: the drama is constructed so that the audience at once feels a sense of deep and primal unity while, at the same time, imagining themselves as the satyr chorus witnessing their god. As the Dionysian audience member sees himself as a satyr, and as a satyr, sees Di-

⁵¹ Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, 69.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8/64.

onysus, it means “in his metamorphosis he beholds *another* vision *outside* himself, as the Apollinian complement of his own state. With this new vision the drama is complete.”⁵³ In Nijinsky’s most famous ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps* (“The Rite of Spring,” 1913), he constructs a world of ancient, pagan, Slavic tribes celebrating the arrival of spring with song, dance, ritualized sex and eroticism. In their observance of the recurrence of spring, the tribes elect a chosen virgin who will sacrifice herself as the outward expression of the return to primal unity of all existence. The Nietzschean elements of tragedy are almost explicit in this ballet, which will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

2.4 The Necessity of Suffering and the End of Suffering

Walter Kaufmann has argued that, though Nietzsche did not praise one god over the other, he certainly favored Apollo.⁵⁴ He suggests that “[Nietzsche] emphasizes the Dionysian only because he feels that the Apollinian genius of the Greeks cannot be fully understood apart from it.”⁵⁵ It is true that Nietzsche regarded an “immense gap which separates the *Dionysian Greek* from the Dionysian barbarian... for the figure of Apollo, rising full of pride, held out the Gorgon’s head to this grotesquely uncouth Dionysian power.”⁵⁶ It is also true that Nietzsche praised the Greeks—and not the ‘barbarians’—because it was the Greek reconciliation of Dionysus and Apollo that bore out the tragic drama. One can understand why Kaufmann might regard Nietzsche as having a less-than-favorable opinion of the Dionysian. However, I must disagree with Kaufmann’s assertion that “[Nietzsche] accounted for the birth of beauty in terms of

⁵³ Ibid. Emphasis my own.

⁵⁴ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 128.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2/39.

conflict and a triumph of Apollo over Dionysus.”⁵⁷ Nietzsche’s own argument in 1872 precludes a statement of such certainty and his corrections in the 1886 preface confirm that preclusion.

“We must understand Greek tragedy as the Dionysian chorus which ever anew discharges itself in an Apollinian world of images,” Nietzsche advises.⁵⁸ It may be helpful to imagine that Nietzsche understands the Dionysian as the content of the religious art and the Apollinian as partly determinative of its form. Additionally, Dionysus is the necessary origin of tragedy and his “chorus is the only ‘reality’” that allows itself to be represented by scripts, actors, and audiences.⁵⁹ Recall that even before the Attic period, Nietzsche identifies tragedy as consisting only as a chorus of satyrs singing their goat-song (the dithyramb). Nietzsche even predicted that some readers might draw conclusions similar to the ones Kaufmann drew, and so he preemptively tried to dissuade such notions: “Should our analysis have established that the Apollinian element in tragedy has by means of illusion gained a complete victory over the primordial Dionysian element of music, making music subservient to its aims, namely to make the drama as vivid as possible,” he cautions,

—it would certainly be necessary to add a very important qualification: **at the most essential points this Apollinian illusion is broken and nullified.** The drama that, with the aid of music, unfolds itself before us with such inwardly illumined distinctness in all its movements and figures, as if we saw the texture coming into being on the loom as the shuttle flies to and fro—attains as a whole an effect that transcends *all Apollinian artistic effects*. **In the total effect of tragedy, the Dionysian predominates once again. Tragedy closes with a sound that could never come from the realm of Apollinian art.** And thus the Apollinian illusion reveals itself as what it really is—the veiling during the performance of the tragedy of the real Dionysian effect; but the latter is so powerful that it ends by forcing the Apollinian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysian wisdom and even denies itself and its Apollinian visibility.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: philosopher, psychologist, antichrist*, 133.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8/65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21/130. Emphasis my own.

As Nietzsche points out here, the beginning and the end of the tragic drama is the Dionysian Chorus. In the second to last section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tacitly acknowledges that we can assess the health of a culture based on “the Dionysian capacity of [the] people”⁶¹ that is the “common source of music and tragic myth.”⁶² Nietzsche’s original title for this book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* should offers a clue as to two of his most pressing concerns at the time: tragedy and music—the domains of Dionysus.

Consider also: Nietzsche repeats a piece of Silenus’ mythic wisdom that Sophocles nested in his *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Not to be born is best of all;
When life is there, the second best
To go hence where you came,
With the best speed you may.⁶³

Nietzsche’s account of how the Greeks dealt with this supremely pessimistic view of life deserves to be quoted in full:

The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians... It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need. Perhaps we may picture the process to ourselves somewhat as follows: out of the original Titanic divine order of terror, the Olympian divine order of joy gradually evolved through the Apollinian impulse toward beauty, just as roses burst from thorny bushes. How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of *suffering*, have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them in their gods, surrounded with a higher glory?⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 24/141.

⁶² Ibid., 24/142.

⁶³ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. David Grene. 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1226ff.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 3/42.

That is, at the horrifying realization of the suffering of life, represented through the Titans' reign of unbridled fury, the Greek responded by creating the Olympic pantheon. In that creation, "we hear nothing but the accents of an exuberant, triumphant life in which all things, whether good or evil, are deified."⁶⁵ *Out of necessity* the Greeks bore Mount Olympus and deified all that can be considered good and bad. As Nietzsche himself points out, it is actually a quite satisfactory theodicy: if the gods live with terror and ecstasy, so too must humans.⁶⁶ *Suffering*, when properly channeled, can be (and should be) the source of beauty. Again, the crux of Nietzsche's admiration of the Archaic Greeks lay here: Gods did not create Greeks; Greeks created the beauty of the gods.

Nevertheless, that 'Apollinian impulse toward beauty' was necessitated upon a Dionysian truth. The god of intoxication had not yet made his debut in Greece at the time, but the truth he represented was the truth echoed in Sophocles' Chorus. For the Olympians to triumph at all—for the Olympians to exist at all—required Dionysus, lurking deep beneath the Apollinian veil of beauty. It was not until the satyr god himself invaded Greece that this call and response might be restaged as a uniform, supremely artistic drama. What Kaufmann declares a triumph, I suggest as merely an appeasement or, at most, a restraint. Noticeably absent from Nietzsche's 1886 preface, the character of Apollo was subsumed under Nietzsche's devotion to Dionysus. Ironically, it is Kaufmann who reads the omission of Apollo in the preface as Nietzsche's admission that "the Dionysian stands for the creative employment of the passions and the affirmation of life in spite of suffering—as it were, the synthesis of the Dionysian, as originally conceived,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3/41.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3/42.

with the Apollinian.”⁶⁷ The admission—that it was always *all* Dionysus—is central when one views Vaslav Nijinsky as a tragic artist. The most original elements of his ballets—those most lauded by dance historians and those most thoroughly disparaged by some of his contemporaries—were representative of what Nietzsche later characterized in his own work as wholly Dionysian. They were dissonant and even ugly, erotic, transformative, and unapologetically amoral and avant-garde. When his artistic freedom was compromised, Nijinsky faced severe obstacles in managing the onset of mental illness. In the next chapter, I will argue that dance, as the corollary to Dionysian music, was Nijinsky’s aesthetic affirmation of life in the face of a world of instability.

The greatness of the Greeks was their continual capacity to show themselves as artists in response to overwhelmingly bleak circumstances. Through art they practiced a life-affirming religion in which the harsh reality of existence was beautified and glorified as drama. The tragic art could only emerge out of “Dionysian madness,” out of an initial “craving for the ugly” that is the source for the equal “craving for beauty.”⁶⁸ Whether it was Oedipus or Prometheus on the Greek stage, each protagonist was merely the mask of Dionysus, the god who, at birth, was torn into pieces by the Titans and who felt the “state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of

⁶⁷ See Kaufmann’s n. 5 in Nietzsche, “Attempt at a self-criticism,” in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 3/20. Nietzsche, also in the preface, reflects on the purpose of his first book:

It was *against* morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life and that discovered for itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life—purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What to call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without taking some liberty—for who could claim to know the rightful name of the Antichrist?—in the name of a Greek god; I called it Dionysian (5/24).

Beyond naming Dionysus as the central character of *The Birth of Tragedy*, this passage is evidence of Nietzsche’s philosophical preoccupations by 1886. His sights set beyond aesthetic concerns to critique more broadly contemporary culture by focusing on the moral foundations of Christianity. *Beyond Good and Evil* was published that same year; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was completed a year prior; in 1888, Nietzsche wrote *The Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a self-criticism,” in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4/21.

all suffering.”⁶⁹ And whatever the drama, it was always at once both truth and illusion. “It is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.” The artist, if he is any artist at all, *must be tortured* by the recognition of the abyss; the artist, if he is any artist at all, must endeavor to transfigure the Dionysian abyss into art.

The ability to open oneself to truth and then to reproduce that truth as art is Nietzsche’s barometer for the health of a culture. Classical Greece—the Greece so lauded by the Romantics and rationalists alike—was Greece in decline. Socrates was the paradigmatic figure of this decline; indeed, Nietzsche calls him “an altogether newborn demon.”⁷⁰ “Aesthetic Socratism” posited “to be beautiful everything must be intelligible,” and thus endangered the salvation provided through the Greek mythic reality.⁷¹ Rather than allowing myths and drama to reveal a truth about existence, the Socratic mind looked to those arts for *reason*; when it could not be found, tragedy died by her own hand. The influence of Socratic virtue condemned tragedy because she refused to be reasoned. In Archaic Greece, the Hellenic spectator participated in tragedy as ritual by being transformed into a satyr attendant of Dionysus. Euripides, at the encouragement of Socrates, brought the everyday man (the “man of culture”) on stage so that the drama had to ‘make sense.’ Socrates swung his axe at what he could not understand—Dionysus—and thus introduced a new opposition that modernity still has yet to reconcile: the Dionysian and the Socratic. *The Birth of Tragedy* is Nietzsche’s attempt to retrieve Dionysus for the modern world and in so doing, myth (the world of Dionysus) and music (the art of Dionysus) becomes inseparable. I imagine that *this* is what might have struck Nijinsky so intently as he transformed into the char-

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 10/73.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12/82.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12/83-4.

acters he was to portray on stage and when he constructed the realities of his own ballets and choreographed how his dancers were to live in them.

2.5 The Death of Tragedy

“To be beautiful everything must be intelligible”: with this claim, the Socratic gospel rendered the truth of tragedy impossible. Prior to Socrates, Nietzsche alleges, tragedy had not been restrained by the fancies of philosophic maxim, but his dramatist disciple, Euripides, “measured elements of the drama—language, characters, dramaturgic structure, and choric music—and corrected them according to this principle.”⁷² Unlike Aeschylus and Sophocles before him, the tragedian Euripides had to force his dramas into rational form in order to make them beautiful according to the new Socratic standards. Apollo, the god of art, was replaced by Socrates, the man of reason. And while Dionysus and Apollo incited each other to continual aesthetic rebirth, Socrates himself could not reconcile with Dionysus because to his mind’s eye, tragedy did not even “tell the truth.”⁷³ It had to be fixed.

Nietzsche portrays his villains, Socrates and Euripides, in nearly comical fashion if one can forget that he charges them with the dismantling of holistic elements of tragedy. He imagines Euripides in the audience of an Aeschylean or Sophoclean play, dumbfounded and unable to *understand* the action on stage in front of him. Surrounded by enraptured spectators, his eyes nervously dart across the *theatron* searching for some other lost soul who might share the same desperate look of confusion. And there, a reassurance and his beacon of hope: Socrates. Socrates—esteemed because *he* could admit that all he knew was that he knew

⁷² Ibid., 12/84.

⁷³ Ibid., 1/33; 14/90.

nothing—“did not comprehend tragedy and therefore did not esteem it.”⁷⁴ What unresolved irony!

In the effort to fix tragedy into a rationally comprehensible form, Nietzsche notes that Euripides invented a practical form of drama: he began with a prologue, often delivered by a deity, which provided not only background context but also informed the audience of the plot and eventual outcome. At the end of the drama was the epilogue explaining the fate of the heroes on stage. Through the aforementioned implements, Euripides explained to his audience the action and dialogue on stage rather than allowing them to experience the transformative feeling that the drama, in Nietzsche’s opinion, should have elicited.

These amendments may seem at first superficial. In Nietzsche’s view, however, they were really indicative of a religio-aesthetic crisis in Greece. He indicates that already in Sophocles the Chorus served in a lesser capacity and that its prominence was diminished to the level of being on par with the individual actors. So by the time of our two nemeses, tragedy was already suffering and her death warrant already issued: Euripides and Socrates merely performed her execution. With Socratic reason as the sole guide of his drama, Euripides merely reproduces in drama his own conscious knowledge. Recall that, according to Nietzsche, tragedy began as only the collective—the dithyrambic chorus of satyrs—out of which Dionysus (or an actor taking on the role of Dionysus) painfully individuated himself for the sake of our Apollinian desire. But—and this is supremely important—tragedy ended as the individuated reentered the collective. Tragedy began and ended with only the Chorus, and the chorus was the crux of tragedy. A horde of intoxicated, orgiastic satyrs is anything but rational. However, the Euripidean Chorus served merely as an explanatory group of characters, so by giving his audience a play governed by cause and effect, Euripides stripped tragedy of its intended nature and purpose.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 12/81.

With “penetrating critical process” and “audacious reasonableness,” Euripides ripped the soul from tragedy, leaving a shell of the great dramas of the past.⁷⁵ On top of all of this, Nietzsche accuses Euripides of shamelessly using the stage to flatter his audience by actually bringing the spectator onto the stage; now that common people, poor people, and slaves were on stage, the audience (composed of all these types) was in a position to judge the characters and left the theater not revived by the Dionysian truth, but rather concerned with everyman habits and everyday virtues. Drama began to look eerily similar to a democratic Socratic mission: under Euripides, drama became an exercise in dialectics focused on individual characters and the judgment the audience could arrive at based on the effectiveness of the individual characters’ argument. How very far this was from tragedy and drama as originally conceived—as music! Let us not forget: according to Nietzsche, the essence of tragedy was “a manifestation and projection into images of Dionysian states, as the visible symbolizing of music, as the dream-world of a Dionysian intoxication.”⁷⁶

So Euripides, with the help of Socrates, abandoned tragedy in favor of reasoned “knowledge.” Socrates, for his part, and as we know through Plato’s dialogues, concerned himself with proving every worthy man’s position as groundless: he believed that “only by instinct” did the greatest, but misguided, Athenians conduct themselves. Where Socrates saw instinct, he also saw “the lack of insight and the power of illusion” and that lack indicated to him the “essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists.”⁷⁷ And to Socrates, tragedy was nothing if not instinct paired with illusion. With this, we are at the heart of Nietzsche’s criticism of Socratic thought: for Nietzsche, it was the Greek instinct toward illusion—even toward the apotheosis of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 12/84.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14/92.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13/87.

illusion—during the Tragic Age that made Greek culture so admirable and triumphant. It was their instinct to look into the abyss and not respond with feelings of *ressentiment* that Nietzsche applauds.⁷⁸ Thus, Socrates' attack on instinct was an attack on the nature of the noblest people. His mission was a symptom of a culture unconsciously hurling toward despair and eventual destruction. Nietzsche uses Socrates' *daimonion* as the prime example of the philosopher's monstrous defect:

This voice, whenever it comes, always dissuades. In this utterly abnormal nature, instinctive wisdom appears only in order to hinder conscious knowledge occasionally. While in all productive men it is instinct that is the creative-affirmative force, and consciousness acts critically and dissuasively, in Socrates it is instinct that becomes the critic, and consciousness that becomes the creator—truly a monstrosity per defectum!⁷⁹

To this Socratic pathology, tragedy as-it-was could not be truthful; the Euripidean hero was forced to become a self-conscious dialectician, explaining his actions with arguments and logic. The effect of tragedy was lost because a rationally-engaged spectator could no longer become transfixed by the spectacle on stage.

On the whole, Nietzsche is comfortable with using Socrates, even over Euripides, as a scapegoat for the death of tragedy and as the origin of modernity's pathetic decadence. Though Euripides' name is attached to the wallowing dramas that severed the tie to mythic truths, Nietzsche seems to think that the overly pragmatic style did not forever change the dramatic tradition. "For a single person to appear at outset of the play," he assures, "telling us who he is,

⁷⁸ "*Ressentiment*" is a French word borrowed by Nietzsche, though he gives it his own distinct meaning. The French word "*ressentiment*" bears a similar resemblance to the English "resentment." Nietzsche, however, utilizes the term to denote the mechanism by which those people in bad situations ('slaves', in a broad sense), invent a story in which they are better off (morally) than their 'masters.' The result, in some cases, is that those people come to believe those stories and, according to Rudiger Bittner, "people go mad from suffering". See the first essay, " 'Good and Evil', 'Good and Bad'" in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. For a concise analysis of Nietzsche's use of the concept, see Rudiger Bittner's chapter, "*Ressentiment*," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, edited by Richard Schacht (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 127-138.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13/88.

what precedes the action, what has happened so far, even what will happen in the course of the play, would be condemned by a modern playwright as a willful, inexcusable abandonment of the effect of suspense.”⁸⁰ Thankfully then, though Euripides’ plays became more and more popular in the ancient Greek world, his instructional style lost favor in modernity. But Nietzsche’s thoughts about Socrates and the tradition that *he* began are more complicated and ambivalent.

We will see Nietzsche’s correlation between Socratism and decadence when we discuss the *Twilight of the Idols* later in this chapter. But it is necessary to nuance Nietzsche’s often overstated disdain for Socrates. Nietzsche did in fact feel an ambivalent kinship with the ancient philosopher⁸¹ and in the next chapter, we will see that Nijinsky felt a similar sort of relationship to Nietzsche. If Socrates was guilty of corrupting the youth as was one of the charges in *The Apology*, then so was Nietzsche. Socrates’ method was one that highlighted the rationally inconsistent positions of his fellow city men. Nietzsche’s method was one that criticized the abandonment of instinctual wisdom in favor of compartmentalized knowledge and life-denying religions. In this respect, both figures were concerned with corrupted contemporary values. According to Kaufmann, Nietzsche learned from Plato’s *Apology* the proper relationship between a philosopher and the masses: Socrates functioned as the Greeks’ physician, identifying an illness and offering a diagnosis, though Nietzsche will argue, one of detriment.⁸² Socrates *was right* in recognizing that something in Athens was askew but his sure dependence on understanding prevented him from correctly diagnosing the problem. He could only see what reason dictated, and

⁸⁰ Ibid., 12/84.

⁸¹ As Kaufmann notes in his translator’s introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*,

Apollo and Dionysus reached a synthesis in tragedy; this synthesis was negated by Socrates; and now another synthesis is wanted, an artistic Socrates...The “artistic Socrates” is Nietzsche himself. He looks forward to a philosophy that admits the tragic aspect of life, as the Greek poets did, but does not sacrifice the critical intellect;... a philosophy as sharply critical as Socrates’ but able and willing to avail itself of the visions and resources of art (12).

⁸² Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: philosopher, psychologist, antichrist*, 145.

to reason's eye, Athens was awash in illusions of the old religion and without proper understanding of their own attested values. Socrates saw himself as just the *god* to reorient those susceptible Greeks who were history's paradigmatic believers. The Socratic enterprise was chronically successful and Nietzsche understood himself as the Dionysian prophet who could strip away the Socratic optimism that had simply replaced the right illusion with a wrong one.

And yet at the end of section 14 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche pulls back from his diatribe against Socrates—almost as if to ponder himself—to ask whether the antagonism he described between *Socrates* and *Dionysus* did not have to continue as an opposition between *Socratism* and *art*. For even in Socrates himself, Nietzsche admits, was an ongoing dream that told the rational Athenian to “practice music.” Socrates acquiescently submitted, penning a song to Apollo and writing music to some Aesopian fables. As the man of reason returns his musical instinct, Socrates' Apollinian dream of a Dionysian command is hopeful sign to Nietzsche that a similar tragic rousing can be brought upon the modern world.

2.6 Reason, Christianity, Modernity, and Decadence

What of all this talk of tragedy? Why, if it were to be lost, would it be something to be mourned? What made the ‘tragic’ in the so-called Tragic Age of Greece so appealing to Nietzsche?

The *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) is perhaps the best work in which to look for answers to the questions just posed as well as how those answers reflect on Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with modernity. As the title suggests, Nietzsche is anticipating the death of modernity's false prophets at his own hand, or more accurately, at his own pen. This “little work,” as Nietzsche called it, was his “great declaration of war” against a modernity—and Nietzsche was primarily concerned with Prussian Reich—that lost a spiritual grounding, invented backward values to

make up for that loss, and increasingly predicated success on military might.⁸³ These “gains” came at the cost of the cultural nobility that produces art and myth rather than weapons and ideologies. As with each of Nietzsche’s works, the subtitle to *Twilight of the Idols* is image-laden as well as instructive: *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* is Nietzsche’s call for liberation from the conventional ways of thinking and moralizing that prevent the modern person from becoming who s/he is. Christianity used a hammer to smash all previous idols; the *Christian* experience had to exclude all others. Socrates, and reason also, exacted this form of execution. Of Socrates, Aaron Ridley provides this summary: “He accorded absolute value to a hypertrophied version of one human capacity, rationality, invented a realm of the Forms that would answer to it, and then used a rod with which to beat and denigrate the rest of human nature and the world.”⁸⁴

All of this was opposed to the Archaic Greek sensibility. In the Tragic Age, though it was a brief swan-song, Greeks lived in a mythic reality that was regenerated, renewed, and rebirthed through tragic drama. Where Christianity and Reason smashed their designated idols, Nietzsche wanted to turn the hammer around in his hand to use it as a tuning fork. Why smash hollow bodies that could be lightly tapped to make countless songs? Animated by music, mythological creativity could reveal itself in artistic dramas. Tragedy represented not only the universal and unifying truth; it represented in a concentrated manner the unfragmented culture that produced it. Nietzsche’s mentor and early muse, Richard Wagner, was the first to enact the modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* but for Nietzsche, a modern total work of art was not possible, at least not yet. The Socratic tradition that overtook modern thinking depended on and stabilized notions of

⁸³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), “Preface,” 155.

⁸⁴ Aaron Ridley, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xxviii.

specialization and fragmentation; for example, in the academic world with which Nietzsche had a contentious relationship, history, philology, art, philosophy, science, and religion were separate fields of inquiry with different sets of questions. Over time, the unifying goal of tragedy had become suspicious. From this, Nietzsche diagnosed a malaise in education and eventually left institutionalized academia in 1879, though he first contemplated doing so during the time of Wagner's Bayreuth project in 1875-76. What modern education provided, in Nietzsche's view, was a distorted view of reality: by choosing an academic specialization, educators hid from themselves and from their pupils the inconsistencies and contradictions made when one engaged the "whole" rather than its constituent "parts." Modern thinking was sick and scared and so frightened of its own implications that maintenance of an optimistic point of view was more important than cultivation of the point of view of honesty.

This is the sentiment Nietzsche expresses in the preface to *Twilight of the Idols* when he says, "the world has more idols than realities"⁸⁵: education as well as morality and ethics were constructed to obstruct Dionysian truth. Nietzsche thought that all of the commonly-assumed and celebrated 'best minds' were actually the most obvious representatives of a decadent culture that binged on optimistic theories and merely gave lip service to interests about reality. Full of easy promises, Socratic thinking was, for Nietzsche, lazy thinking. Look at modern philosophy, Nietzsche insisted. Philosophers were busy, but not busy with *teaching*,

I profit from a philosopher only insofar as he can be an example...this example must be supplied by his outward life and not merely in his books—in the way, that is, in which philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than by what they said, let alone what they wrote. How completely this courageous visibility of philosophical life in Germany is lacking!⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Section 3/pages 136-7.

Here again, we have a glimpse into Nietzsche's respect for Socrates and Greek philosophy. Socrates may have been wrong, but he lived, through example, his misunderstanding. He died for his dedication to his misunderstanding. His incorrect philosophy proved potent because of his full dedication—of body and soul—to it. And here again, Nietzsche reiterates his desire toward 'wholeness,' an achievement that could not be the result of rejecting modernity, but was rather cultivated through a Greek sort of "tragic insight."⁸⁷

The feeling for the tragic, according to Nietzsche, requires turning toward the darkness of existence, welcoming it as a fact of nature, and drinking of it until intoxicated. Practically, this means welcoming all that modern rationality and/or Christianity deemed dirty or distasteful: our sexual drives or desires, inclinations toward cruelty and destruction, celebrations brought on by the renewal of spring, gluttonous mouths and stomachs, and the shadowy joy brought on by dominating others.⁸⁸ However offensive it may seem, this is how Nietzsche understands the cultivation of individual and human strength. And the Greeks had an "excess of strength."⁸⁹ For all their similarities, Nietzsche could not agree with any kind of "noble simplicity" attributed to the Greeks by Winckelmann because in the Hellenic will, Nietzsche saw "inner *explosives*" and "ruthless hostility"—a will *to power* quite unmatched in the rest of history.⁹⁰ Those Greeks said "a triumphal yes to life over and above all death and change,"⁹¹ ushering in pain, destruction, sadness, debauchery, and ugliness as permanent guests. It was easy to die, those Greeks knew; it took strength to live. But it was not simply the Greek embrace of the ugliness of life that

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 15/98.

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 8/196. The communal violence that is the flip side of the otherwise happy coming of spring is one of the main themes in Nijinsky's 1913 ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps*. See chapter three of this thesis.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, "What I Owe the Ancients," 4/227.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3/226.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4/228.

Nietzsche so admired. This Dionysian embrace was not historically unique: Dionysian festivals existed from “Rome to Babylon,” but it was only in Greece that “sexual licentiousness,” “savage instincts,” and “that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty” reached a level of beautification—of art.⁹² *Tragedy*: an all-encompassing art realized by a culture of strength through their myths that aggrandized pain, their religion that beautified the ugly, and dissonant music that abstractly externalized truth. The Greeks showed us that tragedy was religious and art *could* and *should* be religious because it ‘spiritualized the passions’, to paraphrase Nietzsche.⁹³ The tragic poet and artist—Nietzsche thought of himself as the former and I believe, had he seen Nijinsky, would have thought of the dancer as the latter—were responsible for revealing that salvation was neither a matter of self-abandonment or denial nor was it a domain of a life after death. No: salvation, happiness, and even cheerfulness were to be found in myth, darkness, and the power of creation. The salvation provided by the Tragic Artist was in his or her ability to take a hard look at ugly reality and turn it into beauty. The more suffering the artist was willing to endure, the more beauty he or she could transfigure. That was the “Greek cheerfulness” as a pessimism of strength.

Out of the death of the Tragic Age emerged two ailing infants whose exponential growth belied their chronic illness. In modernity, the traditions of Socratic reason and Christianity labeled each other as enemies, but part of Nietzsche’s philosophical project was in recovering the story of their common birth their shared defect. Both of these philosophies shared in their negations of the absurd and inexplicable aspects of life in favor of a brighter illusion called ‘truth’ or ‘reality.’ “Reason,” for its part, taught us that the senses lied by presenting what only seemed to be the truth. As Socrates’ mouthpiece, Plato taught that a separate world of the ideal forms ex-

⁹² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2/39.

⁹³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-nature,” 1/172.

isted and that all earthly creations were merely flawed copies of the perfect forms. This dualistic worldview offended Nietzsche because it guaranteed that the artist could have no hope that his/her creations were more than shoddy imitations of perfected executions that already existed; Plato's ontology prohibited the notion that anything truly *new* could ever be created. Similarly, Nietzsche deemed Christianity as "Platonism for the 'people'"⁹⁴ as it posited a better, "real" world in the form of the afterlife that was the sufferer's consolation. Christianity also harbored a suspicion of the senses that manifested through the dogmatic demonization of the body and the pleasure received through the body. As if a consolation, Christianity offered castration as a curing exorcism and glorified the eradication "of sensuality, of pride, of greed, of the thirst to dominate and exact revenge."⁹⁵ *Those*, in Nietzsche's understanding of Christianity, were the vices of the godless pagans.

Reason and Christianity both posited the existence of a perfect world that was inaccessible to mortals. At their heart, both traditions assumed that the world as it appeared was somehow false, evil, or incomplete. Consider two of Nietzsche's related rebuttals against the propositions of Reason and Christianity, the first addressing "reason":

The senses do not lie...What we *do* with the testimony of the senses, that is where the lies begin... 'Reason' makes us falsify the testimony of the senses. The senses are not lying when they show becoming, passing away, and change,...The 'apparent' world is the only world: the 'true world' is just a *lie added on to it* . . .⁹⁶

And the second, responding to Christianity:

⁹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), "Preface," 2.

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Morality as Anti-nature," 1/172.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, " 'Reason' in Philosophy," 2/167-8.

To divide the world into a ‘true’ half and a ‘illusory’ one, whether in the manner of Christianity or in the manner of Kant (an *underhanded* Christian, at the end of the day), is just a sign of decadence,—it is a symptom of a life *in decline* . . . The fact that artists have valued appearance more highly than reality is not an objection to this proposition. Because ‘appearance’ here means reality *once again*, only selected, strengthened, corrected . . . The tragic artist is *not* a pessimist—he says *yes* to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is *Dionysian* . . .⁹⁷

If there were ever a most meaningless and corruptive dichotomy, in Nietzsche’s opinion, is this: the metaphysics of rationality and Christianity (“Platonism for the masses”) declared that there were two worlds, the one of everyday life that obscured the hidden reality. Instead, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proposed a “metaphysics of art” that challenged the predominant dualistic religious and philosophical thinking of his day. At the close of the book, he repeats the dictum he offered in the beginning, that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”⁹⁸ This vision of the world squarely charged humanity with responsibility for the creation of its own meaningful life and for Nietzsche, this meaning revealed itself only through art.

It was the artist’s metaphysical method that could transfigure suffering into beauty—even unfamiliar, surprising, *dissonant* beauty. The two “inseparable”⁹⁹ components of tragedy, music and tragic myth, reflected the Dionysian capacity of a people to plunge willingly into suffering in order to emerge more beautiful. Nietzsche’s first book was an intervention and an announcement signaling what would become his lifelong suspicion of modernity’s ‘progress’ and his initial hope that Richard Wagner represented the emergence of the modern “tragic artist” who could introduce tragedy as modernity’s antidote. Nietzsche viewed himself as the philosophical equal to Wagner’s operatic genius; through *The Birth of Tragedy*, he offered himself up as the phi-

⁹⁷ Ibid., 6/170.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5/52 and 24/141.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 25/143.

osopher with tragic insight who self-consciously fashioned the tragic myth of Dionysus and Apollo as a gift for his own ailing modernity.

3. NIJINSKY, ARTIST OF THE FUTURE

Forty years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950) was among the most famous in his art. To western audiences in particular, Nijinsky was an enigma for various reasons. First, he reintroduced to western audiences the male ballet dancer's virility on the stage and offered himself in place of the female as the object of the audience's sensual gaze. Secondly, as noted by his teachers, critics, and audiences, Nijinsky's bodily proportions were peculiar so that his leap lifted him high above the stage and it seemed that in mid-air he could "hold himself... at the height of his leap."¹⁰⁰ Finally and most importantly, was the dancer's ability to transform himself completely in order to embody a role, a skill that precipitated the controversial choreography that he produced for the Russian dance troupe, *Ballets Russes*, during the 1912 and 1913 seasons.

The pivotal year, 1912 through 1913, established a legacy for Nijinsky, though the nature of that legacy was debated up until the 1970s when biographies and memoirs detailing Nijinsky's career began to emerge.¹⁰¹ These narratives describe an artist destined for greatness but ahead of his time, and lurking behind the stories is the fact of Nijinsky's eventual descent into a madness that crippled him mentally and artistically for 30 years (from 1919 until his death in 1950).¹⁰² Nevertheless the biographies, along with Nijinsky's own journals, reveal a man fully

¹⁰⁰ Bronislava Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, trans. Irina Nijinska and Jean Rawlinson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 70.

¹⁰¹ See, for example: Richard Buckle, *Nijinsky* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Vera Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, trans. John E. Bowlit (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979). Krasovskaya first published the book in Russian in 1974. Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava Nijinska, penned her memoirs in 1971, a year before her death. See Bronislava Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, trans. Irina Nijinska and Jean Rawlinson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981).

¹⁰² Joan Acocella, "Secrets of Nijinsky," *The New York Review of Books*, January 14, 1999, accessed February 12, 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/jan/14/secrets-of-nijinsky/>.

devoted, even if to a fault, to his artistry. He was called the “god of the dance,”¹⁰³ and to make sense of that title we might recall Nietzsche’s concept that in the pantheon of gods, all action—beyond the classifications of good or of evil—is deified. Nijinsky’s brilliance on stage was mirrored back as irregularity and ineptness in his immediate social world. Ballet historian and critic Cyril Beaumont exclaimed that in the 1911 production of the *Ballet Russes’ Petrouchka*, Nijinsky in the lead role “was a different being entirely: a puppet, and thing of painted wood and sawdust, yet endowed with a tiny soul. Here... Nijinsky scored a great triumph and interpreted with an artistry amounting to genius the complex nature of the maltreated doll.”¹⁰⁴ This description of Nijinsky’s ability to transform completely into his on-stage persona is noted by most of his biographers and critics. So too, though, is the disconnect between Nijinsky’s charismatic presence on stage and his reticent and awkward personality in everyday, and especially in intimate, social situations. Peter Ostwald, a biographer of Nijinsky’s mental illness, described the dancer’s typical affect: “Usually he had little to say and remained silent, or merely smiled. When Nijinsky did open his mouth, he seemed clumsy, struggling for words, almost disorganized at times, which was embarrassing for him.”¹⁰⁵ Comparing Nijinsky’s dancing virtuosity and the ability to “[thrill] the high priests of [the classical ballet canon]” to his social incompetence, Russian ballet historian Vera Krasovskaya lamented,

Nature often levies a tax in lieu of her gifts. She gave Nijinsky a magical, natural aptitude for dance, but she deprived him of naturalness of everyday life. Even as a little boy, Nijinsky was scarcely able to be himself. Later on, thousands delighted in Nijinsky the dancer, but hardly anyone knew Nijinsky the man.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 321. Buckle cites the May 15, 1909 edition of *Le Figaro*. See pp. 93 in his *Nijinsky*.

¹⁰⁴ Cyril Beaumont, *Vaslav Nijinsky* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974), 15.

¹⁰⁵ Prince Peter Lieven, *The Birth of the Ballets-Russes*, 323. Quoted in Peter Ostwald, *Vaslav Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 36.

¹⁰⁶ Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 9.

With such dichotomous descriptions juxtaposing Nijinsky's performative genius against his social paralysis, he easily became a character in myths built around the history of modern ballet, the inception of the avant-garde, the *fin de siècle* emergence of the gay identity, and the trope of the artist as the genius-madman. This chapter will briefly demonstrate how these mythologies developed and intertwined, but will focus more intently on the way that Nijinsky embodied Nietzsche's call for the modern tragic artist as the salvation for a confused and mythless world. Beginning with Nijinsky's explicit references to Nietzsche as evidenced in his journals (January-March 1919), and then tracing Nijinsky's artistic development during his time as a student and later with the *Ballet Russes* (1909-1913), the biographical and artistic parallels between Nietzsche and Nijinsky will develop, illuminating a mythic understanding of Nijinsky as a salvific and tragic artist for the modern world, a figure anticipated in Nietzsche's work, as we saw in the last chapter.

3.1 The Diary

In the spring following the end of the Great War, Nijinsky faced the onset of psychosis. He was 29 at the time, living in St. Mortise, Switzerland, with his wife and daughter, and his career as a dancer and choreographer had, for all intents and purposes, already ended, albeit prematurely. As a result, his energies shifted in an attempt to accommodate his new world (living away from Russia, away from the world of artists, and away from dancing). Writing, which was formerly a chore demanded of him while he studied at the Theatrical School in St. Petersburg as a boy, became a necessary form of catharsis. Starting in January of 1919, Nijinsky penned several journals that chronicled his daily experiences and, at times, reflected his memories of the past. They also served as a place where Nijinsky could elaborate on what can only be called his aesthetic ideals. He projects an intensifying fascination with the distinction between

“thought” and “feeling,” his message (God-sent, he believed) being that intellect murders feeling; intending that the journals be published, Nijinsky writes in the first notebook, titled “On Life,” that “I want to write this book because I want to explain what feeling is.”¹⁰⁷ This sentiment already implies a Nietzschean perspective: at a basic level, Nijinsky, like Nietzsche, was suspicious of a modernity that depended too much on rational thought and he believed himself to be living on a level of feeling while the world around him operated solely through the intellect. It is this disjunction—between *his* feeling and *the world’s* intellect—which Nijinsky blames for his so-called madness.

Nijinsky’s ongoing battle with schizophrenia¹⁰⁸ is evident in the notebooks, but there are themes that remain constant and surprisingly lucid throughout; the division mentioned above

¹⁰⁷ Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, trans. Kyril Fitzlyon, ed. Joan Acocella (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 22.

Nijinsky’s wife, Romola de Pulszky, first published the diary in 1936. Her version is heavily edited (it expunges any overt references to Nijinsky’s sexuality and bodily functions) and is reproduced out of order. Acocella regards Pulszky’s editing as a way of protecting the perception of her husband’s sanity and sexuality but also as a way of obfuscating her own marital infidelity, to which Nijinsky alludes (see xxvi-xxxi in Acocella’s introduction). Acocella’s edition of the diary is unexpurgated. It includes the text of four notebooks in which Nijinsky wrote and is grouped into three sections reflecting Nijinsky’s own divisions. The first and second sections are titled, respectively, “On Life” and “On Death.” The last section is untitled, but includes a series of “letters” that Nijinsky wrote to friends and acquaintances.

¹⁰⁸ Schizophrenia is one of the most plausible posthumous diagnoses of Nijinsky’s illness. Ostwald provides a brief “formal diagnosis of Nijinsky’s psychosis” in the appendix of his biography. He writes that Eugen Bleuler (who first characterized the symptoms of “schizophrenia” and subsequently coined the term) examined and diagnosed Nijinsky with schizophrenia in 1919. Bleuler’s definition of the illness indicates that he thought it was the result of many different disorders that result in “a specific type of alteration of thinking, feeling, and relation to the external world” signified by the “weakening of judgment, of mental activity and of creative ability, the dulling of emotional interest and the loss of energy, loosening of the inner unity of intellect, emotion and volition in themselves and among one another.

Ostwald and his collaborator, Dr. Joseph F. Stephens, using the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM III, determined that it is likely Nijinsky also suffered from bi-polar affective disorder. This is categorized as a mood disorder manifesting in “recurring, severe fluctuations in mood from mania to depression, psychomotor agitation or retardation, loss of energy, marked disturbances of sleep and appetite, delusional feelings of worthlessness and self-reproach, excessive and inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to think and concentrate, thoughts of death, death-wishes, and suicide.” Ostwald and Stephens also assign Nijinsky with a narcissistic personality and conclude “our final diagnosis according to DSM III of the tragic genius Vaslav Nijinsky must be Schizoaffective Disorder [diagnosis given to a patient exhibiting both schizo-

between thought and feeling is one. Religion and “God” is another. Finally, a third theme related to the first: a feeling of distanced kinship that Nijinsky feels with the philosopher born almost two generations before, Friedrich Nietzsche. There are four explicit references to Nietzsche in the diaries: below I list those references, in the order in which they appear in the diary, with sufficient context to provide a sense of Nijinsky’s ambivalence regarding Nietzsche, as well as a glimpse into his own mental state at the time:

1. It was not Nietzsche but Darwin who said that man is descended from the ape. I asked my wife in the morning because I felt sorry for Nietzsche. I like Nietzsche. He will not understand me because he thinks. Darwin is a learned man. My wife told me that he wrote scholarly things in French called ‘The History of Nature.’ Darwin’s nature was artificial. He did not feel nature. Nature is life and life is nature. I like nature. I know what nature is. I understand nature because I feel nature.¹⁰⁹

2. I will speak of Nietzsche and Darwin because they thought. Darwin, like Nietzsche, was descended from apes. They imitate those that they themselves have invented. They think they have discovered America. By discovering America I mean that a person says something that has already been said. Darwin was not the first to have invented the ape. The ape is descended from an ape, and that ape from God. God is descended from God, and God from God. I have a good feeling because I understand everything I write. I am a man descended from God, not from an ape. I am an ape if I do not feel. I am God if I feel... People must not think me. They must feel me and understand me through feeling.... People think that I will go mad, because they think I will lose my head. Nietzsche lost his head because he thought. I do not think and therefore will not lose my head.¹¹⁰

phrenia and a mood disorder] in a Narcissistic Personality.” See Appendix B in Ostwald, *Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness*, 348-350.

Diaghilev dismissed Nijinsky from the *Ballets Russes* in 1913 following the dancer’s surprise marriage to Romola de Pulszky, the daughter of Hungary’s most famous actress, Emilia Markus. It is apparent to me that Pulszky was, for all intents and purposes, similar to what we would today call a ‘groupie’ or at the very least, a devoted fan that followed the ballet troupe as they toured. Their elopement enraged Diaghilev, who felt betrayed by his young lover. Nijinsky was allowed to return to the company in 1916 for a North American tour, but he received almost no help from Diaghilev; in the role of impresario, Nijinsky was decidedly unsuccessful. He stopped dancing after the failure and developed his mental illness shortly thereafter. The relationship between artistry and health, posted by Nietzsche, becomes relevant here as many agree the loss of the support of the artistic community contributed to Nijinsky’s disorders.

¹⁰⁹ Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

3. I know Dr. Bernhard. He is a rich man, and I hope he will not ask me to pay him for his visit. I will show him my foot, and while waiting I will play sad things because he operates on people. God does not want operations. God does not like science. God does not like Darwin and Nietzsche's philosophies. God will abolish disease without the help of medicines. Medicines do not help.¹¹¹

4. I love Christ because he was like me. I love Tolstoy because he is like me. I want to save the whole terrestrial globe from suffocation. All scientists must abandon their books and come to me. I will help everyone, for I know many things. I am a man in God. I am not afraid of death... I am reason, and not intelligence. I am God, for I am reason. Tolstoy speaks a lot about reason. Schopenhauer also wrote about reason. I too write about reason. I am the philosophy of reason. I am the true, not invented, philosophy. Nietzsche went mad because he realized at the end of his life that everything he had written was nonsense. He became frightened of people and went mad. I will not be frightened of people if people attack me, gnashing their teeth.¹¹²

It must be said that these passages do not allow one to conclude that Nijinsky actually read much of Nietzsche, though his wife, Romola Nijinsky, and biographer Richard Buckle, claim that the dancer did have some knowledge of his work.¹¹³ However, the invocation of Nietzsche's name with those of Schopenhauer (4), Darwin (1, 2, and 3), Tolstoy and Christ (4) indicates that the dancer did have some knowledge of Nietzsche's preoccupations, and the surrounding text demonstrates that he shared at least some of them.

As we saw in chapter one, Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*) was among Nietzsche's earliest intellectual influences—one that he happened to share with Richard Wagner and that served as a foundation for the ideas expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*.¹¹⁴ Nijinsky's mention of him here cannot provide much in-

¹¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹¹² Ibid., 225.

¹¹³ Romola Nijinsky wrote in her memoir of Nijinsky that one afternoon in 1918 while living in St. Moritz, "we had to pass through Sils Maria, and I pointed out to him the house where Nietzsche lived and wrote his *Ecce Homo*. Vaslav likes this book." Ricard Buckle also claimed that Nijinsky was fond of the book; it is my guess that he based that on Romola Nijinsky's recollection. Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 400 and Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing, 1941), 408.

¹¹⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 31.

sight into his knowledge or opinion of the philosopher, but it does establish his familiarity with Nietzsche's intellectual history. Nijinsky was much better-read than many of his contemporaries assumed, so it is certainly possible that Schopenhauer was included among his reading lists.¹¹⁵ It might also be the case that he was introduced to Schopenhauer's work during his time with the *Ballets Russes* when he became enmeshed with highly educated aesthetes and art critics.

More interesting—and instructive—for our purposes are Nijinsky's references to Darwin, especially in connection with Nietzsche, considering the latter's critique of the famed naturalist. On first appraisal, Nijinsky's grievances are hard to pin down. "Darwin's nature was artificial," he claims. At the very least, this loosely constructed claim indicates that Nijinsky thought Darwin's construction of life and nature was itself *unnatural*. Nietzsche developed a similar attitude. He was among the first philosophers to engage the implications of Darwinian thought,¹¹⁶ and his critique provides evidence for his interest in origins and teleology, as well as his loyalty to the principle of tragic aestheticism. Targeting Darwin's evolutionary model, Nietzsche argues in the aphorism entitled "Anti-Darwin" from *Twilight of the Idols*:

Species do *not* grow in perfection: the weak keep gaining dominance over the strong,—there are more of them, and besides, they are *cleverer*. . . Darwin forgot about spirit... , *the weak have more spirit*. . . You have to need spirit in order to get it,—you lose it when you lose the need for it. Anyone with strength can do without spirit (—'let it go!' people in Germany think these days—'the *Reich* will still be ours'. . .).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Nijinska reports that in the summer of 1905 Vaslav began reading Turgenev, Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoyevsky. As a gift celebrating his graduation from the Imperial Theatrical School in 1907, he received an eight-volume set of Tolstoy's works. Bronislava recalls she and her brother reading the same volume concurrently and that "Vaslav was always ready to talk to me about Tolstoy." See Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 146, 312-13.

¹¹⁶ Jean Gayon, "Nietzsche and Darwin," in *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, ed. Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 155.

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 14/page 199.

The passage reflects Nietzsche's strained relationship with the masses. He is amazed by the spirit required for them to "gain dominance," but resents the herd mentality and the relinquishment of personal responsibility in favor of a paternalistic state that takes over once that dominance is achieved. His comments in the *Nachlass*, inform Charles H. Pence's perspective that Nietzsche's anti-Darwinism was not fueled only by a suspicion of evolutionary claims but also from a mistrust of the pursuit of a world without illusion.¹¹⁸ Echoing arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states "the only possibility of life: in art. Otherwise a turning away from life. The complete annihilation of illusion is the drive of the sciences: it would be followed by quietism—were it not for art."¹¹⁹ In this way, Nietzsche's criticisms of Darwin dovetail into his rejection of mechanistic scientism and rationality represented by the character of Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* (as we saw in chapter one). Pence contends—convincingly, I think—that "Darwin's theory... draws [Nietzsche's] ire particularly due to its claim to understand life itself. It claims to possess the fundamental truths of life, yet it denies art, that which is, for Nietzsche, 'the only possibility of life itself.'¹²⁰ Thus, one reason why Nijinsky invokes Nietzsche in relation to Darwin might be because Nijinsky also interprets the evolution of species as a incomplete explanation of life that ignores the intense creativity necessary for the successful lives of human beings.

To accept that singular explanation, however, would be remiss. Nijinsky's diary also reveals his suspicion of Nietzsche; indeed, in the second passage quoted above, Nijinsky likens Nietzsche to Darwin, following his own associative logic: "I will speak of Nietzsche and Darwin because they thought... Nietzsche lost his head because he thought. I do not think and there-

¹¹⁸ Charles Pence, "Nietzsche's Aesthetic Critique of Darwin," in *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 33.2 (2011): 182.

¹¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, trans. R. Geuss and A. Nehamas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22.

¹²⁰ Pence, "Nietzsche's Aesthetic Critique of Darwin," 182.

fore will not lose my head.” He concludes, as stated in the third passage, that “Nietzsche went mad because he realized at the end of his life that everything he had written was nonsense. He became frightened of people and went mad.” Clearly, his own onset of madness is on Nijinsky’s mind.¹²¹ He seems to want to convince himself that Nietzsche remained sane as long as he did not think too much.

The distinction between thinking and feeling is a crucial one to Nijinsky. While it is impossible to systematize this fundamental distinction (much as it is nearly impossible to systematize Nietzsche’s intellectual corpus) or provide a detailed account of it in the diaries, a few passages suffice to show how deeply problematic Nijinsky considered the overuse of ‘thought’ to be. In the beginning of the first journal, “On Life,” Nijinsky writes,

I will be playing in Paris very soon. I will dance alone for the benefit of poor French artists. I want artists to feel me, and therefore I will take their life. I will get drunk in order to understand them. If God wills, I will go to a cabaret with them. They need me because they have lost feelings. They need money, and I will give it to them. They will forget me, but their feeling will live. I want them to feel, and therefore I will dance.¹²²

Compare this hopeful mission, guided by feeling, to the alarm roused in him by his wife, Romola: “My wife does not sway when she feels a dance. She is a healthy woman, only she thinks a lot. I am afraid for her because I think that thought may prevent her from understanding me.”¹²³ This contrast floods the diary, and Nijinsky expresses his desire to teach the world about ‘feeling’ so that people will understand him and understand that what they see as ‘madness’ is

¹²¹ Joan Acocella, editor of Nijinsky’s unexpurgated diary, suggests that many of the figures named by Nijinsky represent the dancer’s acute awareness of his mental illness. See her note in Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, 54.

¹²² Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, 9-10.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

in fact a result of a judgment clouded too much by thought. Kyril FitzLyon, translator of the Russian diary into English explains:

To [Nijinsky] “feeling” means intuitive perception, the ability to understand something—a person, a situation—by merging with it emotionally. Such understanding, which in his mind can be akin to a spiritual experience, is seldom achieved deliberately, and never by means of what he calls ‘thinking’ or ‘intellect.’ Nijinsky regards thinking with some contempt, as the antithesis of feeling: a purely cerebral and almost artificial activity, which never penetrates beneath the surface of things. People who merely think are incapable of knowing the truth or conducting intimate relationships.¹²⁴

On immediate appraisal, Nijinsky’s conception of intellect and feeling sounds quite similar to Nietzsche’s denunciation of Christianity and rationality and his embrace of the Dionysian. However, the two dichotomies do not line up perfectly. Nijinsky never repudiated Christianity—in fact, he speaks devotedly of Christ throughout his diary—and embraced (and documented) the struggle of living the Christian life as interpreted by Tolstoy. Along with this, FitzLyon notes, Nijinsky believed that “reason” was “a faculty emanating from God.”¹²⁵ To me, however, it remains unclear whether the difference in Nietzsche’s and Nijinsky’s appraisal of “reason” rests merely in semantics. Conscious of others’ perception of his mental illness, Nijinsky attempts to clarify his own mental health by writing, “I know many people will say that a man without an intellect is mad or a fool. A madman is not a reasonable being. A madman is a man who does not understand his own actions. I understand my own bad and good actions. I am man with reason.”¹²⁶ Here it sounds as if Nijinsky’s idea of reason is one simply bound up with his internal logic, one that he of course understands. It also sounds as if he has become obsessed with proving his sanity following years of praise *and* criticism drawn from his theatrical command and ability to

¹²⁴ Kyril FitzLyon, “Translator’s Preface,” in *ibid.*, xlix.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

detach enough from his self and shed his identity in order to become another character. Rather than trying to prove that his transfigurations were not simply the result of a person empty of intellect, in his diary, Nijinsky defends himself by denouncing intellect altogether. If anything, his concept of *intellect* (and not reason) is more reminiscent of Nietzsche's definition of rationalism. In each man's vocabulary, intellect and rationalism imply the existence of something more "real" or "true" than what lays on the surface.

Despite the similarities in thought, Nijinsky obviously distrusts Nietzsche on a fundamental level: "God does not like Darwin's and Nietzsche's philosophies."¹²⁷ This condemnation is injected into a description of a meeting Nijinsky had with one of his doctors and the subsequent thoughts the dancer has about the effectiveness of medicine and operations (see passage 3 above). What is most striking to me is the clear relationship that Nijinsky posits here between disease and medicine: "God does not want operations. God does not like science. God does not like Darwin's and Nietzsche's philosophies. God will abolish disease without the help of medicines."

His mention of Darwin and Nietzsche may at first seem out of place here but I think it actually serves as the best evidence for Nijinsky's familiarity with Nietzsche's philosophical pursuits, as we will see in a moment. With that said, the passage also demonstrates one of Nijinsky's keen observations: that despite Nietzsche's dismissal of Darwinian evolutionary claims, he shared with Darwin a similar vision of the world that refused the Judeo-Christian god. *The Origin of Species* depicted the natural world as a dynamic system in which adaptation, as perceived and verified by scientific methods, would perfect species. Darwin's positivistic universe left little room for Nijinsky's insistence on the power of feeling and his certainty about the power of God.

¹²⁷ Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, 40.

The health and progress of species—humanity included—were merely products to be observed through science.

Nietzsche, though he repudiated the false optimism he saw in many scientific endeavors, did not argue that human growth and development were the products of divine intervention. Throughout his intellectual life he suggested that the philosopher's job was to diagnose societal disease so that humanity may benefit from the philosophical cure. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche longs for—and, I think, longs to be—a “philosophical physician” who “pursue[s] the problem of the total health of a people, time, race, or of humanity... to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.”¹²⁸ In a set of notes crediting Socrates as the first philosopher to recognize his medicinal role, Nietzsche wrote that he “received from the apology of Socrates the decisive thought of how a philosopher ought to behave toward man: as their physician, as a gadfly on the neck of man.”¹²⁹ Thus it is Socrates and Nietzsche and other philosophers who dispense therapeutic cures to an ailing culture. According to Nijinsky, though, it is God who “will abolish disease without the help of medicine,” and the physiological and cultural remedies cited by Darwin and Nietzsche are lies that deny God's claim on the world. Religious fervor had in large part replaced art in Nijinsky's life¹³⁰; the absence of the latter is often cited as a precursor to his mental illness.

¹²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 2/35.

¹²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Oehler. *Gesammelte Werke*. Musarionausg. ed. Munich: Musarion Verlag, 1920-29, vol. IV, 404. Quoted in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 145.

¹³⁰ Arlene Croce, *Going to the Dance* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 267.

3.2 Nijinsky's cultural and artistic milieu: East meets West

Nijinsky's diary alone cannot establish any consistent link between himself and Nietzsche; as we have just seen, Nijinsky's writings present only a fragile connection to Nietzsche that oftentimes present the philosopher in an unfavorable light. However, if we graft Nietzsche's diagnosis of the sickness of modernity as well as his conception of the tragic artist as the redemptive cure onto the life and career of Nijinsky, then the historical patterns in the two men's lives and artistic passions become readily apparent.

Vaslav Nijinsky was born in Kiev on March 12, 1889,¹³¹ during the same year that Nietzsche suffered his mental collapse in Turin. Nijinsky's parents were both dancers: his Polish mother, Eleonora, was orphaned by age seven, and shortly thereafter she was accepted into the Theatrical Ballet School in Warsaw. In 1868, at 12 years old, she was recruited with two other sisters to dance in Kiev as part of the Russian Opera Season.¹³² The eldest sister was a mere 16 and the girls only spoke Polish, but they willingly traveled from city to city, earning wages through dancing. Eleonora, in 1876 (age 19) was first engaged to a Russian military officer. Bronislava Nijinska, Nijinsky's younger sister, wrote:

A few days before the wedding the engaged couple were driving through the city when the fiancé pointed out one of Warsaw's Catholic churches with traces of bullets on its walls, saying, "There at that wall more than one Pole was shot in '63-'64." Perhaps forgetting that his bride-to-be was Polish, he went on to describe how he himself, as a young officer, had taken part in the repression of the Polish Insurrection. Eleonora did not say anything, but she realized now that she could not marry a Russian officer. The next day she sent her engagement ring back to her fiancé and left Warsaw.¹³³

¹³¹ February 27 or 28, according to the Julian calendar that was still in use in many Eastern Orthodox countries at the time.

¹³² During this time, Kiev (now the capital of Ukraine) was a part of the Russian Empire.

¹³³ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 8.

Nijinska remarked in her memoir that she and her siblings “never regretted not being born into a military family. We were proud that *we were born artists*.”¹³⁴

Nijinsky’s father, Thomas, also trained at the Ballet School in Warsaw, though he did so a few years after Eleonora. His family was very politically active; both his grandfather and father were revolutionaries who took part in Polish insurrections against Russia (in 1830 and 1863).¹³⁵ His younger brother was also a member of the Polish Revolutionary Party of the Liberation but Thomas himself was a theater man. He danced as a ballet artist for the Wielki Theatre in Warsaw before finding better employment—as well as love—in Russia. Thomas and Eleonora married in 1884 when he was 22 and she 27. He worked as a *premier danseur* and as a ballet master¹³⁶; he had three children with Eleonora: Stanislav (1886), Vaslav (1889) and Bronislava (1891, with whom Vaslav developed an especially deep familial and artistic relationship). Vaslav and Bronislava would later become artists of the Russian Imperial Theatre and would eventually be recruited by Sergei Diaghilev’s nascent *Ballets Russes*; both went on to become famous dancers and formative choreographers in their own right.

As children, the Nijinskys learned traditional Ukrainian and Polish folk songs and dances from their parents,¹³⁷ some of which Thomas Nijinsky performed famously across the music halls and stages of Russia. Nietzsche himself admired folk culture, suggesting that folk songs were a people’s first attempt at externalizing the internal Dionysian impulse.¹³⁸ Toward the end

¹³⁴ Ibid. Emphasis my own.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁶ Within a company, a *premier danseur* is the highest rank achieved by a male dancer. A ballet master in the 18th and 19th centuries was the head of a ballet company and was responsible for its artistic direction; Thomas Nijinsky would have created ballets as well as the majority of the choreography. The ballet master also controlled the technique and style of ballet performed by his company.

¹³⁷ See Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 20-29, for a brief description of the early introduction of dance into the Nijinsky home.

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 6/52-4.

of his life, it pleased Nietzsche to consider himself a Pole; he even claimed (albeit ironically) to have had Polish aristocratic ancestors himself.¹³⁹ This, of course, was not the case, but in Nietzsche's imagination the Polish represented (along with the French) a people of true culture and spirit whose values represented the antithesis of the modern Prussian machine-like state.¹⁴⁰ In a fashion of which Nietzsche might have approved, traversing the expanse of the country that linked Europe to Asia, the Nijinsky children journeyed across the expanse of the Russian empire with their performing parents. Richard Buckle imagines that "there can have been few such travelled children in the whole of that immense land which divided the West from the East and stretched from the dark Arctic wastes to the sun-drenched vineyards of the Caspian Sea." He goes on to explain the effects of such a nomadic early existence, noting that

[a]lthough their life was spent moving from one small-town cheap hotel to another, they saw, heard and smelt the landscape and the people of Russia. Such was the background of Vaslav and Bronislava, who were destined to produce, to the music of Stravinsky two of the elemental Russian epics of our time, 'Le Sacre du printemps' and 'Les Noces'."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ See, for instance, his claim in *Ecce Homo*: "I am a pure-blooded Polish nobleman without a single drop of bad blood, certainly not German blood," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), "Why I am So Wise," section 3/page 77. See also his letter to Georg Brandes dated April 10, 1888 in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Selected Letters* ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921), 339. The opening of the letter reads,

I was born on the 15th of October, 1844, on the battlefield of Lutzen. The first name I remember was that of Gustavus Adolphus. My ancestors were Poles belonging to the aristocracy (Niezky). The type seems to be well preserved, in spite of three German mothers. Abroad I am generally taken for a Pole. In the visitors' list at Nice only this winter I was entered as a Pole.

See also C.W. Maris van Sandelingenambacht, "Nietzsche Niězky Nijinsky," trans. Donald Gardner in *Cardozo Law Review* 24 (2002-2003): 1261-62, 1271.

¹⁴⁰ See the section, "What the Germans Lack," in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 186-191.

¹⁴¹ Buckle, *Nijinsky* 10.

The cultivation of creative activity in the Nijinskys was also encouraged by an artistic renaissance in Russia between the early 19th and early 20th centuries, which produced some of the country's most formative and influential writers, and artists. Buckle attributes this explosion in the Russian arts to the developing relationship between Russian artists and the literary and artistic movements in Western Europe, beginning with Romanticism in the early 19th century and culminating in the Decadent art-for-art's sake mentality at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁴² Nijinsky certainly benefited from (and embodied, as we will soon see) this mixture of east and west, particularly when he joined the French-titled Russian troupe *Ballets Russes* in 1909. Though he would receive his classical ballet training in St. Petersburg's Imperial Theatrical School, Nijinsky's fame was firmly established when he began performing in front of Parisian audiences and critics.

As tastes shifted from Romantic nostalgia to the modern search for existential comfort, Western Europeans turned to the East for answers. This shift was a peculiar one though; where Romantic energies channeled toward imagining a Golden Age of ancient Greeks and Romans, many Modernist movements (most notably, Primitivism), sought a *contemporary* Golden Age in the cultures of the East. In this sense the nostalgia for ancient Greece and Rome simply shifted to contemporary people, "replacing the temporally distant with the spatially removed"¹⁴³; the form of Romanticism had changed, though much of its content remained the same. The vastness of the Russian empire became a fascination of the more 'civilized' societies of Western

¹⁴² Ibid., 12.

¹⁴³ This phrase comes from Robert Goldwater's seminal text, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, originally published in 1938. Goldwater demonstrates that the primitivism movement, which became popular among western artists during the early 20th century (and was present in Nijinsky's 1913 ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps*), was the result of gradual shifts in the assessment of so-called "primitive" cultures during the 19th century. Scientists, ethnologists, and historians, he argues, turned their eye toward living peoples in the Near East, Oceania, Africa, and the Americas for evidence of unchanged, millenia-old, cultural practices. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1986), 51-2. For a concise review of changing attitudes of Western Europeans toward the primitive arts, see chapter one in Goldwater, "Primitive Art in Europe," pp. 3-50.

Europe. Hanna Järvinen, among others, argues that Western Europe envisioned Russia as “some sort of Oriental backwater inhabited by naturally dancing barbarians.”¹⁴⁴ This image was not discouraged by the productions of Russian ballets in Paris and London; the *Ballets Russes*, for instance, was famous for its exoticizing ballets such as *Prince Igor* (1909), *L’oiseau de feu* (*The Firebird*, 1910), and *Schéhérazade* (1910).¹⁴⁵ However, Järvinen posits that productions such as these were reflective of Russian participation in general Western European artistic trends. “The Russians,” she argues, “may have thought of themselves as Orientalists, but in the eyes of their Western admirers, they were simply Orientals.”¹⁴⁶ Part of the controversy surrounding performance of Nijinsky’s choreography in Paris resulted from his refusal to adhere to the conventional standards that Western Europe imposed on Russian artists.

Though the cultural elites in Paris expected (and rejoiced in) a primitive quality in the Russian arts, they also respected the collaborative effort necessary to produce such overwhelming performances. Truman Bullard, who compiled and translated French reviews of Nijinsky’s most famous and controversial ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, writes that the French had a “profound admiration o[f] the creative powers of the Russians as well as their ability to work together toward a common artistic goal.” Some “looked upon the current French artistic world as being stifled by excessive individualism whereas the Russian artists had demonstrated an ability to

¹⁴⁴ Järvinen, “‘The Russian Barnum’: Russian Opinions on Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 1909-1914,” 25.

¹⁴⁵ *Prince Igor*, originally conceived and composed as an opera by Alexander Borodin, was left unfinished because of the composer’s untimely death. It was completed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov shortly thereafter and premiered in St. Petersburg in 1890. The plot follows the narrative of *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, a early 13th century Slavic epic recounting the failed campaign of Prince Igor Svyatoslavich against the Polovtsians. *L’oiseau de feu* was the first of the *Ballets Russes* productions to feature an original score by Igor Stravinsky. It was based on Russian folk tales of a glowing bird that helps a prince safely escape a frightening and magical world by casting a dancing spell on its menacing creatures. *Schéhérazade* was first composed as a stand-alone symphonic suite in 1888 by Rimsky-Korsakov; it was a musical adaptation of the collection of Middle Eastern and Asian stories, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Under the choreographic direction of Mikel Fokine in 1910, it was staged as a ballet starring Nijinsky.

¹⁴⁶ Järvinen, “‘The Russian Barnum’: Russian Opinions on Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 1909-1914,” 25.

subjugate personal values and goals for the benefit of a larger whole which was born of collaboration.”¹⁴⁷ Adolphe Boschot, a music historian and critic who attended the premiere performance of *Le Sacre du Printemps* was elated by the “splendid barbarism” that the Russians brought to French stages.¹⁴⁸ Thus, Western Europe—and more precisely, the cultural capitals Paris and London—saw in Russian arts exquisite products of foreignness and collaboration that eventually became two of the hallmarks of the Avant-Garde.

Nijinsky was part of a reintroduction of Russian ballet to Western Europe that resulted from a stylistic break between Russian and continental dance that occurred in the 19th century Romantic period. Gradually during that time, the Western ballet tradition had removed the male presence from the stage. Reversing the form of gender bias present in the age of Greek tragedy, Western European ballets increasingly offered female dancers dressed *en travestie* to perform the roles of male characters. Ramsay Burt explains that

[w]hat became conflictual and, consequently, repressed was anything that might draw attention to the spectacle of the male body. What one should, therefore, be looking for to explain the mid-nineteenth century prejudice against the male dancer, is the development, during this period, of modern attitudes to the body and gender, at a time when bodies in general were a source of anxiety. It is these attitudes that brought about a situation in which it seemed ‘natural’ not to look at the male body, and, therefore, problematic and conflictual for men to enjoy looking at men dancing.¹⁴⁹

Though, Burt contends, it was true that much of the 19th century opinion about gender was expressed in a contrast between “stoic, taciturn masculinity” and “feminine sensitivity and emotionality,” Romantic poets, visual artists, and composers were granted reprieve from such strict

¹⁴⁷ Truman Bullard, "The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*." (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1971), vol. I, 41.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted and translated in *ibid.*, vol. II, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies Spectacles, Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15.

categorization because of their perceived artistic genius.¹⁵⁰ “The Romantic genius,” Burt continues, “was allowed a wide range of self-expression that would have been considered unacceptable in men not considered to be gifted.”¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, dance was not yet considered a high art. As ballet historian Lincoln Kirstein notes, prior to the formation of the *Ballets Russes*, “only a small band of amateurs believed that choreography, the craft of mapping movement, could be a ‘major’ art.”¹⁵² Burt, in his analysis, agrees:

As far as theatre dance is concerned, during the nineteenth century the dancing of ballet movements was not recognized as a reputable means of artistic self-expression, let alone a means through which male genius manifests itself. There were significant differences between the performance of the male dancer and forms of self-expression in music, literature, and the visual arts. The general low status of the performing arts, and of dance as a non-verbal form within them, contributed to the exclusion of the male dancer from the realm of genius.¹⁵³

Burt ties this anxiety about male dancing and dancing-as-art to the fear that 19th century men had of crossing the boundary of homosocial relationships into homoerotic sexuality.¹⁵⁴ As an embodied performance, dancing invited the de-facto male gaze. Directed toward the stage of an all-female *corps*, this gaze took on a sexualized element and the ballerina became an object of male desire. Having men on stage complicated the eroticism elicited by the spectacle; one solution was to simply remove the complication.

When Nijinsky arrived in 1909 for the first season of the *Ballets Russes* in Paris, he reminded audiences of the dramatic and performative tension provided by male ballet dancers. Though Modernism was in its earliest stages, the initial acceptance of Nijinsky’s presence on

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 17-8.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵² Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 40.

¹⁵³ Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 19.

¹⁵⁴ See chapter one, “The Trouble with the Male Dancer,” in Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 9-29.

stage hearkened back to well-established Romantic norms. Of the *Ballets Russes*, one English magazine commented, “We want to know the truth about these semi-Asiatic and semi-European people...Of this [Victorian] disease of super-civilisation these Russians are emphatically free...they are pagan with the pure untroubled paganism of the healthy child.”¹⁵⁵ The “primitive” characterization of Russia partly exempted its male dancers from the mores dictated by Victorian ideals, even those pertaining to dance. The *Ballets Russes* certainly capitalized on the fascination with their motherland and the east that lay beyond, producing several ballets that featured narratives, costumes, and sets that conformed to Orientalist fantasies. As we will see though, in the 1912 and 1913 seasons, Nijinsky would disrupt the expectations of Parisian and London audiences with innovative choreography that challenged the boundaries of gender performance, the representation of ethno-religious identity, and the trajectory of ballet productions in the 20th century.

3.3 Prophecies and Premonitions

Of course, Nietzsche had questioned the tenability of continental norms generations before Nijinsky’s premiere on the stages of Europe. Breaking with dominant aesthetic paradigms, he deemed music—not the visual arts or poetry—as the highest form of art and challenged, at the most basic level, the notion that beauty was a result of inner serenity and harmony. Initially inspired by Wagnerian opera, he conceived of performance as a total work of art only when it integrated the Dionysian (music) with the Apollinian (actors). An organic development stemming from his aesthetic perspective, Nietzsche lambasted the major European paradigms of existence—rationality and Christianity—labeling them decadent and nihilistic. For the philosopher, modernity exhibited all the symptoms of decadence, or declining health. Decadence itself was

¹⁵⁵ The exact provenance of this quote is unclear, though Burt attributes it either to American *Vogue* magazine or to the UK’s *Vogue* magazine. Quoted in Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 61.

not a problem, as it was a well-spring from which suffering might be transfigured through art. But rather than channeling that pain into art, many Europeans mistakenly relied on an idealistic rationality that posited a world of perfect Forms beyond human reach, and on Christianity, whose virtue rested solely on a moral view of the world.

These trends, Nietzsche maintained, could only lead to nihilism, a term that can most easily be described as the state a culture enters when its quest for ‘truth’ reveals nothing but humanity’s meaninglessness. Take, for example, Nietzsche’s criticism of Christianity’s claim to singular ‘Truth.’ Christian doctrine had been fortified and narrowed, he thought, by an insistence that it was the sole revelation of truth in history and in this truth was nothing but “hatred *against* every reality.”¹⁵⁶ This formulation was dishonest from its very inception, according to Nietzsche, because it dictated that an inner, eternal world was the only true world. On top of this, ‘truth’ was something discovered only passively as fact, rather than through a participatory process in which humans developed their creative abilities as they had done in the early Greek dramas. (The distinction between Christian and pagan could not be clearer in this instance). When the theology of Christianity collided with 19th century obsessions such as rationalism, science, and historicism, the impending disaster could not be avoided: the new fields in the Arts and Sciences exposed the constructed nature of the Christian narrative, causing Nietzsche to pronounce infamously, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”¹⁵⁷

This was precisely the problem of nihilism that Nietzsche identified in his attack on David Strauss (see chapter 1). While Strauss sought to historicize—and hence to demythologize—Christ, he still advocated for and tried to live with Christian morality. The character of Strauss was Nietzsche’s stand-in for the prevailing, inadequate European worldview. “He announces,”

¹⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 39/36.

¹⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 125/181.

Nietzsche said of Strauss, “with admirable frankness that he is no longer a Christian, but he does not wish to disturb anyone’s peace of mind” by questioning Christian morality.¹⁵⁸ So long as Christianity could use the rhetoric of rationalism (e.g. the “fact” of Christ and the “truth” of his salvation) without actually being subjected to its principles, it could survive. The destabilizing discovery of the 19th century was that in questioning the facts of the Christian *narrative* (as in Strauss’ *The Life of Jesus*), the more fundamental and engrained tenets of Christian *morality* might also be called into question.¹⁵⁹

The continued acceptance—even a heightened defense—of Christian morality following the crumbling of its foundation was a sign to Nietzsche of contemporary decadence. Colloquially, “decadence” is associated with indulgence against the standards of morality, especially in the vices of consumption. Nietzsche’s decadence, however, has ‘morality’ as one of its signifiers; it becomes a by-product from a rejection of natural human tendencies. The two philosophic trajectories of his day—rationality and Christianity—Nietzsche thought, were too suspicious of human instinct and rebelled against it: In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche tries to convey how that position was unsustainable, arguing that:

Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power: what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of

¹⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, “David Strauss, the confessor and the writer,” in *Untimely Meditations*, 7/29.

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche’s speaks to this argument especially well in section five (titled “G. Eliot”) in “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man.” He writes:

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now think that they have to hold on to Christian morality more than ever...[but w]hen you give up Christian faith, you pull the rug out from under your right to Christian morality as well...Christianity is a system, a carefully considered, *integrated* view of things. If you break of a main tenet, the belief in God, you smash the whole system along with it: you lose your grip on anything necessary.

Nietzsche, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” in *Twilight of the Idols*, 5/193-94.

decadence—they *change* the way it is expressed but do not get rid of the thing itself. Socrates was a misunderstanding; *the whole morality of improvement, including that of Christianity, was a misunderstanding* . . . The most glaring daylight, rationality at any cost, a cold, bright, cautious, conscious life without instinct, opposed to instinct, was itself just a sickness, another sickness—and in no way a return to ‘virtue’, to ‘health’, to happiness . . . To *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula for decadence.¹⁶⁰

Modernity’s main problem was that it had misdiagnosed itself. Modern life was not, at least, in the dark about being sick: the wars, philosophy, religion, and rejection of religion were all responses to perceived problems. But, Nietzsche argued, those responses were symptoms of the illness and not remedies. “A young man becomes prematurely pale and wrinkled,” he posits. “His friends say: some illness or another is to blame. I say: *the fact that* he became sick, *the fact that* he could not fight the illness off, this was already the effect of an impoverished life and hereditary exhaustion.”¹⁶¹ That is, those already ailed by a weak spirit are most susceptible to the ravages of illness. Morality, virtue, religion, art, and education—all of these were in symptomatic of the problem. Morality was anti-natural and anti-instinctual; the cultivation of virtue was impossible without acknowledging human passions and desires. Religion limped along meaninglessly severed from the power of myth. Nietzsche was tremendously concerned with this as it was the loss of “the feeling for myth” that jettisoned all the rest. “Let us imagine,” he quips, “the lawless roving of artistic imagination, unchecked by any native myth; let us think of a culture that has no fixed and sacred primordial site but is doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on all other cultures—there we have the present age.”¹⁶² To that dismal image Nietzsche adds this resignation, speaking to the paltry state of both art and education:

¹⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 11/166.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., “The Four Great Errors,” 2/177.

¹⁶² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 23/135.

now the mythless man stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig for them among the remotest antiquities. The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb? Let us ask ourselves whether the feverish and uncanny excitement of this culture is anything but the greedy seizing and snatching at food of a hungry man—and who would care to contribute anything to a culture that cannot be satisfied no matter how much it devours, and at whose contact the most vigorous and wholesome nourishment is changed into ‘history and criticism’?¹⁶³

Decadence is actually an unseen—but certainly felt—loss whose emptiness is filled with dozens of hope-filled—but ultimately ineffectual—pastimes and philosophies. Modernity, in particular, was unique in its naiveté about its own illness, and pillaged through “the Greeks” for a healing elixir. Like the aesthetic theories of Winckelmann and Lessing a century prior, Nietzsche saw in his contemporary culture a mistaken characterization of Greece as “the best” civilization and thus the one to imitate. Alternatively, Nietzsche took the triumph of Greece in the Tragic Age as a challenge and a paradigm to be surpassed through the work of the tragic artist who would re-awaken the creative instinct of humanity. For Nietzsche, the tragic artist, the one who might fashion new myths for a new world, would become modernity’s potential savior from its nihilistic and decadent habits.

His tirades against the decadence of Christianity and rationality, in addition to his disagreement with the traditional European assessment of art and the burgeoning culture of war signified him as a sort of man-out-of-place. A sense of his own premature existence is found throughout his corpus, but particularly in his later works. Take for example the preface to *The Antichrist* (1888, published 1895), in which Nietzsche begins:

This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them are even alive yet. Maybe they are the ones who will understand my *Zarathustra*. There are ears to hear some people—

¹⁶³ Ibid., 23/136.

but how could I ever think there were ears to hear me?—My day won't come until the day after tomorrow. Some people are born posthumously.¹⁶⁴

Displaying a similar sentiment in his intellectual autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (1888, published 1908) Nietzsche slyly chimed, “All my writings from this point on [*Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886] have been fish hooks: perhaps I know how to fish as well as anyone? . . . It was not my fault if nothing was *caught*. *There weren't any fish* . . .”¹⁶⁵ In both of these instances, Nietzsche both bemoans and rejoices in the inadequacy of his philosophical timing. He thinks his sermons fall on deaf ears (“there weren't any fish”)¹⁶⁶ and in an optimistic response, I think, sees himself as a philosopher of the future.¹⁶⁷

3.4 The early development of a tragic artist

In many ways Nijinsky's life realized Nietzsche's description of the tragic savior and signaled the dancer's own untimely artistry. His aesthetic sense of life and dance included some of Nietzsche's essential tragic ingredients: the reconciliation of the diametric opposition of Apollo and Dionysus; the reframing of beauty as a quality of dissonance and even ugliness; the view of art as the meta-physicality of life; and the drive not merely to copy the genius of the past, but rather to allow the spirit enshrined in the ancient arts to become his muse. Above all, Nijinsky found his salvation in acts of artistic creation, and it was by suffering through their production

¹⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Preface/page 3.

¹⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. Trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), “Beyond Good and Evil,” section 1/page 134.

¹⁶⁶ Or, as noted, they fell on no ears as *The Anti-Christ* and *Ecce Homo* were posthumous publications.

¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche subtitled *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future”. Recall from chapter 1 that Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff's polemic against *The Birth of Tragedy* was titled, “Future Philology! a reply to Friedrich Nietzsche's “*birth of tragedy*.”

that he garnered the strength of spirit. As Lincoln Kirstein writes in his beautifully written expose of Nijinsky, “a figure of supple integrity, Nijinsky represents a type of artist who magnetizes other talents in forging an endless chain, despite personal disaster and social upheaval. He symbolizes a craft that has managed to resist corrosion, that has waxed healthy while other craft values disappear and society takes on an aura of doomsday.”¹⁶⁸ A man inspired and an inspirational man, Nijinsky is at once Nietzsche’s grandiose image of the Tragic Artist as the savior of a decadent era but he also a tragic figure whose untimeliness extracts sympathy.

Beginning even in his time as a pupil of the Imperial Theatrical School, Nijinsky displayed a propensity for music and movement, but an inadequacy with academic subjects and in navigating the social sphere of his peers. The tension between his prodigious dance acumen and his maladroit forms of casual human communication heightened as he became older, contributing I think, to his reclusion from the public world and eventual mental illness.

During his early enrollment at the Imperial Theatrical School in St. Petersburg, Nijinsky stood out among his peers. His sister, Bronislava, recalled his disruptive conduct and poor grades in his academic classes, but explained that both were “really his continuing attempt to find ways to use his excess energy,” and that he excelled to the top of his classes in Dancing, Art, Music, Drawing, and Gymnastic.¹⁶⁹ Like Nietzsche, he had a love for music and casually picked up any sort of instrument—the mandolin, accordion, clarinet, flute, balalaika—but refused the patience necessary to learn to read music. More impressively, however, Nijinsky could memorize opera overtures and play them back to family and friends by ear. He astounded his teachers, Mikel Fokine, Enrico Cecchitti, and brothers Sergei and Nicolas Legat (some of the most famous names in ballet) with his innate skill. While still nominally a student in the Lower

¹⁶⁸ Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 18.

¹⁶⁹ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 120-21.

Division due to his age, Nijinsky was promoted to dance with the advanced students in the Upper Division, a circumstance that put Nijinsky at odds with his fellow classmates in both divisions, as each set became increasingly aware of Nijinsky's favor among the instructors. Dancing a *pas de deux* and a *divertissement* in the 1905 Annual Student Performance, he outshone the graduating students for whom the performance was professionally important, as it would determine who was hired to become an Artist of the Imperial Theatre.¹⁷⁰

This 1905 performance earned what appears to be the first mention of Nijinsky in a review. Nijinska quotes the St. Petersburg newspaper, *Russ*: “[Fokine] succeeded best in the mounting of the *variations*...The student Nijinsky had a great success with his high jumps and fast turns, which he executed with ease and without any sign of acrobatics. With confidence we can predict a future of ballet laurels for this young artist.”¹⁷¹ Another critic, though unattributed, allegedly wrote:

The student Nijinsky amazed everyone: the young artist still has two years ahead of him in the School. It is all the more pleasant to see such exceptional talent. His lightness and elevation together with his remarkably fluid and beautiful movements were striking. Here is a worthy future partner for Mesdames Pavlova and Sedova... It only remains to wish that this 15 year old artist does not remain a child prodigy but rather continues to perfect himself.¹⁷²

Even these initial observers of Nijinsky were aware of his talent and singled out the student for praise, though neither review implies a premonition of the stir that the student's eventual ballets would elicit from audiences and critics. His teachers showered him with attention and praise;

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 139.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Ibid., 144.

¹⁷² Quoted in Ibid.

they rewarded his skill with favorable roles in student productions and operas that made him famous in St. Petersburg even before his graduation.¹⁷³

But the young pupil was much less successful in developing friendships among his peers. Only halfway through his first year at the Theatrical School, he told his sister that “his classmates pestered him at dance lessons, pushed him in the back, and teased him, saying things like, ‘Are you a girl, to dance so well?’”¹⁷⁴ Jealousy among his schoolmates once manifested in a cruel prank. Having tired of hearing the gushing praise of Nijinsky’s signature leap, some boys urged him to jump over a music stand, and as he began running to propel himself upward, the boys raised the stand to an impossible height. Nijinska recalls Vaslav telling her that one of the boys had pulled him back down by grabbing his leg. Nijinsky fell and lay unconscious on the floor. He did not awake until five days later in the hospital, having endured massive internal bleeding in his abdominal region. The period of recovery set him back a semester in school.¹⁷⁵ This incident narrowly encompasses the difficulty Nijinsky endured at school and Richard Buckle describes that the awkward pupil was “treated as an outcast by the other boys. He was despised for being Polish, silent, bad at expressing himself and apparently slow witted... Throughout his eight years at school he never made a friend.”¹⁷⁶

As is often the case among artists, what his early critics (in this case, his peers) labeled as Nijinsky’s deficits would later be associated with his greatest successes. Besides being provoked because of his feminizing affinity for dance, nationality, and taciturn constitution, the other boys at the Imperial Theatrical School nicknamed him ‘Japonczek’ (‘the little Japanese’), mock-

¹⁷³ Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 57.

¹⁷⁴ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 85.

¹⁷⁵ The details of this incident vary a bit among biographers. See Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 99-103; Ostwald, *Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness*, 11-3

¹⁷⁶ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 13.

ing his “Tartar or Mongolian features.”¹⁷⁷ This, of course, only added to the mystique of Nijinsky’s foreignness later on in the eyes of western European audiences, whose first images of the 1909 inaugural season of *Ballets Russes* were promotional posters and newspaper headlines featuring Nijinsky’s image.¹⁷⁸

After Nijinsky had graduated from the Imperial Theatrical School in 1907, he avoided speaking of it altogether. His sister, Bronislava, two years his junior, wrote that she tried to converse with Vaslav about her remaining time at the school only to be rebuked by her brother. “Whenever I mentioned anything concerning the School,” she remembered, “he would invariably stop me quite abruptly, saying he found it unpleasant to hear anything about the School as it reminded him of his own stay there.”¹⁷⁹ She continued, “he had felt confined and imprisoned. ‘Only when I was dancing, did I feel free . . .’”¹⁸⁰ Nijinsky was happy to move forward into his career as an Artist, a dream that he often shared with his sister.

Though leaving school was liberating, Nijinsky had yet to realize the extent of his vulnerability as a talented young man entering the world of the theatrical arts. He was accepted in the summer of 1907 as an Artist of the Imperial Theatres in the rank of *coryphé*, but it quickly became apparent, even in his first year, that ballerinas and *première danseuses* desired to be paired with Nijinsky; by November he was dancing in leading roles at the famed Maryinsky Theatre.¹⁸¹ Cast as the Blue Bird in *The Sleeping Beauty* (1907), Nijinska writes that her brother revolutionized the “unshakeable routine”:

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 51. See also John Fraser, “Nijinsky Photographs and Photographers,” in *Dance Chronicle*, 7.4 (1983): 435-74.

¹⁷⁹ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 197.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ A member of the *coryphé* was a rank above the *corps de ballet* and a rank below a soloist.

The birdlike wings were part of his dancing body; his arms did not bend at the elbow, but the movement as in the wing of a bird was generated in the shoulder; the movements of the dancing body were the movements of a bird in flight. A flittering motion of the hands at the wrist and the Blue Bird's wings trembled and fluttered; the Blue Bird was soaring and singing its bird's song, and Nijinsky's body was singing in his dancing flight. He was creating his dance-image of a Blue Bird, an image that had become a living entity, part of himself and his dancing body.¹⁸²

Nijinska's appraisal of her brother's animal-like instinct is widely echoed in critical reviews of her brother's dancing, and so too is the description of his ability to morph into his roles. Costume designer for the *Ballets Russes*, Alexandre Benois, in an otherwise tepid description of Nijinsky's choreographic competence, described the times that the dancer layered on his costume and makeup before performances as the "moments the usually apathetic Vaslav became nervous and capricious... he gradually began to change into another being, the one he saw in the mirror. He became reincarnated and actually *entered* into his new existence."¹⁸³ It is in accounts such as Nijinska's and Benois's above that one may hear Nietzsche's voice whispering in the background, speaking of the ancient art of tragedy: "To see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character [:] This process stands at the beginning of the origin of drama."¹⁸⁴ Nijinsky's compulsive drive toward dramatic and artistic perfection¹⁸⁵ caught the attention of one of the most notorious impresarios of modern ballet. Without his skill and without the keen eye of someone who knew

¹⁸² Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 207-9.

¹⁸³ Alexandre Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, translated by Mary Britnieva. (London: Putnam, 1941), 289.

¹⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8/64.

¹⁸⁵ Though his choreographic skill, which was exhibited for the first time in 1912, was questioned by biographers and commentators, Nijinsky's dedication to his craft was not. Following a performance, Nijinsky would practice *barre* exercises before going home for the night.

how to capitalize on it, Nijinsky may never have amazed the Western European audiences that burdened him both fame and infamy.

3.5 Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes

“Formed in Petersburg, [Nijinsky] matured in Paris.”¹⁸⁶ While it is true that Nijinsky achieved success in Russia—his instinctive skill was recognized before he even graduated from the Imperial Theatrical School—it was in Paris that he became an unparalleled superstar in the world of dance. His rise to fame did not come without some potentially devastating trade-offs, but Nietzsche himself could have written the Polish-born dancer’s arrival in France into Fate. Among the European nations, Nietzsche’s writings (particularly *Ecce Homo* and his first *Untimely Meditation*, “David Strauss: the confessor and the writer”) reflect a respect for the cultural triumphs (and military failures) of the Poles and the French. For their part, the French would respond to Nijinsky’s art in varying degrees ranging from ecstatic fervor to outright hostility, but the young prodigy with slanted Mongol eyes, as if “storming in from Asia,” would excite them either way. He had one of the most well-known names in Russian art circles to thank for his Parisian successes; without impresario Sergei Diaghilev, Nijinsky’s biography may have been limited to the annals of Russia.

The importance of Sergei Diaghilev’s intervention in Nijinsky’s career cannot be overstated. The men had a tumultuous and painful intimate relationship, but in the world of ballet production in which collaboration among dozens of artists—choreographers, composers, set and costume designers, dancers, advertisers, ballet masters—was necessary, Diaghilev fostered the individual development of Nijinsky’s artistry and ensured that his vision was communicated to those who worked with him. Diaghilev took a risk with Nijinsky by offering the young dancer the chance to choreograph ballets to be performed in Paris, the epicenter of burgeoning

¹⁸⁶ Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 57.

modernist art. As the impresario of the nascent *Ballets Russes*, Diaghilev was principally responsible for legitimizing the Russian arts in Western Europe.

Nijinsky knew of Diaghilev long before their meeting; Nijinska wrote in her memoir that, “naturally, even as a child, when a pupil in the Imperial Theatrical School, I had heard about Diaghilev,”¹⁸⁷ and we can assume that the statement applied to Nijinsky as well. Diaghilev had spent the years between 1899 and 1901 working for the Imperial Theatres, but even before that time he was already steeped in St. Petersburg’s artistic scene. Like Nietzsche and Nijinsky, Diaghilev had a love for music. He had attended the St. Petersburg Conservatory to study under the tutelage of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.¹⁸⁸ In 1899 after a sort of Grand Tour, Diaghilev, along with Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, co-founded the Russian art magazine *Mir Iskusstva* (The World of Art), which highlighted Russia’s contribution to the *fin de siècle* art movement. Many of *Mir Iskusstva*’s members later became involved in Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, a most expensive and risky venture.

In 1908 the impresario decided to produce a *Saison Russe* in Paris that would offer operatic performances (a safe bet), but also a bit of ballet. He had been watching the development of the Imperial Theatre artists, noting the “new unity and expressiveness” of the choreographers and dancers, concluding, “that new kinds of triumph could be enjoyed in the West which... would be impossible in Russia.”¹⁸⁹ French audiences were ambivalent about dance, instead preferring Wagnerian-proportioned operas. In his negotiations with French theatre manager and promoter, Gabriel Astruc, Diaghilev urged the fellow impresario to back a fledgling ballet troupe financially:

¹⁸⁷ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 253.

¹⁸⁸ Apparently, Diaghilev’s musical talent was limited. Later, for the *Ballets Russes*, Diaghilev would commission Rimsky-Korsakov’s most famous student, Igor Stravinsky, to compose original pieces for several ballets including *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

¹⁸⁹ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 62.

You seem so fond of dancing,' said Diaghilev, 'you ought to come to St. Petersburg to see our Imperial Ballet. You, in France, do not honour dancing any longer, and the art is incomplete as you show it today. You possess fine ballerinas but you have no ideas what a male dancer can be. Our male dancers are stars in Russia.'¹⁹⁰

With Astruc's acquiescence, Nijinsky and artists of the Imperial Theatre were recruited to dance as a part of the *Saison Russe* during their summer sabbaticals.

Prince Pavel Dmitrievitch Lvov, a rich bureaucrat with whom Nijinsky shared a brief sexual affair, arranged the official meeting between Diaghilev and Nijinsky. It was probably with Lvov that Nijinsky had his first homoerotic relationship—but not his last—as Lvov passed him on to Diaghilev. This sort of trading was not uncommon in the world of dance; Richard Buckle and Ramsay Burt both describe a culture in St. Petersburg centered on the pimping of dancers of both sexes among the wealthiest members of society. Buckle attempts to minimize the emphasis on the sexual aspect of the Nijinsky-Diaghilev relationship, assuring his readers that "affairs between men were accepted as quite natural in Petersburg society."¹⁹¹ He instead describes the creative partnership of the two men in a balanced fashion, alluding to 'coming out' of gay artists as part of a new, broader artistic birth in Europe:

Such, in November or December 1908, was the first encounter of two men whose friendship was to become the most notorious since that of Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas in the previous decade. Their union could produce no children, but it would give birth to masterpieces—and change the history of dance, of music, and of painting throughout the world.¹⁹²

The imagery of 'birth' is familiar to us already; indeed it is the central theme of Nietzsche's theory of the tragic arts. And as Buckle intimates in the excerpt above, birth is bound to the human

¹⁹⁰ Gabriel Astruc, "Le Premier Feu d'Artifice," *Revue Musicale* 1 December, 1930. Quoted in *ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹¹ See Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 56-7 and Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 60-2.

¹⁹² Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 60.

sexual instinct. Nijinsky's most famous character roles and choreographed ballets played with the significance of that basic theme and his artistic range reflected the spectrum of sexual experiences. His early roles as a dancer in the *Ballets Russes* introduced Parisian audiences to the diversity of his style and they were enamored almost at once; Nijinsky was a "revelation" to them. He demanded the spectator's attention and gaze, "creat[ing] a new image for the male dancer" that began a new era in which ballets could champion the *premier danseur* and challenge traditional European desire for the female form alone.¹⁹³ By securing the attention and fame normally reserved for ballerinas, Nijinsky took on an androgynous and hypersexualized persona that allowed him to play two roles at once. The reconciliation of this opposition of the sexes is addressed by Nietzsche in the first sentence of *The Birth of Tragedy* where he explains, ever so simply, that "the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollinian* and *Dionysian* duality—just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations...they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births."¹⁹⁴ Art and (pro)creativity, he tells us from the outset, are products of joining opposite forces.

Nijinsky's roles in first three seasons with the *Ballets Russes* exemplify his ability to fuse oppositions. Though he had traveled across Russia, the inaugural 1909 *Saison Russe* occasioned the young dancer's first trip outside of his homeland. Paris buzzed with excitement over the arrival of the oriental troupe; rehearsals were attended by the likes of Marcel Proust, Robert Brussel, and Jean Cocteau. The opening night (May 19, 1909) audience constituted a who's who of French creative circles, gathering together to witness the spectacle brought by their

¹⁹³ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 274.

¹⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1/33.

brethren from the East.¹⁹⁵ That evening, the Russians flattered their “more cultured” kin by first performing *Le Pavillion d’Armide*, a ballet designed and costumed by Alexandre Benois and set in Rococo Versailles. Nijinsky danced the role of the favorite slave of Armida, the title character (danced by Anna Pavlova). Though not billed as the star of this ballet, Nijinsky was declared by critic Geoffrey Whitworth as the climax of the action on stage, transporting the whole theater into 18th century France. Notes of Nietzsche resound in this comment, especially in Whitworth’s comment about the confusion of reality and illusion: “For Nijinsky,” Whitworth extols,

the vivid, radiant boy, is also the hierophant of mysteries, and in the glamour of his presence *Armide* comes to seem not merely a matchless display of lovely form in lovely motion, but also a type of the supreme function of a state of being most strange and utterly alien from our own. The court of Armide, one believes, is part of a definite and settled polity, with its own laws, its own customs, and its own business from day to day. It is more objective in feeling than the scene of any other of the Russian ballets—less a dream than a vision, so that when it comes to an end we feel that it is ourselves that are losing touch with reality rather than that what appeared as reality is now proving itself an illusion. The secret to this effect...lies...partly in the conviction of *aloofness* which Nijinsky brings to his rendering of the part of Armide’s slave. He never forgets for a moment where and what he is.¹⁹⁶

Whitworth’s *The Art of Nijinsky* was published in 1913, making it the first book dedicated to the dancer. His description of Nijinsky’s dancing and the court of Armida are familiar to readers of Nietzsche, who himself described the Greek tragic drama as a “fictitious *natural state*” populated by “fictitious *natural beings*”¹⁹⁷ that removed the border propped up by the rhetoric of ‘reality’ and ‘illusion.’¹⁹⁸ The allusions supplied by Whitworth to Nietzsche’s concept of tragedy

¹⁹⁵ See Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 80, for a list of some of the members of attendance, including Henri de Rothschild (André Pascal), Georges Goursat (Sem), Isadora Duncan, Octave Mirbeau, Gabriel Fauré, Maurice Ravel, and Auguste Rodin (who used Nijinsky as a model for a sculpture named for the dancer).

¹⁹⁶ Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky*, 41-2.

¹⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 7/58

¹⁹⁸ Nietzsche speaks of this turn of the mind’s eye in this way: “The satyr chorus is, first of all, a vision of the Dionysian mass of spectators, just as the world of the stage, in turn, is a vision of this satyr chorus:

become even greater when paired with the previously-quoted observation by Benois', in which he comments on Nijinsky's pre-performance ritual. "At these moments," we recall Benois writing,

the usually apathetic Vaslav, became nervous and capricious. Having put on the costume, he gradually began to change into another being, the one he saw in the mirror. He became reincarnated and actually *entered into* his new existence as an exceptionally attractive and poetical personality. The fact that Nijinsky's metamorphosis was predominantly subconscious is in my opinion the very proof of his genius.¹⁹⁹

Add Vera Krasovskaya's picture of the same habit, writing that Nijinsky "had transformed himself into that phenomenal and fantastic being. He had simply turned into poetry."²⁰⁰ Compare each of those descriptions to Nietzsche's earlier meditation on the nature of the poet: "For a genuine poet...character is for him...an obtrusively alive person before his eyes."²⁰¹ Just a few lines down, he describes that the poet can become a dramatist if s/he "feel[s] the urge to transform himself and to speak out of other bodies and souls."²⁰² The similarities between Nietzsche's prose and the descriptions of Nijinsky are striking.

The following two years (1910 and 1911) produced similar Nietzschean sentiments in reviewers' remarks. Cyril Beaumont lionized the musicality of Nijinsky's 1911 performance in *Le Carnaval*, writing: "He did not so much as dance to the music, he appeared to issue from it. His dancing was music made visible."²⁰³ For Nietzsche, whose first book argued the music was the highest form of art, Nijinsky's dance was its finest complement. Countless reviewers noted Nijinsky's animal-like interpretations of his roles; this of course conjures the image of Nietzsche's

the force of this vision is strong enough to make the eye insensitive and blind to the impression of 'reality.' (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 8/63).

¹⁹⁹ Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, 289.

²⁰⁰ Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 108.

²⁰¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8/63.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 8/64.

²⁰³ Cyril Beaumont, *Bookseller at the Ballet* (London: C.W. Beaumont, 1975), 100.

satyrs, the attendants of Dionysus, but it also speaks to Nietzsche's call for artists to embrace their instincts. In the 1910 production of *Schéhérazade*, Nijinsky again danced the part of a slave (his third time doing so with the *Ballets Russes*) like "a beautiful beast, like a tiger."²⁰⁴ His sister, Bronislava, added in conversations with Richard Buckle that her brother "was first a snake, then a panther."²⁰⁵ Benois spoke of Nijinsky's characterizations as "fiendishly agile, feminine, and yet wholly terrifying."²⁰⁶ Michel Fokine, then the *Ballets Russes* main choreographer, focused on Nijinsky's metamorphosing technique in *Schéhérazade*:

He resembled a primitive savage, not by the colour of his body make-up, but by his movements. Now he was half-human, half-feline animal, softly leaping great distances, now a stallion, with distended nostrils, full of energy, overflowing with an abundance of power, his feet impatiently pawing the ground.²⁰⁷

In a June 1910 issue of the French journal, *Comœdia*, Nijinsky's admirer Jean Cocteau wrote that Nijinsky "jumps like a young beast of prey that had been kept locked up in darkness and is now intoxicated by the light. His movements are sudden, like a tiger's; he reels from happiness; he gives out mute cries."²⁰⁸ Again and again, Nijinsky plunged himself into a fully realized world, letting his instinct guide his creations and, allowing it to reveal itself on stage, audiences intimated that his was a mind and body totally different from their own. As his diary would later indicate, Nijinsky probably did not think of his art in a similar manner. Instead, he simply "felt" his characters and let the drama penetrate into the deepest parts of his psyche to be released during the ritual of performance. Critics called Nijinsky "le dieu de la danse"—quite the title—and

²⁰⁴ Andre Levinson, *Staryi i novyi ballet* (Petograd, 1918), 48. Quoted in Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 141.

²⁰⁵ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 141.

²⁰⁶ Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, 316.

²⁰⁷ Michel Fokine, *Fokine: Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, trans. Vitale Fokine, ed. Anatole Chujoy (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1961), 155-56.

²⁰⁸ Jean Cocteau, "Vaslav Nijinsky" in *Comœdia*, Paris 1910. Quoted in Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 144.

we can only guess at how Nietzsche might have appraised the young virtuoso, especially in light of the fact that Nietzsche's prophetic hero, Zarathustra, declared "I would only believe in a god who can dance."²⁰⁹ This single statement cleverly demonstrates the relationship Nietzsche recognized between religion, art, and play: they are indispensable to each other. Using reviews as testimony, we can presume that Nijinsky (at least for a time) felt the same way.

Unfortunately for Nijinsky, his on-stage apotheosis was rendered null when he met adoring fans later. Though, as Krasovskaya notes, "it became fashionable to speak of the 'bestiality' of Nijinsky's creations" and of his "supernatural" being, the praise was indeed "oppressive" to the artist himself.²¹⁰ She continues, explaining that Nijinsky's desire to connect with others was made nearly impossible by such aggrandizing acclaim:

His fear of people did not destroy his hopes of communicating with them more closely. But the possibility of doing so became more and more remote. He was admired from afar as if he were an expensive toy. People took great pains to meet with him so as to boast their acquaintance with a celebrity.²¹¹

But Nijinsky was too plebeian. In everyday life, he did not assume the role of artist for himself nor presume that of audience for everyone else; his quiet and anxious demeanor was disappointing, even to other artists. Even as Diaghilev brought Nijinsky into his *Mir Iskusstva* inner circle—the group of men whose vision became the *Ballets Russes'* reality—Nijinsky only gawked and stood timidly as the others decided the troupe's creative direction. Nijinska frames her brother's silence as an indication of his reverence for the artists in his midst. "On several occasions," she wrote, "he expressed to me his own opinions and the comments he would have made if only he had spoken at the meeting." Nijinsky was overcome with anxiety and feelings of

²⁰⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Reading and Writing," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 41.

²¹⁰ Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 146.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

inadequacy. “In the midst of Diaghilev’s distinguished companions,” she continued, “the young Nijinsky froze and was not able to overcome his timidity. He did not behave like a famous artist. He did not realize that he had achieved fame on his own merit and that he was great in his own art.”²¹² In a backhanded compliment, pianist and famed salon hostess Misia Sert called Nijinsky an “idiot of genius.”²¹³ Prince Peter Lieven, a friend of Sert and Diaghilev, justified her appraisal, arguing that the “admiration goes to the dancer’s creative instincts and not to the conception of his brain.”²¹⁴ Thus, Nijinsky’s idiot of genius was no contradiction in terms.

It could be the case that Lieven read Nijinsky’s diary and noticed the fundamental disjunction that the ailing artist described between “feeling” and “thinking”; his comment about Sert’s “compliment” certainly suggests as much. A framing similar to Lieven’s is also found in Buckle’s biography, though Buckle gestures more overtly toward the dancer’s remarks in his 1919 diary: “it is clear that *thinking* a role out was not a successful method with Nijinsky, though of course he forced himself to try: he had to *feel* it.”²¹⁵ The statement moves beyond a reiteration though. It speaks more broadly of Nijinsky’s oddity and incommensurability as an artist. He was half-beast—without thinking consciousness—and half-human—with the ingenuity of a god—and the descriptions of his animalism were no doubt tied to his sexuality. His relationship with Diaghilev was no secret, and the French public (and beginning in the 1911 season, the London public, too)²¹⁶ was surprised by its own attraction to this male dancer’s seductive art. The sexual

²¹² Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 306.

²¹³ Prince Peter Lieven, “Vaslav Nijinsky,” in Cobbett Steinberg, *The Dance Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 89.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 143-4.

²¹⁶ After the first successful seasons in Paris, the *Ballets Russes* also performed in Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, Rome, and Monte Carlo; the most important audiences and critics, however, remained in Paris and London.

gaze once reserved for the ballerina and *prima donna* shifted to Nijinsky; Modris Eksteins wrote that even though Nijinsky's female equivalents—Anna Pavlova, Ida Rubenstein, Tamara Karsavina—were lavishly doted on by wealthy or poetic suitors (or both), “every aesthete in Europe seemed to be in love with the ‘grace and brutality,’ to use Cocteau’s words, of Nijinsky.”²¹⁷ The ballet renaissance in Western Europe was novel, but even more so were the sensuous feelings it ignited. At 20 years of age, Vaslav Nijinsky—still accompanied by his mother on the troupe’s various excursions to Paris, London, Rome, and Berlin—was a star and sexual icon. By 22, Diaghilev bestowed upon the dancer the ultimate creative responsibility: that of choreographer.

3.6 Staging Tragic Ballets

Buckle contends that as early as the first *Saison Russe* in 1909, Diaghilev had plans to make Nijinsky a choreographer.²¹⁸ As a new lover, Diaghilev lavished gifts, vacations, and professional development on Nijinsky, but he also saw in the young prodigy endless creative possibilities and a way to reawaken the danger and intoxication of the long stagnant art of dance. The impresario initially recruited Michel Fokine from the Imperial Theatre as the *Ballets Russes* choreographer and in that role, Fokine was extremely successful. He had given to Nijinsky—sometimes under the orders of Diaghilev—the roles that made him a sensation and had also choreographed the ballets that revealed to Western Europe the high art that ballet could attain. But Diaghilev feared that Fokine’s ingenuity was fading, his fantasy-worlds empty of meaning; “What had these fairy-tales to say to the people of a world which was beginning to realize it was ‘modern’?”²¹⁹ Diaghilev must be afforded credit for his early recognition that Nijinsky would

²¹⁷ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 35.

²¹⁸ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 108.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

transform the classical, Wagnerian, over-the-top ballet productions into modern pieces of art reflecting the deepest internal taboos.

Though Nijinsky's previous performances embodied Nietzsche's description of the tragic artist, it was in his role as choreographer that Nijinsky truly unleashed the inner dissonance and ugliness that Nietzsche argued may be at the center of art and—paradoxically—beauty.²²⁰ In this section, it is my contention that Nijinsky *choreographed* a response to the modern world's "loss of myth" in a way very similar to how Friedrich Nietzsche *wrote* philosophically about the same loss. As we have seen, Nietzsche lamented the mythlessness of modernity. With that orientation, he argued, we create an eternal hunger that forces us to consume endlessly the histories of antiquity without ever reaching satiation. It is the decadence of that "greedy seizing and snatching at food" that Nietzsche worries so much about when he questions who would want to contribute to such a culture. What is the antidote to this endless ingestion? For Nietzsche, the tragic artist, the one who can fashion new myths, is modernity's potential savior.

The three ballets choreographed by Nijinsky during his time with the *Ballets Russes*—*L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912), *Jeux* (1913), and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913)— display the aesthetic opposition and union of what Nietzsche first called the Apollinian and Dionysian. His productions, like his dances, unleashed primal and instinctual human truths (like the surface-level eroticism of everyday play, the pain of curious lust, the link between sex and violence, and the necessity of destruction in the process of renewal) through a highly controlled and ordered medium, much in the same way as highly developed tragic dramas. Consciously or not, Nijinsky's themes—and at times, the themes of his collaborators—molded together to create modern, performative masterpieces. As one of Diaghilev's champions, the mid-century Ukrainian dancer and ballet master Sergei Lifar, describes it, the *Ballets Russes* was able to achieve a

²²⁰ See pp. 29 and 39 of this thesis.

“synthesis of music, painting and dance” that incorporated “cubism, constructivism, realism, and primitivism.”²²¹ Accordingly, the ballets fused the primordial Dionysian and Apollinian arts (music, painting, dance) with the ultra modern forms (cubism, constructivism, realism, primitivism), creating consistency by way of upheaval and regeneration.

Nietzsche was appointed to a professorship in Basel at age 24 and published *The Birth of Tragedy* just three years later. Nijinsky became an official Artist of the Imperial Theatre at 17 and would premiere his first staged ballet at age 22. Both young geniuses presented startling first works, though it is likely that Nijinsky was better prepared for critical acclaim or disapproval than was Nietzsche, who voluntarily left the institution of academia just 10 years after his appointment. Regardless of Nijinsky’s experience with dance, criticism, and fame, Diaghilev was unwilling to give him the responsibility of choreography without significant training first in the impresario’s aesthetic preferences and process. In order to prime the young dancer, Diaghilev carefully orchestrated Nijinsky’s entrance into his inner circle, hoping that the immersion in the artistic group would inspire and cultivate Vaslav’s own innovative sense. “The key,” Krasovskaya explains, “was to give Nijinsky the opportunity to associate with modern artists of genuine talent, and the main thing was to allow him the freedom to create.”²²² Diaghilev brought Nijinsky on his vacations, to his dinners, and shuffled him in and out of museums, attempting to sharpen the visionary and aesthetic eye of the poor, less cultured dancer.²²³

²²¹ Sergei Lifar, “The Russian Ballet in Russia and in the West,” in *Russian Review* 28.4 (October 1969): 397-398.

²²² Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 97.

²²³ Nijinsky later wrote in his diary, “[Diaghilev] is a tidy man and likes museums. I consider museums to be graveyards. He considers museums to be life. A museum cannot be life, if only because it contains the works of dead artists. I believe that pictures by dead artists should not be preserved, because they destroy the life of young artists. The young artist is compared with the museum artists.” (Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, 164.) It seems clear to me that he is resentful of his past—both with Diaghilev (with whom he had a disastrous break) and with the reception of his work. He also seems to allude to the fact that performative art has no chance of preservation due to its ephemeral nature.

3.6.1 “L'après-midi d'un faune”

The influence of Diaghilev’s instruction and Nietzsche’s Dionysian requirement of aesthetics is evident from the very first ballet Nijinsky choreographed, *L'après-midi d'un faune*, based on the poem of the same name by Stéphane Mallarmé. In 1910, just prior to beginning work on the choreography, Nijinsky visited the Louvre with Diaghilev’s friend and *Ballet Russes* set designer Léon Baskt; he was immediately taken by the exhibitions of the ancient arts, particularly the bas-reliefs and vases of Egypt, Assyria, and Greece. Going home to St. Petersburg, intent on creating a “moving Greek frieze,”²²⁴ Nijinsky began setting choreography on his sister, creating an angular dimensionality to her body and movements. Nijinska recalls her brother excitedly telling her “I want to move away from the classical Greece that Fokine likes to use. Instead I want to use the archaic Greece that is less known and, so far, little used in theatre.”²²⁵ Bronislava was overjoyed by this new creative outlet for Vaslav, writing in her notes at the time,

I can see clearly the delicate refinement, the precision, the jewel-like work, the fine wrought filigree of his choreography...It is amazing how Vaslav himself, from the very beginning, without any preparation, is in complete mastery of the new technique of his ballet. In his own execution, each movement, each position of the body, and the expression of each choreographic moment is perfect.²²⁶

²²⁴ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 164. See Isadora Duncan’s autobiography, *My Life* (1927; repr., New York: Liveright, 1995) for her description of the Greek influence in her dance technique.

²²⁵ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 315. Among Fokine’s favorite settings for his ballets was classical Greece, as seen in *Acis and Galatea* (1905), *Eunice* (1907), *Narcisse* (1911) and *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912). Diaghilev kept Nijinsky’s new role as choreographer from Fokine for as long as possible; Fokine was furious when he discovered the secret at the end of 1911. He was especially upset that Nijinsky’s *L'après-midi d'un faune* might cast a shadow on his own Greek-inspired ballet, *Daphnis et Chloé*, which was to premiere in the same season. He left the *Ballets Russes* in 1912, immediately after the London tour.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

It was important to Nijinsky that he not appropriate archaic Greece through what Nietzsche considered the ‘slavish imitation’ of the Romantic artists; instead, as his sister would later recall,²²⁷ Nijinsky experimented with a sort of *neo-hellenism* whereby the artistry of ancient Greece was the inspiration, not the intended goal. In his new style, Nijinsky would find “by instinct and experiment”²²⁸ a way to animate the static friezes he saw in museums across Europe.

According to Buckle, Nijinsky surpassed the ingenuity of Fokine, and even Isadora Duncan, by changing the relationship among a dancer’s inspiration, music, and movement. Based on the timeline suggested by Nijinska, Vaslav began choreography of the then-unnamed ballet long before the music and plot were chosen.²²⁹ Buckle goes so far as to say that Debussy’s score, which was eventually chosen as music and title, became mere “background music.” “A new step had been taken in the history of the relationship between music and dancing,” he writes. “Suddenly it was possible to imagine a dance in opposition to music—or without it.”²³⁰ In addition to developing the choreography—which was eventually edited down to fit Debussy’s 10-minute score—before deciding on the music, Nijinsky also revolutionized the conception of the plastic body. Beaumont judiciously described the pattern of movement of the eight dancers (Nijinsky as the faun and seven female nymphs) in *L’après-midi d’un faune* as

an attempt to adapt the figures on Greek vases to the service of ballet. Not to use them as poses in a three-dimensional composition, but to preserve the two-dimensional surface characteristic of Greek vases and friezes. The actual result corresponded to a frieze of living figures—their bodies facing the audience, their head and limbs in profile—which

²²⁷ See pp. 98 of this thesis.

²²⁸ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 163.

²²⁹ Both Buckle and Nijinska suggest that Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894) was chosen by Diaghilev as the accompanying score for the ballet in early 1911 only after Vaslav and Bronislava demonstrated the choreography.

²³⁰ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 164. It should be noted that Buckle later commends Nijinsky for adapting his new technique “very comfortably to Debussy’s score, finding apt cues for entries, confrontations, sudden incursions and panicky exits” (239).

moved at different speeds. When it was necessary for the dancers to recross their tracks, they made an abrupt half-turn in place and moved in the opposite direction, so that the impression of a two-dimensional surface was always retained. The arms and hands, with the palms parallel to the spectator, were used with particular effect.²³¹

With this ballet, Nijinsky provided an unexpected solution to the debate between Lessing's preference for poetry and Winckelmann's supreme valuation of Greek visual art: he combined the two by plasticizing poetry. Bronislava Nijinska described her brother in early rehearsals as a meticulous artist, externalizing his internal vision by "creating his Faune by using me as his model. I am like a piece of clay that he is molding, shaping into each pose and change in movement."²³² (See figures 3-1, 3-2, and 3-3).

What is absent from Nijinsky's early invention—and absolutely crucial to Nietzsche's conception of tragedy—is the purely abstract musical art form. As described above, Buckle characterized Nijinsky's new method as "in opposition to" or "without" music; surely this would cast the nascent choreographer's work securely outside tragic artistry: "*Quite generally*, only music," Nietzsche declares toward the end of *The Birth of Tragedy*, "can give us an idea of what is meant by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon."²³³ However, I understand that important qualifier, "quite generally," as the sign of a rare instance in which Nietzsche accepts that there may be other answers outside of his own.²³⁴ Had Nijinsky discovered a new way to explore the entirely aesthetic world posited by Nietzsche? Had music, even in its apparent absence, served as one of its deepest instincts? Nijinska writes that her brother's production

²³¹ Cyril W. Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets: a guide to the principal ballets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (New York: Garden City Publishing, 1941), 652-3.

²³² Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 316.

²³³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 24/141.

²³⁴ My advisor, Lou Ruprecht, suggested



Figure 3-1 Nijinsky with Lydia Nelidova as the bathing Nymph



Figure 3-2 Nijinsky as the faun

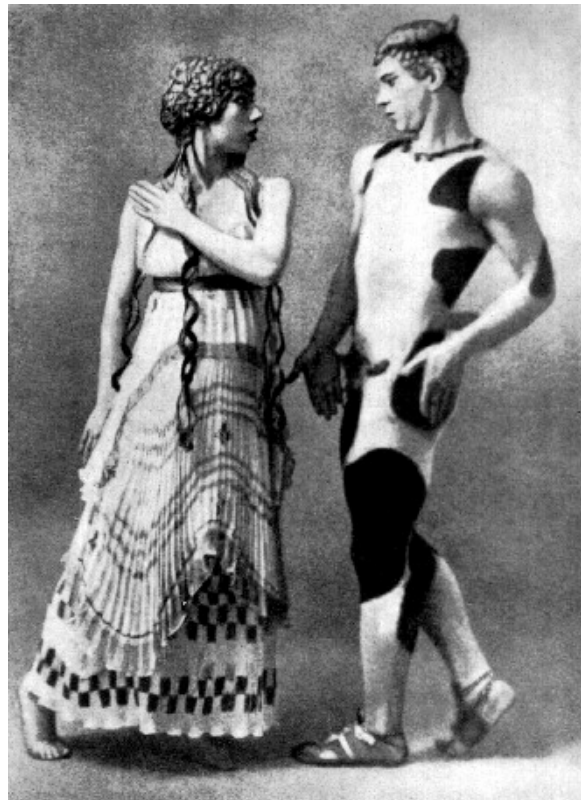


Figure 3-3 Bronislava Nijinska and Nijinsky

was the first time that a ballet had been mounted and rehearsed in the same way that a musical score is performed by an orchestra. In this new technique Nijinsky truly demonstrated his choreographic genius: he conducted his ballet, seeing each choreographic detail in the same way that the conductor of an orchestra hears each note in a musical score.²³⁵

Buckle wonders, “Did he realize he was taking the first steps toward abstraction?”²³⁶ Nijinsky, so often described as simple, was tremendously self-aware about the direction of his earliest ballet, telling his sister that, though the inspiration for the choreography was archaic Greece, it was “only to be the source of my inspiration. I want to render it in my own way.”²³⁷ Lincoln Kirstein explained the effect of Nijinsky’s “own way” in relation to Debussy’s music, contrasting it to what Fokine may have produced:

Had Fokine been in command, the curves and fluid sounds might have been echoed and repeated. Nijinsky’s angularity and clear linear propulsion seemed to jar against the waves of supple, sumptuous, thick orchestration. But in performance the two systems created an unsuspected dialectic which gave increased energy to a disjunct marriage of music and motion.²³⁸

Moving a step beyond Nietzsche, Nijinsky abandoned not only a literal imitation of the ancient arts (on which modernity “imitatively” depended), but also the imitation of music. With his method, his ambulatory and musical manipulation, Nijinsky had created a truly new art.

It must have been a historical coincidence, however, that Nijinsky’s first ballet was a brief glimpse into the life of a satyr’s meeting of a higher species and sex. The origin of the word ‘tragedy’ comes from the Greek *tragoidia*; literally, goat (*tragos*)-song (*oidia*). In the short ballet, which Buckles surmises must be set in Cyprus, Crete “with its dark pleasures,” or Thessaly

²³⁵ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 427.

²³⁶ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 163.

²³⁷ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 315.

²³⁸ Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, 126.

“through which the train of Bacchus had to pass, bringing the dangerous gift of wine from Asia,”²³⁹ a faun (Nijinsky) sits atop an embankment alternating dripping the juice of a cluster of grapes into his mouth and languorously playing a flute. Below, nymphs, their voluminous dresses (designed by Baskt) contrasted with the flatness of their movement, enter—three at first, then two, then another, and finally another—as the faun sits still, trying to avoid discovery. The nymphs move in three linear rows, with two groups of three, and the final nymph moving across the stage alone holding only her scarf; the others bathe her. They walk only horizontally, momentarily stopping to shift from one angular direction to another, elbows and bent knees accentuated even through the layers of gauzy fabric. The faun, “a strange being, half human, half animal...actuated by instinct rather than intelligence”²⁴⁰ until now only carefully watching, is lustfully stirred from his frightened pose and jumps down to the nymphs to inspect them. Six of the animated frieze-group hurry off stage, leaving only the scarved nymph to dance dangerously with the ancient creature. He moves in the same linear way as the nymphs do, only when he walks, as the ball of his front foot reaches the stage, the heel of his back foot raises and moves forward, creating the illusion of a bas-relief that has escaped its frieze but is still governed by its two-dimensional laws. Pelvis first, he moves toward the nymph and his torso area tenses, holding in his libidinal energy. They meet and interlock arms but she suddenly escapes, leaving her scarf as the only evidence of their interaction. The faun picks up the abandoned cloth, carefully and gently holding it at first, and then overcome with passion, throws it across his yearning face. A few of the nymphs return in short bursts—either to attempt to retrieve the animal’s new possession or to tease him for his helplessness—only to recoil back off stage. Accepting it will be all he can have from the woman, the faun carries the scarf back up to his perch, lays it down in

²³⁹ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 239.

²⁴⁰ Beaumont, *Bookseller at the Ballet*, 120.

front of him and sensuously lies atop of it, sliding his hands from his chest down to his groin.

The scene closes with the faun's final, orgasmic thrust.

The production was a scandal in all the negative and positive senses. Diaghilev dedicated much of the 1912 season's publicity efforts to Nijinsky's new ballet and, according to most accounts, spared nothing in order to ensure a "favorable climate" for its reception.²⁴¹ However, as Bullard estimates, there were three immediate objections to the performance²⁴²: the impression of the faun's final masturbatory act,²⁴³ the perceived misuse and betrayal of the French composer Debussy (a beloved representative of the French arts), and finally, the aesthetic disparity between the Debussy piece (already close to 20 years old) and Nijinsky's choreography. It was the first of the *Ballets Russes'* performances to elicit an applause mixed of cheers and praise against audible jeers and booing. Surprised by the potent reaction and convinced that the audience simply had not understood the art performed before them, Diaghilev ordered an *en-core* of the ballet on its opening night in Paris (May 29, 1912).

Though the press following the performance was actually quite complimentary, the powerful editor of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Gaston Calmette, authored a scathing review, writing:

[a]nyone who mentions the words 'art' and 'imagination' in the same breath as the production must be laughing at us. This is neither a pretty pastoral nor a work of profound meaning. We are shown a lecherous faun, whose movements are filthy and bestial in their eroticism, and whose gestures are as crude as they are indecent. That is all. And the over-explicit miming of this mis-shapen beast, loathsome when seen full on, but even more loathsome in profile, was greeted with the booing it deserved. Decent people will never accept such animal realism.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 237. See also Bullard, "The First Performance...", vol. I, 19-21.

²⁴² Bullard, "The First Performance...", vol. I, 21-5.

²⁴³ It seems that after the first performance of *L'après-midi d'un faune*, Nijinsky altered his final pose so as to make it more acceptable to gentile audiences. See Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 241.

²⁴⁴ *Le Figaro*, May 30, 1912. Quoted in Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 242.

Calmette specifically wrote the review, inserting it in the place of Robert Brussel's theatre page. He refused to print Brussel's article on the ballet. He went so far as to temporarily convince the police to place an injunction against the ballet so that it could not be performed again; they eventually withdrew the sanction after public opinion roused against them. Nevertheless, a national debate had begun. After Calmette's derisive critique—aptly titled “Un Faux Pas”—the then aged sculptor Auguste Rodin came to Nijinsky's defense, calling the young choreographer a “genius” able to “express all the emotions of the human soul.”²⁴⁵ This exchange went on and on; Calmette eventually accused Rodin of being a bad artist living off the taxpayer's dime, thus situating the ballet as part of the larger discussion of the relationship between the arts to the state.²⁴⁶ Diaghilev certainly spun this all in the ballet's favor. In an interview with a British newspaper he was asked if audiences were to see *L'après-midi d'un faune* in the London season. Diaghilev replied in a defiant, challenging tone:

I cannot say definitely—I cannot say because I do not yet sufficiently understand the English public. Are they or are they not in a position to appreciate this little piece? Can you or anyone tell me?... If we are to give this piece we must have the moral support of London artists and art-lovers, for it is a work that offers no concessions whatsoever to the Philistines. In Paris we were fortunate enough in having the enthusiastic concurrence of the sculptor Rodin. As for the London production—it is still an open question.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ *Le Matin*, May 31, 1912. Quoted in Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 436. Translation from Anita Leslie, *Rodin: immortal peasant* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1937). Rodin created a sculpture of Nijinsky in 1912. The original plaster piece is located at the Musée Rodin in Paris. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York holds a 1959 bronze cast.

²⁴⁶ Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* was the first Russian ballet troupe dissociated from the Imperial Theatres; it had a tenuous relationship with the aristocracy back in St. Petersburg (Diaghilev himself was the Special Assistant to the Director of the Imperial Theatres for a year before being dismissed in 1901) who worried how the ballet represented Russian culture. Some French critics, too—as noted at the beginning of this chapter—resented what they perceived to be the pedagogic nature of Russian artists.

²⁴⁷ *Daily Mail*, June 18, 1912. Quoted in Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975), 78.

Either Diaghilev misunderstood London's aesthetic sensibility or—more likely given his famously manipulative nature—he properly prepared it because the ballet was very well received.²⁴⁸

All of this—the replacement of Fokine, the staging of Nijinsky's ballet, the first true scandal of the *Ballets Russes*—marked 1912 as a turning point for the Diaghilev's ballet; Nijinsky was at the heart of it.²⁴⁹ Though it was Diaghilev who initially believed Nijinsky could be the herald of a sea-change—led, though, by the impresario's guiding hand—in ballet, Vaslav's artistic impulses were now proven to be charged beyond Diaghilev's prior estimation. In all of his roles as a dancer, Nijinsky had confirmed himself capable of bringing his character to life and irresistible to audiences.²⁵⁰ Nietzsche might have called him a "Dionysian," "possess[ing] the art of communication to the highest degree."²⁵¹ Now, as a choreographer, Nijinsky was able to orchestrate an entire vision and will it into execution. And as an artist, Nijinsky was not only the sign of a revolution in dance (Fokine, by many estimates, was a great *reformer*) but also a harbinger of the Avant-Garde. In momentary, intoxicated lapses, he fused artist and art, revealing what Nietzsche called the aesthetically-justified world. Lydia Sokolova, the *Ballets Russes'* first English dancer, perfectly described this phenomenon:

In appearance Nijinsky himself was a faun—a wild creature who had been trapped by society and was always ill at ease. When addressed, he turned his head furtively, looking as if he might suddenly butt you in the stomach. He moved on the balls of his feet, his nervous energy found an outlet in fidgeting: when he sat down he twisted his fingers

²⁴⁸ See excerpts from reviews in the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *Standard*, *Sunday Times*, and *Truth* in *Ibid.*, 80-81.

²⁴⁹ Bullard, "The First Performance..." vol. I, 13-5.

²⁵⁰ Diaghilev was Nijinsky's most famed admirer, but he was also the object of attraction for others. Jean Cocteau is said to have fallen smitten for Nijinsky when they first met. Nijinsky also had a small band of devoted female followers including the Marchioness of Ripon and her daughter Juliet Duff as well as Valentine Gross. The woman who was to become his wife, Romola de Pulszky, also followed him from city to city. Marie Rambert, who helped Nijinsky stage *Le Sacre du Printemps*, also fell in love with him, only realizing her feelings upon the news that he was engaged.

²⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 10/197.

or played with his shoes. He hardly spoke to anyone, and seemed to exist on a different plane. Before dancing he was even more withdrawn, like a bewitched soul...I had never seen anyone like him before.²⁵²

Sokolova's observation confirms the descriptions of Nijinsky made by others, but when situated within the context of his *L'après-midi d'un faune*, his capacity to transfigure himself and those around him becomes even more obvious. The pain of everyday life—of being a wild creature trapped by society—was a source of his artistry. The 'troubled artist' was already common, even cliché, trope in Romantic musings, but there is no evidence that Nijinsky thought of himself in this way at all. In his dance generally and *L'après-midi d'un faune*, in particular, he took the struggle of living in the world and re-formed it into expressive, powerful art. The essential component to intoxication and creating art, Nietzsche foretold, "is the feeling of fullness and increasing strength. This feeling make us release ourselves onto things, we *force* them to accept us, we violate them."²⁵³ What was the heart of Nijinsky's inadequacy was also the soul of his creativity; to partition the two as if one was the "real" Nijinsky and the other merely his persona, was to commit Nietzsche's gravest sin. "To divide the world" (or in this case, a man)

into a 'true' half and an 'illusory' one...is just a sign of decadence—it is a symptom of life *in decline* . . . The fact that artists have valued appearance more highly than reality is not an objection to this proposition. Because 'appearance' here means reality *once again*, only selected, strengthened, corrected . . . The tragic artist is *not* a pessimist, —he says *yes* to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is *Dionysian*.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Lydia Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev: The Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova*, Ed. by Richard Buckle, (London: John Murray, 1960), 38.

²⁵³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 8/196.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, " 'Reason' in Philosophy," 6/170.

Nijinsky dancing as a yearning faun was reality and metaphor at once.²⁵⁵ As Calmette and a few others argued, Nijinsky's *faune* was questionable and terrible, toeing the line between human and animal, lust and instinct, reason and senselessness. But in this dance, Nijinsky seems to have grasped the same dreadful truth that Nietzsche identified in the Greek arts of the Tragic Age: that oppositions were the driving force of life and art.

3.6.2 "Jeux"

Debussy was not impressed with Nijinsky's adaptation of his music into dance. In a 1914 interview, he related his distaste of the choreographic output: "Imagine if you can," he stipulates,

the discrepancy between a sinuous, soothing, flexible musical line on the one hand, and on the other a performance whose characters move like those on Greek or Etruscan vases, ungracefully, rigidly, as though their every gestures were constricted by the laws of plane geometry. So profound a dissonance can know no resolution!²⁵⁶

Debussy's appeal to the incongruous dissonance of Nijinsky's ballet instructively leads me back to Nietzsche, for whom dissonance, as we know, is at the center of the tragic myth and artistry. It is moments of disharmony, disunity, and the pain of being torn in rival directions that occasion the possibility of transfiguration; it is precisely this transfiguration, Nietzsche contends, that convinces us that disharmony and disunity are components of an "artistic game."²⁵⁷

Nijinsky produced two ballets for the 1913 *Ballets Russes* season, one of which quite literally engaged the concept of the artistic game. *Jeux (Games)* was Nijinsky's attempt to depict the contemporary (perhaps even future) leisurely life. Again drawing from his life with Diaghilev, Nijinsky attempted to put to dance the affluent recreational rituals of the people he observed at

²⁵⁵ Nijinsky writes very little in his diary about his ballets but in a brief reference to *L'après-midi d'un faune* he simply comments, "The Faun is me." (207).

²⁵⁶ *La Tribuna*, February 23, 1914. Quoted in Philippe Néagu and Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Afternoon of a Faun: Mallarmé, Debussy, Nijinsky* (New York: Verdome Press, 1989), 35.

²⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 24/141.

the resorts and lidos across Europe. Sport was fashionable; the rich bet on horse racing and cricket, swimming was becoming increasingly available to all²⁵⁸ (though sailing and yachting were still reserved for the wealthy), and the Olympics had been revived less than two decades before.²⁵⁹ It was decided that a tennis match was to be the ballet's chosen game. The French portraitist Jacques-Émile Blanche first suggested the leisure-class sportsman as the archetype for the contemporary-themed ballet, but in his 1937 autobiography, Blanche voiced his suspicion of the work from the start, facetiously calling it "cubist," and "licentious," concluding that it was a "childish idea."²⁶⁰

The ballet was a failure. Even Bronislava Nijinska, who is most sympathetic to her brother's work, admitted that the ballet was unsuccessful.²⁶¹ In the first place, Nijinsky made the mistake of demanding that Debussy compose his first (and only) score for a ballet—a feat only accomplished Diaghilev's promise to double Debussy's salary. Though they valued Nijinsky's artistry, the French public adored their national composer and one critic wrote, "we shall never pardon [Nijinsky] for having taken for his experiment a score of the value and purpose of *Jeux*, and to have so deliberately refused to honor and respect it."²⁶² Debussy himself rebuked the bal-

²⁵⁸ For a history of the ascendancy of swimming as leisure and sport, see Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: the swimmer as hero* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). My advisor, Dr. Louis Ruprecht, suggested to me that had Nijinsky chosen swimming as the athletic theme of his ballet, it might have fared better with Parisian audiences. Swimming had ties both to modern Olympics (revived in 1896) and to the ancient rituals that the modern Olympics secularized and internationalized. Swimming in the Hellenistic world had a religious and erotic nature that later the Romans, and after them, the Romantics, admired. Its "timelessness" and mythic quality would likely have made it more attractive to the 1913 audience. See especially chapter two in Sprawson, "Classical Waters," pp. 45-69.

²⁵⁹ Lawn tennis was a fairly new recreational sport, having originated in England during the late 19th century. It was added to the 1900 Olympic games, which were, incidentally, held in Paris.

²⁶⁰ Jacques-Émile Blanche, *Portraits of a Lifetime: the Late Victorian Era, The Edwardian Pageant, 1870-1914*, trans. Walter Clement (New York: Coward-McCann, 1938), 257, 258.

²⁶¹ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 469.

²⁶² Emile Vuillermoz, "La Saison Russe au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," in S.I.M., June 15, 1913. Translated and quoted in Bullard, "The First Performance..." vol. II, 159.

let saying it gave “an odd mathematical twist to [Nijinsky’s] perverse genius”²⁶³ and that the its licentiousness was disguised only because “in ballet, immorality escapes through the dancers’ legs and ends in a *pirouette*.”²⁶⁴

Related to the seeming misuse of Debussy’s score was the nature of the ballet; its theme of the contemporary ‘man-at-play’ was deemed by audiences to be tedious and unexotic. Henri Quittard in *Le Figaro* wrote, “It is said that M.Nijinsky’s intention was to provide, in this ballet, an apologia in plastic terms for the man of 1913. If this is so, we have nothing to be proud of.”²⁶⁵ This may be in reference to the suggestion of sexual debauchery implicit in the dance: a game of tennis morphs into erotic play between two young girls, then each girl with a boy (Nijinsky), then the three together. A rogue tennis ball flies in from off stage, interrupting what might have become a moral spectator’s worst nightmare. Or, as a critic put another way:

Nijinsky makes love to each in turn, with an extraordinary amount of osculatory play, to the evident dissatisfaction of the neglected one, then bravely he takes on the task of making love to both girls together, to avoid all jealousy, and the fall of the ball in their midst puts an end to this extraordinary amount of violent flirtation just in time to prevent the audience from showing *how bored they were* in an unmistakable manner.²⁶⁶

Ballets Russes audiences were familiar with the troupe’s taste for sexual impropriety in the themes of their ballets; it was one of the factors that kept theaters packed with spectators. Nijinsky often danced in gender-bending, sexually charged roles, so while some critics and theatre-goers may have been offended by the homoeroticism and ménage-a-trois in principle, it is more likely that the contemporary theme was just too close to home to be either acceptable *or* excit-

²⁶³ Letter to Robert Godet. Quoted in Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 469.

²⁶⁴ Letter to Jacques Durand, September 12, 1912. Quoted in Buckle, *Nijinsky* 266.

²⁶⁵ *Le Figaro*, May 17, 1913. Quoted in Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 289.

²⁶⁶ *The Dancing Times*, June 1913. Quoted in Hanna Järvinen, “Critical Silence: The Unseemly Games of Love in *Jeux* (1913),” in *Dance Research* vol. 2 (27, 2009): 203-4.

ing. Whereas “ferocious sexual desires and reversed gender roles were prominent only in works set in the Orient—Egypt, India, the Near East, or the Caucasus,” *Jeux* “did away with the safe Othering of non-normative behavior.”²⁶⁷ On top of this, Hanna Järvinen argues that, for early 20th century Western audiences, modernity (and modern sport) was not viewed as a sufficient inspiration for the creation of real art that would stand the test of time. Tennis was just a part of the meaningless popular culture.²⁶⁸ The equally provocative *L'après-midi d'un faune* had a dream-like atmosphere through which taboos were more easily obfuscated or even apotheosized; the immediacy of *Jeux* made it both crass and, at the same time, dull—a sign, it could be interpreted, of the early 20th century’s decadence and ennui.

Jeux was so unsuccessful that it was performed only five times; nevertheless Krasovskaya, sympathetic to Nijinsky’s art and speaking of specifically of *Jeux*, writes that the failure *and* the genius of his choreography lay in the fact that Nijinsky was born before his time.²⁶⁹ His sister, Bronislava became a respected *Ballets Russes* choreographer in her own right in the 1920s and cited the choreographic elements of *Jeux* as one of her major influences.²⁷⁰ She also noted that in *Jeux* her brother gave breath to neoclassical dance techniques that would not become popular until decades later.²⁷¹ His depiction of modern love as nothing more than a game or pastime, however, violated early modern images of romance.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 210.

²⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 212

²⁶⁹ Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, 260.

²⁷⁰ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 469. Nijinska was the first and only female choreographer employed by the *Ballets Russes*.

²⁷¹ David Vaughan, in his chapter titled, “Classicism and Neoclassicism” in *The Ballets Russes and its World* defines neoclassical ballet as “a contemporary stylization of the [classical] technique, sometimes with the admixture of elements derived from jazz or social dancing, but often also a use of contemporary subject matter.” He continues, “it is in both these senses that Nijinsky’s *Jeux* can be seen as prototypically neoclassical.” (157). Eds. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

L'après-midi d'un faune and *Jeux* established Nijinsky as an entirely new force in the world of dance, something like Nietzsche's "amoral 'artist-god' who...whether he is building or destroying...creating worlds" can "[free] himself from the *distress* of fullness and *overfullness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul."²⁷² In each case, Nijinsky presented a "parallel to emotional experiences" (discovery, love, lust, youthfulness, loss) in art—"not an imitation of nature," his wife recalls him saying, but "the image of nature obtained through artificial means."²⁷³ I take these statements—the first from Nietzsche, the second allegedly by Nijinsky—to speak to a similar subjective view shared by both men, namely that art is a continuous process of creation, obliteration, and reconstitution of elements that reveals the possibilities of nature and existence. Nijinsky explored the most instinctual drive toward creation, sex, as the focal point of his two ballets; this is fitting if we are to view him through a Nietzschean lens. The "psychology of the artist," his one "physiological precondition" must be intoxication we are told; "above all," Nietzsche continues, "the intoxication of sexual excitement, the most ancient and original form."²⁷⁴ In the mythic world of *L'après-midi d'un faune* and the ultra-modern setting and sensibility of *Jeux*, Nijinsky made that primal Dionysian state his muse.

3.6.3 "Le Sacre du Printemps"

Along with *Jeux*, Nijinsky choreographed *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the 1913 season. Its premiere, as written about extensively elsewhere, made it infamous.²⁷⁵ Now, almost exactly a

²⁷² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 5/22.

²⁷³ Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky*, 199.

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man" 8/195-6.

²⁷⁵ See, for instance, Millicent Hodson's *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace* (New York, Pendragon Press, 1996), and Bullard's "The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's 'Le Sacre du Printemps,'" both of which are dedicated solely to the ballets construction and reception; see also Buckle, *Nijinsky*, pp. 299-304; Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky*, pp. 261-272; Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed...*, 97-105; and Thomas Forrest Kelly, *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 256-334.

century later, it is the most revered of Nijinsky's ballets, inspiring books, articles, and film scenes dedicated to its riot-inducing premiere performance.²⁷⁶ It is the paradigmatic example of the evanescence of performed art: the score—preserved in the archive and performed as a classic—is among the most popular of the 20th century, but of the ballet only staged photographs and sketches remain.²⁷⁷ The ballet has accrued a mythic status, and in that respect alone, it is the most Nietzschean of all Nijinsky's productions. But even more deeply than that, the ballet's content—music, libretto, and choreography—and the reviews responding to it, were explicitly laden with Nietzschean and pagan tones that signify *Le Sacre du Printemps* as a production uniquely situated to demonstrate the shifting aesthetic values and contributions of the 20th century.

Igor Stravinsky's composition remains the most venerated component of the ballet and is among the most recognizable scores of the 20th century. Though it is familiar to most, *Le Sacre du Printemps* as a stand-alone musical piece is still surprisingly dissonant to the ears; it is not difficult to imagine what it must have been like to hear it for the first time, especially following the comparatively more harmonious trends of Debussy, Ravel, and Strauss. I think it safe to say that when Nietzsche reflects on the "tremendous hope" of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and looks forward to the next century for music's Dionysian future,²⁷⁸ it is Stravinsky's score that should mark the fulfilled dream. It was just as brooding and overwhelming as Wagner's compositions (it was

²⁷⁶ See, for example the films *Nijinsky* (1980) and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2009). The opening scene of the latter depicts the riotous affair, following what appears to be Stravinsky's version of the events in Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: The Norton Library, 1962), 47. The BBC also made a television-movie in 2005 titled *Riot at the Rite*, which specifically dramatized the production of *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

²⁷⁷ Millicent Hodson worked tirelessly in the mid-1980s to reconstruct the ballet from the remaining documents and interviews. The result of her investigation was staged by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987. Watch a video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF1OQkHybEQ>

²⁷⁸ Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Ecce Homo*, 4/110.

written for a 100+ piece orchestra), but it was its sound, then absence of sound, pulses, breaks, interruptions, and violent tonalities that gave Stravinsky's composition its terrifying quality.

Stravinsky began writing what would become *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1910, after devising the libretto with Nicholas Roerich, who would eventually design the set and costumes for the ballet. From its inception, composer and amateur archaeologist/painter imbued the piece with the elements intended to evoke a Dionysian world: the communal intoxication of Spring, pre-Christian origins, sacrifice, and musical dissonance. One of the remaining versions of the libretto, written in Stravinsky's hand, provides a brief synopsis of the plot:

Vesna Sviasschennaya [(*The Rite of Spring*)] is a musical-chorographical work. It represents pagan Russia and is unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of the creative power of Spring. The piece has no plot, but the choreographic succession is as follows:

FIRST PART: THE KISS OF THE EARTH

The spring celebration. It takes place in the hills. The pipers pipe and young men tell fortunes. The old woman enters. She knows the mystery of nature and how to predict the future. Young girls with painted faces come in from the river in a single file. They dance the spring dance. Games start. The Spring Khorovod.²⁷⁹ The people divide into two groups, opposing each other. The holy procession of the wise old men. The oldest and wisest interrupts the spring games, which come to a stop. The people pause trembling before the great action. The old men bless the spring earth. *The Kiss of the Earth*. The people dance passionately on the earth, sanctifying it and becoming one with it.

SECOND PART: THE GREAT SACRIFICE

At night the virgins hold mysterious games, walking in circles. One of the virgins is consecrated as the victim and is twice pointed to by fate, being caught twice in the perpetual circle. The virgins honor her, the chosen one, with a marital dance. They invoke the ancestors and entrust the chosen one to the old wise men. She sacrifices herself in the presence of the old men in the great holy dance, the great sacrifice.²⁸⁰

The work was officially commissioned by Diaghilev for the *Ballets Russes* in 1911 with the thought that it would be presented in the 1912 season under the choreographic direction of

²⁷⁹ A ciricling song-dance.

²⁸⁰ Translated in Robert Craft and Vera Stravinsky, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 75.

Fokine. In a letter to his mother in March of that year, Stravinsky expresses discontent regarding the situation, writing “Diaghilev and Nijinsky are mad about my new child, *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The unpleasant part is that it will have to be done by Fokine.” Agreeing with Diaghilev’s reevaluation of the *Ballets Russes*’ chief choreographer, Stravinsky thought Fokine was “an exhausted artist, one who traveled his road quickly, and who writes himself out with each new work...and all of them immeasurably inferior and weaker...New forms must be created,” he charges, “and the gifted Fokine has not even dreamed of them...Genius is needed.”²⁸¹

As it happened, Fokine was unable to take on another ballet for the 1912 season and Diaghilev passed the challenge on to Nijinsky, whom he entrusted with the company’s future. Stravinsky was pleased with the change in direction, and at the end of 1912, he wrote characteristically of the ballet’s new choreographer: “Nijinsky directs [*Le Sacre du Printemps*] with passionate zeal, forgetting himself.”²⁸² Nijinsky himself was so excited by the new endeavor that his other commission for the 1913 season, *Jeux*, suffered the loss of his exclusive love and attention. While *Jeux*’s composer, Debussy, was less than enthusiastic about Nijinsky’s choreographic contribution to his music, with *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Vaslav had the opportunity to work closely with Stravinsky and Roerich, both of whom he admired and respected. It was the first authentically collaborative production he worked on and the process was invigorating.

Despite his energy and devotion to the ballet, Nijinsky was impossibly inept in communicating his choreographic vision to his dancers; This failing was already established as a pattern in the staging *L’après-midi d’un faune* and *Jeux*. Tamara Karsavina recalled that in the rehearsals for *Jeux*, Nijinsky “was at a loss to explain what he wanted of me.”²⁸³ Sometimes, instead of

²⁸¹ Letter dated March 17, 1912. Translated and quoted in *ibid.*, 30.

²⁸² Letter to Nikolai Findizen, editor of *The Russian Newspaper*, dated December 15, 1912. Translated and quoted in *ibid.*, 92.

²⁸³ Tamara Karsavina, *Theatre Street* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1973), 237.

rehearsing, Nijinsky would take the ballerinas to the local tennis courts in order to watch games in play.²⁸⁴ He expected that they would glean inspiration from the outings exactly as he did; this did not turn out to be the case, so eventually a student from the Dalcrozian School, Marie Rambert, was eventually recruited from the to help Nijinsky translate his expectations²⁸⁵; though initially unimpressed with ballet altogether, her mind was changed by Nijinsky's new style. In her memoir Rambert writes that in the staging of *L'après-midi d'un faune*, Nijinsky was well aware of the restlessness of his dancers who were completely incapable of modifying their classically-trained bodies to perform the work of his ballet.²⁸⁶ Ida Rubenstein, initially cast as the bathing nymph in *L'après-midi d'un faune*, attended just one of the ballet's rehearsals before announcing that she would no longer participate. In a conversation with Nijinska 16 years later, Rubenstein complained, "In my part there was not a single natural movement, not one single comfortable step on the stage. Everything was topsy-turvy...Nijinsky wanted the impossible."²⁸⁷ The sheer size of new piece only magnified these issues of direction. *L'après-midi d'un faune* employed eight dancers, Nijinsky included. *Jeux* required only three. *Le Sacre du Printemps* was huge by comparison, involving 46 dancers in 71 distinct parts.

Continuing in his departure from classical ballet as originally seen in his first two productions, Nijinsky's choreography for *Le Sacre du Printemps* was a style totally new. Methodologically, however, he constructed the new work in a fashion similar to the two previous works. For instance, he forbade any pantomime or ad-libbing from the dancers. This was a drastic departure from Fokine, who provided his dancers with basic steps and allowed them to develop the

²⁸⁴ Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*. 444.

²⁸⁵ Dalcroze Eurythmics was a method developed in the early 20th century by Swiss music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze that taught students the basic components of music through kinesthetic movement. See Rambert, *Quicksilver* 47-52 for a description of typical Dalcrozian lessons.

²⁸⁶ See Rambert, *Quicksilver*, 55, and Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 230.

²⁸⁷ As recorded by Nijinska. See her note in *Early Memoirs*, bottom of 406.

details as they saw fit. Nijinsky, on the other hand, was a demanding director who always had a “strict choreographic plan.”²⁸⁸ In all three ballets, Nijinsky required the principals and corps to adhere their bodies to a single position; in the case of *Le Sacre du Printemps* it was an inverted first position, with the feet and pelvis turned inward (see Figures 4 and 5). The pose forced the dancers’ bodies to take on a graceless form—a “crime” in ballet.²⁸⁹

The premiere night of May 29, 1913, was already an auspicious occasion. Diaghilev planned to reveal Nijinsky’s third ballet exactly a year to the day after the scandalous premiere of *L’après-midi d’un faune*. After the failure of *Jeux* just two weeks earlier, Diaghilev and audiences alike hoped for a spectacular comeback from Nijinsky. On face value, *Le Sacre du Printemps* was merely a Russian interpretation of the newly popular primitivism movement, and due to that fact, it had the potential to be well-received by critics and popular audiences alike. Stravinsky’s score manipulated the conventions of music in order to render a violent, chaotic character onto Romantic fantasies of ‘primitive man,’ and Roerich’s costumes and set design were incarnations of a vision of ancient Russia. The new sciences of anthropology and ethnology unveiled the myriad ways in which humans (particularly tribal groups in Africa and Oceania) were seeing, interacting, and recreating the world around them; toying with this newly appreciated fact was the *raison d’être* of primitivism in Western visual arts; Stravinsky and Nijinsky were to introduce its musical and kinetic analogues to an ambivalent reception.

In the primitivist movement of modern art, of which I can only speak briefly here, there was, as Robert Goldwater noted, “the desire to present as subject matter the basic emotional situations of life, visualizing them as violent and irrepressible, and depicting each one as a

²⁸⁸ “Nijinsky was the first to demand that his whole choreographic material should be executed not only exactly as he saw it but also according to his artistic interpretation.” Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, 427.

²⁸⁹ For a studied review and reconstruction of this transgression, see Millicent Hodson, *Nijinsky’s Crime Against Grace* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1996).



Figure 3-3 Male dancers in Le Sacre du Printemps. In some scenes they would wear faux bear skins over their heads and shoulders. Costumes designed by Nicholas Roerich.



Figure 3-4 Village Maidens. Notice the turned in feet and head rested to the side on the hand, the position from which the dance emanated.

symbol representing the ‘realities’ of life.”²⁹⁰ This aspiration certainly seemed to be one of *Le Sacre du Printemps*’ collaborators (and Nietzsche, too, I think), but Goldwater—and the majority of primitivism’s critics—write exclusively about the paintings and sculptural works by artists such as Gauguin, Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso, Klee, and Modigliani. As a ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps* managed to extrapolate the characteristics of primitivism and apply them to a fictional people brought alive through sound and motion. This was an unanticipated modification to the depiction of ancient and mythic themes in ballet that generally trended toward the 19th century’s vision of the romantic. *Le Sacre du Printemps* offered a glimpse into a mythical Slavic world in which Spring is welcomed—a common theme in the Romantic arts, with light sound and graceful poetics ushering in a soft renewal—but did so in as a violent and immediate “surge of spring, the magnificent upsurge of nature reborn.”²⁹¹ Part one, “The Adoration of the Earth” (*L’adoration de la Terre*) depicts the mythic space (presumably the Central Asian steppes) and mythic people: young girls dancing, shamans fortune telling, mock rape, and the ‘oldest and wisest one’ kissing the earth. In the second part, *Le Sacrifice*, virgins dance in a circle and one is chosen as the sacrificial victim. The others sanctify her, and elder men in dressed in bearskins watch as the “Chosen One” dances to her sacrificial death.

The production intoxicated the whole theatre: the action on stage spoke to the mythic age from which Nietzsche felt modernity was disconnected—one in which spontaneity and newness were folded into the story of the universe, not subject to systematic theological or historical inquiry. The dancers were from a pre-Christian Russia, one without its own Socrates to put their springtime ritual to a rational, analytic test. These would-be bacchantes were propelled by their bodies and by the world around them. Literary critic Jacques Rivière, in a review essay of the

²⁹⁰ Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 57.

²⁹¹ Stravinsky, quoted in Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 207.

ballet, wrote that in Nijinsky's ballet "the body is no longer a means of escape for the soul; on the contrary, it collects and gathers itself around it; it suppresses its outward thrust, and, by the very resistance that it offers to the soul, becomes completely permeated by it."²⁹² A translated excerpt of Rivière's superb essay, commissioned by Lincoln Kirstein and translated by Miriam Lassman, may be found in Appendix A of this thesis. This description nearly perfectly echoes Nietzsche's description of "the metaphysics of art": the collapse of the false dichotomy between body and soul, physical and mental, illusory and real. This altering of the body's consciousness replicated itself in at least two of the theatre-goers on opening night: American critic Carl Van Vechten wrote that the gentleman seated behind him had stood up at some point during the ballet in order to see better. "The intense excitement under which he was laboring, thanks to the potent force of the music," Van Vechten wrote, "betrayed itself presently when he began to beat rhythmically on the top of my head with his fists." Van Vechten himself did not notice the assault for quite a while. "When I did," he casually recalled, "I turned around. His apology was sincere. We had both been carried beyond ourselves."²⁹³

Van Vechten's experience, in some ways, reproduced that of the dancers on stage who were bounded to their own rite: they were inescapably present to and driven by socio-somatic necessity. They gyrated in circles across the stage, eliciting both the order and disorder of nature. They stamped and jumped and endlessly spun, kinesthetically representing Stravinsky's frenetic score. Rivière defended the bizarre, new choreography, arguing that the movements Nijinsky orchestrated resulted in only "its most immediate, most radical, most etymological ex-

²⁹² Jacques Rivière, "Le Sacre du Printemps," in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, (November 7, 1913): 706-730. Quoted in Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing*, trans. by Miriam Lassman, 166.

²⁹³ Carl Van Vechten, "Igor Stravinsky: A New Composer," in *Music After the Great War*, (New York: Schirmer, 1915), reprinted in *Dance Writings* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1974), 109. Quoted in Millicent Hodson, "Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*," in *Dance Research* 3:2 (Summer, 1985): 40.

pressions.” He continued, “motion has been reduced to obedience; it is constantly made to return to the body; it is tied to it, caught and pulled back by it... This is motion that does not run off, that has been forbidden to chant its own little tune; motion that must come back to take orders every minute”.²⁹⁴ The movements were repetitive and rigid, the feet turned inward and the head always returned to rest on the shoulder. There were no *pirouettes* or *tours jetés*; the *arabesque* was mangled by a bent knee and down-turned toes. Nijinsky understood that he had to ‘found’ movement that “would trigger psychic release.”²⁹⁵ In this way both Nijinsky and Stravinsky orchestrated a revolution (in both senses of the word “revolution”). Together they overwhelmed and overthrew the tenets classical ballet, though Stravinsky notes with condescension that “the *avant-garde*” were “ready, as always to welcome as a new discovery anything that differs, be it ever so little, from the *déjà vu*.”²⁹⁶ Upon watching a rehearsal, former director of the Imperial Theatres, Sergei Volkonsky remarked that *Le Sacre du Printemps* was “not a ballet, thank heavens. It is a ritual, it is an ancient rite. Nothing could worse prepare the prospective audience of this spectacle than the word *ballet* and all the associations that it brings with it.”²⁹⁷ The production was a total departure from the canons of the past, almost an irruption through the foundation of classical movement—both the musical and the bodily.

Yet at the same time, the performance cast itself as a return to a barbaric state. The music and the choreography were a re-scripting of the efficacy and awesome power of spring. The production was at once both of these, fantastically ‘new’ and ‘old’, but also neither of these, at

²⁹⁴ Translation by Miriam Lassman in Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975), 165.

²⁹⁵ Millicent Hodson, “Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*,” *Dance Research*, 3:2 (Summer, 1985): 42.

²⁹⁶ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: The Norton Library, 1962), 47.

²⁹⁷ Sergei Volkonsky, *Otkliki teatra* (Petrograd, 1914), 48. Cited in Vera Krasovskaya, *Nijinsky* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979). Translated from the original Russian text (1974) by John E. Bowlit, p. 243.

least not as initially perceived. On the one hand, as Richard Taruskin argues, Stravinsky's composition was not necessarily the beginning of modern, 20th century music but rather the tail-end, cacophonous crash of 19th century Romanticism.²⁹⁸ His artistic audio/vision was steeped in the wiles of primitivism: the notion that humanity's child-like past, where man "knew not" was where *true* souls existed, unencumbered by the modernity that separated our present selves from our *true* selves.

This image, though, is in stark contrast to the action on stage, which suggests an "anti-humanist"²⁹⁹ and antirational message. As Rivière, once again, brilliantly explained, the ballet represents a time when humans did not exist as modern individuals. "At no time during the dance does the Chosen Maiden show the personal terror that ought to fill her soul," he observes. "She carries out a rite; she is absorbed by a social function, and without any sign of comprehension or of interpretation, she moves as dictated by the desires and impulses of a being vaster than herself, a monster filled with ignorance and appetites, with cruelty and darkness."³⁰⁰ Though the ostensive reason for her death insinuates a rebirth of life through sacrifice, a restorative balance is not suggested by the choreography and its picture of the coming of spring is not that which was offered by the Romantic myths of the past century. Nijinsky brought the "craving for the ugly"³⁰¹ — "the good, severe will of the older Greeks to pessimism, to the tragic myth, to the image of everything underlying existence that is frightful, evil, a riddle, destructive, fatal" — to the beauty of ballet, converting the terrifying destructiveness suggested by

²⁹⁸ Richard Taruskin, "A Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rite of Spring, the Tradition of the New, and 'The Music Itself,'" in *Modernism/Modernity* 2.1 (1995): 14.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰⁰ Rivière, "Le Sacre du Printemps," in Kirstein, 168.

³⁰¹ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4/21.

Darwin's evolutionary theory and humanity's archaic roots into a 30-minute reconfiguration of music and movement that displayed the grace of art without disguising its dreadful origin.

Consequently, the disapproving reviews tended to direct their ire at the ballet's ugliness. Of the Parisian reviews written between May and December 1913, Bullard designates just 13 as approving of Nijinsky's choreography and 22 as critical.³⁰² Adolphe Boschot, formerly charmed by the *Ballets Russes*, wrote a scathing article that articulated the main arguments against the ballet. Using the theme of *Le Sacre du Printemps* as a charge against it, he wrote that "the Russian Ballet has proven to be incapable of renewing itself," and that Nijinsky's two previous ballets serve as added evidence of that fact.³⁰³ He goes on to call the Chosen Maiden's dance "hideous", charging that in Nijinsky's elementary equation, "the more ugly and deformed it is the more prehistoric."³⁰⁴ In a review that directs its ire mostly toward the unbecoming behavior of the audience, there is still space to condemn the production for, as critic Gustave de Pawlowski writes, "a work of art...should not be based only upon the vulgar or ugly...If one uses ugliness in art it should be used only as a point of comparison." He concludes that the ballet would have been salvageable if "the impoverished gestures of primitive tribes in *Le Sacre du Printemps*" were "short, incidental, and did not last two full acts."³⁰⁵ Since the Boschot review is demonstrative of the most prominent critiques against the ballet,³⁰⁶ I have included it in Appendix B.

³⁰² See Table 5, "Summary of Reviews of *Le Sacre du Printemps* Written in Paris Between May and December, 1913," in Bullard, "The First Performance...", vol. I, 180-182.

³⁰³ Adolphe Boschot, "*Le Sacre du Printemps*, ballet en deux actes de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky, et Nijinsky," in *L'echo de Paris*, May 30, 1913, 6. Quoted and translated in Bullard, "The First Performance...", vol. II, 11.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁰⁵ Gustave de Pawlowski, "Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Le Sacre du Printemps*, ballet de deux actes de M. Igor Stravinsky," in *Comœdia* May 31, 1913. Quoted and translated in *ibid.*, vol. II, 41-2.

³⁰⁶ This according to Bullard, vol. II, 10.

One can only speculate about the reaction Nietzsche would have had to the ballet or to the reviews like the ones cited above. I imagine he would be disappointed with Boschot, Pawlowski, and their ilk, who likely would have tarnished his high opinion of the French as a people who value art above the rest. After all, their critiques seem to accept without question the classical beauty associated with Athens after Socrates and speak nearly disparagingly of anything Nietzsche might associate with Dionysus. It is my opinion that, at the very least, he would have recognized the ballet's prescience and layered metaphor (out of destruction, rebirth—both in the mythic world and in the world of ballet). It was as if Nijinsky's ballet predicted the calamitous and brutal forthcoming of the Great War. In July of 1914, following the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Maurice Dupont wrote in *La Revue Bleue* that *Le Sacre du Printemps* was a "Dionysian orgy dreamed of by Nietzsche and called forth by his prophetic wish to be the beacon of a world hurtling toward death."³⁰⁷ The connotation here is nihilistic—far from the aspirations, I think, of both Nietzsche and Nijinsky.

Dupont speaks of the ballet as if it celebrates destruction for the sake of destruction and ego, as if Nietzsche and Nijinsky call forth an apocalypse so that they may lead the world, as pined pipers, out of devastation. In Nietzsche's mind, however, modernity was already careening toward ruin: Christianity, he thought, was the ubiquitous form of nihilism and the chronic affliction in Europe, and it was reaching its logical, philosophical, and metaphorical end. As a self-styled physician, Nietzsche prescribed the recovery of the Dionysian impulse that he first recognized in the ancient Greeks as the antidote: By way of the painful destruction of the Christian paradigm, Nietzsche believed that a creative sense—pagan in its nature—could be renewed. At its heart, it was the serious engagement of a pre-Christian religiosity and the concept of creation through destruction that narrated Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

³⁰⁷ Maurice Dupont, "Les Ballets russes: l'orgie du rythme et de la couleur," in *Revue Bleue*, July 11, 1914, 53-6. Quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 54.

4. CONCLUSION

In Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in Nijinsky's final ballet of the trilogy presented during the 1912 and 1913 seasons, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, a pagan ideology was presented as an alternative to modern habits and thinking. Nietzsche wrote of the Greek world during the Tragic Age as a place and a people with exploding creative tendencies emerging from their embrace of pessimism and the instinct to transform; Apollo, the sculpting god of dreams and individuation, and Dionysus, the god of intoxication and communal trance joined in mythical and aesthetic brotherhood so that the Greeks could transcend conventional ideas of beauty and unify the two opposing essences in the tragic drama. Nijinsky choreographed the Nietzschean vision, fusing Dionysian, dissonant music with the Apollinian plasticity of dance so that the mythic tribe of Slavic bacchantes might communally receive the resurgence of spring. We now consider each man a characteristically *modern* representative of his artistic medium, but Nietzsche and Nijinsky's unprecedented works were inspired and challenged by mythic reconstructions of the *past*. While Nietzsche aimed explicitly to retrieve a pre-Christian and pre-Socratic pagan disposition, Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (and, to a lesser extent, *L'après-midi d'un faune* and *Jeux*) aestheticized the power of human instinct, however immoral (or pre-moral) they seemed to contemporary critics.

What Nietzsche wrote as a poet, Nijinsky embodied as a dancer. Through their arts, they encouraged an acceptance of the fullness of life—both in its brightest and darkest moments—through the creative process of the production of art. The essence of the tragic artist was thus: to beautify the experience of life not by eradicating the ugly, disharmonious, and chaotic, but by idealizing them, by “spiritualizing the passions.”³⁰⁸ Whitworth wrote of the challenging lack of grace in *Le Sacre du Printemps*, concluding “prettiness is very well in its way, but life is greater,

³⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” section 1/page 172.

and truth greater still. And in this truth—this reality which is the gleam that for ever eludes us—lies, as some believe, the hope of truest beauty.³⁰⁹ If beauty does reside in truth, in Dionysian truth even, then we can reconcile Nijinsky's own artistic statement: "*La Grace, le Charme, le Joli sont rangés tout autour du point central qu'est le Beau. C'est pour le Beau que je travaille.*"³¹⁰ Like Nietzsche, Nijinsky led a charge against traditional standards and definitions of "beauty," and destroyed, for the sake of recreation and reconstitution, long-standing commitments to grace and effortlessness in the history of ballet.

The sacrifice of Nijinsky's classical training was danced on stage as a saint-like annihilation of a virgin's self for her tribe's continued life. Was this not a metaphor for the whole art of ballet? Experimentation and doing away with the reigning canons of beauty was a necessity, in Nijinsky's mind, for the growth and relevance of his beloved medium. But artists working in times of philosophical and aesthetic transition live precariously among their contemporaries. This is true of Nietzsche, whose works were often despised or unread, and of Nijinsky, whose ballets were equally lauded and denounced. We look back on their courageous productions with the benefit of hindsight; their acknowledgement of the religious character of art, sacrifice, drama, and the destructive inclination is of clearer value to our minds: our idea of modern art—the experimentation with new ways of seeing the world and recreating its image—is bound up with these central tenets. We have seen, however, Nietzsche's and Nijinsky's struggle with intemperativity and ascribe to them bittersweet quality of creating art that was "ahead of its time."

* * *

Nijinsky was dismissed from the *Ballets Russes* following the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps* under complicated circumstances. The ballet company's next destinations were a

³⁰⁹ Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky*, 100.

³¹⁰ "Grace, Charm, Attractiveness, are ordered around the central point that is Beauty. It is for Beauty that I work." Translation my own. Quoted in *ibid*.

part of their first South American tour in 1913. Diaghilev refused to make the trip, superstitiously citing his belief that he would die on the ocean. On board the ship, Nijinsky became engaged to Romola de Pulzsky, a 23 year old wealthy woman who had been, like a crazed fan, following the *Ballets Russes* from city to city and who cleverly calculated her new friendships based on who could put her in Nijinsky's sights. The two barely knew one another and they could only communicate in French, a second language for both; Nijinsky actually proposed through a mutual acquaintance. They married as soon as arriving in Buenos Aires. Nijinsky sent Diaghilev a letter detailing the happy news and inquiring about his role in the upcoming season; the impresario was devastated and scripted a response from the *Ballets Russes'* *régisseur*, Serge Grigoriev, coolly informing the dancer and choreographer that his work as an artist was no longer needed. In September, Nijinsky wrote to Stravinsky, apparently clueless of his perceived betrayal: "If it is true that Serge does not want to work with me—then I have lost everything...I cannot imagine what has happened, what is the reason for his behavior. Please ask Serge what is the matter, and write to me about it."³¹¹

Even if imperceptive about the effect his marriage was to have on his relationship with Diaghilev, Nijinsky was correct in his prediction that the loss of Diaghilev's support was equivalent to a loss of everything. Aside from an unsuccessful return to the ballet in 1916—without any emotional or promotional support from Diaghilev—Nijinsky's career as a dancer and choreographer effectively ended in 1913. Though offered contracts from a few other companies and opera houses, the *Ballets Russes* was, at the time, the only troupe committed to experimenting with and outside of classical ballet standards. Without the troupe and its artistic circle, Nijinsky fell into dark depressions and manic periods. After being placed on house arrest in his mother-in-law's home during the First World War, Nijinsky, his wife, and daughter moved to St. Moritz,

³¹¹ Quoted in Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 39.

Switzerland. It was there that a servant of the household initially recognized in Nijinsky the symptoms of mental illness exhibited by his former employer, Nietzsche.³¹² From that point forward, Nijinsky practiced his art in solitude and rarely performed in front of others. His creative drive found a narrow path in drawing and painting; he worked obsessively on images of eyes, faces made of repetitive concentric circles, and masks boldly colored red and black. Looking at them today, one can get a sense of Nijinsky's fluctuating moods. Some drawings feel as light as a dancer's leap; others, however—particularly those completed during the final days of World War I—are indisputably morose and ominous.

Nietzsche lived with his illness for a decade and Nijinsky survived with his own for three times as long. Even though the categorization of psychological afflictions as a result of a "mental collapse" connotes a total break with one's previous personality, relationships, and interests, Nietzsche and Nijinsky continued to concern themselves with the two basic human passions: art and religion, and the correlation between the two. Nietzsche's effacement of Christianity became central to his philosophy, sometimes at the expense of deliberate and careful thought. His work grew increasingly self-aggrandizing, and he believed in his redemptive role as a tragic poet; the proof of his greatness, it appears he assured himself, was in modernity's rejection of him. Nijinsky also directed his energies—devotedly, for a time—toward Tolstoyan Christianity, which, as previously noted,³¹³ replaced the primacy of dance in his life. It was the severing blow to his relationship with Diaghilev (and by extension, with the transnational artistry of the *Ballets Russes*) that marked the monumental shift in his nature: Nijinsky's character changed from

³¹² Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky*, 418. "[T]he young man, our stoker, made a few hesitating steps and quickly said, 'Madame, forgive me; I may be wrong. We all love you both. You remember I told you that at home in my village at Sils Maria as a child I used to do errands for Mr. Nietzsche? I carried his rucksack when he went to the Alps to work. Madame, he acted and looked, before he was taken away, just like Mr. Nijinsky does now.'"

³¹³ See pp. 54 of this thesis.

merely odd to insane and he moved from away from his overwhelming devotion to art toward a necessary comfort in faith that regulated his desires when art could no longer. He held a final, small, bizarre public performance in 1919, during which he sat still for half an hour before standing up and shouting to his spectators, “Now I will dance you the war, with its suffering, with its destruction, with its death. The war which you did not prevent and so you are also responsible for.”³¹⁴ He died in a London clinic in 1950. His legacy, ever evolving, was first declared ominously in 1913, just after the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps*; as if a clairvoyant, Geoffery Whitworth closed his book, *The Art of Nijinsky*, simply: “if Nijinsky never danced again,” the final sentence began, “we should know that his fame would be safe—the fame of one who, more perhaps than any man living, has made beauty for his generation.”³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky*, 425.

³¹⁵ Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky*, 104.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Jacques Rivière, excerpt from “Le Sacre du Printemps,” November 7, 1913, trans. Miriam Lassman

The great innovation of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is the absence of all "trimmings." Here is a work that is absolutely pure. Cold and harsh, if you will, but without any glaze to mar its inherent brilliance, without any artifices to rearrange or distort its contours. This is not a "work of art" with all the usual little contrivances. Nothing is blurred, nothing obscured by shadows; there is no veiling or poetic mellowing, no trace of aesthetic effect. The work is presented whole and in its natural state; the parts are set before us completely raw, without anything that will aid in their digestion; everything is open, intact, clear and coarse. . . .

Le Sacre du Printemps is the first masterpiece capable of confronting those of the Impressionists....

Innovative as the music of *Le Sacre du Printemps* might be, the fact that it can be compared to that of Moussorgsky shows that it has retained a certain link to our past experience, that it is possible to find its approximate derivation. The same cannot be said for the choreography. It no longer has any ties whatsoever to the classical ballet. Here, everything has been started anew, everything fashioned on the spot, everything reinvented. The innovation is so shocking and so crude that the public cannot be denied the right—of which it moreover has made overly conscientious use—of rebelling against it. Let us therefore try, in the faint hope of accustoming the public to it, to define this innovation in some detail.

Once again, in my opinion, it consists in the absence of all artifices. As regards the dance in general, one might say that there are two types of artifices. First, those of Loie Fuller: the play of lights, floating draperies, veils that envelop the body and disguise its shape, the blurring of all contours; the dancer's chief aim is to lose herself in her surroundings, to blend her

own movements with movements that are vaster and less well-defined, to conceal every exact form in a sort of multihued effusion of which she now is nothing but the indistinct and mysterious center. Quite naturally, she has been led to illustrate Debussy's "Nuages."

Against this first type of artifice, the Russians openly declared themselves from the start. They had the body reappear from under its veils and took it out from that billowing atmosphere in which it had been immersed; henceforth, our only impressions were to come from the body's own movements and from the clearly visible and distinctly outlined figure drawn by the dancer with his arms and legs. They brought clarity back to the dance. I well remember those first nights. For me, it was the revelation of a new world. It was possible, then, to come out of the shadows, to let every gesture be seen, to spell out everything in full without any mystery, and yet be profound and pathetic, holding the spectators' attention as by the most intricate and enigmatic tricks. I made a discovery in art similar to that of geometry in the sciences, and the joy that I felt was similar to the satisfaction one experiences when watching a perfect scientific demonstration. At each of Nijinsky's whirls, just after he had closed, kneeling and crossing his hands, the buckle he had opened while soaring into space, I took an immense pleasure in mentally reviewing the entire figure described by his movement: alive, pure, precise, boldly drawn, as if wrenched in one block and by force from the formless mass of possibilities. There remained no doubts, no confusion, nothing that might cause me to hesitate; rather, I felt reassured and content, like a man who takes in at one glance a system of mathematical propositions from which all possibilities of error have been scrupulously eliminated.

Nevertheless, in this dance which to us had seemed so severe, Nijinsky was able to detect yet another kind of artifice, well before we had noticed it ourselves, and he accordingly undertook to cleanse choreography of it. Having experienced a certain unease in executing Fokine's creations, he understood that they still contained a certain artfulness, a certain vacillation, some sort of inner vagueness that would have to be eliminated at any cost. Conciseness

such as this could still be refined; such exactness could be carried even further.... From that day on, he would not rest until he himself had turned the screw, had tightened the bolts of the choreographic machinery, so that it might function with absolute precision. Those who find the feeling of something being done in a slipshod and so-so fashion extremely disconcerting, will readily understand him.

First, let us determine the nature of this second type of artifice. What is there that still obscures the dancer even after he has divested himself of all accessories? The very intensity of his motion, his passage, his flight across time, the arabesque described by his movement; "he travels along a road. which he destroys in the very act of his passing; he follows a mysterious thread that becomes invisible behind him; by his brushing-off gesture, by those hands that he waves in the air, by the thousand slow revolutions of his body, he gives the appearance of a magician busy at obliterating the traces of his handiwork; he will not be caught; we shall not be able to hold him fast and pin his arms to his sides, so as to survey him at leisure from head to foot."* Something interposes itself between him and us; it is that very movement of his; we see him move in a world parallel to ours but different from his; he has lost himself on his own voyage and we perceive him only through a haze formed by the accumulation of his gestures and by his ceaseless to-and-fro motion. More specifically: in the course of his first ten steps, the dancer outlines a figure that immediately thereafter tends to leave him, to escape, to go off on its own, like a melody which, once one has found its first notes, continues by itself, making its own improvisations, until it finally imposes itself on the voice that gave it birth. There is a spring concealed in it that thrusts it from its position. No sooner have the first movements been created by the body than it seems as though, having become aware of themselves, they say to their author,

* *This passage is taken from a note I wrote last year (July 1, 1912) on Fokine and in which I made several assertions, which today Nijinsky obliges me not to deny entirely, but rather to surpass, just as he himself, without denying it, has surpassed Fokine. (Rivière's notation).*

"That's enough! Now we do it by ourselves!" Unchained, they regenerate each other by repetition, by redoubling, by variation, drawing from themselves an infinite abundance. The body which at first had dictated their actions, now serves only as their support; it now is merely asked to receive and to execute them. Thus, in their hands, the body loses its own form and articulation. They rearrange it, correct it, retouch it; they create passages in it where there had been gaps; they join its members by a graceful and unbroken line; they erase angles, fill in holes, throw bridges. From head to toe, the body in some way takes on fluidity and fullness. An added elegance casually descends and rests upon it. Like a heavily made-up actor, it is no longer recognizable. The *Specter of the Rose* offers the best example for this transfiguration. Nijinsky's body literally disappears in its own dance. The only thing that remains visible of that muscular being, with its so strong and prominent features, are exquisitely fleeting contours, constantly evanescent forms. The atmosphere in which he is submerged is dynamic rather than multicolored, but he is rendered as indistinct by it as Loie Fuller by her luminous veils. As delightful as the spectacle may be, there is in the *Specter of the Rose* a certain inner lack of truth that can no longer fail to trouble me.

The innovation of *Le Sacre du Printemps* thus lies in doing away with dynamic artificiality, in the return to the body, in the effort to adhere more closely to its natural movements, in lending an ear only to its most immediate, most radical, most etymological expressions. Motion has been reduced to obedience; it is constantly made to return to the body; it is tied to it, caught and pulled back by it, like someone being caught by the elbows and prevented from fleeing. This is motion that does not run off, that has been forbidden to change its own little tune; motion that must come back to take orders every minute. In the body in repose, there are a thousand hidden directions, an entire system of lines that incline it toward the dance. With Fokine, they all ended in one single movement that joined and exhausted them all; rather than listening to each one, he listened to them all combined; he expressed them by substitution, replacing their varied

multitude by a simple and continuous arabesque. In *Le Sacre du Printemps*, on the other hand, as many propensities and occasions as are offered by the body, as many times does the movement stop and start again; as many possible points of departure the dancer discovers in himself, as many times does he rise again. He regains possession of himself at each instant; like a source that must successively drain all its fountainheads, he recovers his strength, and his dance becomes the analysis, the enumeration of all the body's inclinations toward motion that he can find in it. Here we discover in Nijinsky the same preoccupation as with Stravinsky: to approach everything according to its own orientation. His aim is to follow all the inclinations of the body very directly, regardless of their divergence, and to produce movement only through them. He cannot pursue them all at the same time, however, and as soon as he has followed one for an instant, he suddenly leaves it; he breaks with it and returns to seek another. A dance simultaneously faithful and cut off! Similar to our body, all the motions remain in perfect harmony with the members that execute them; they retain their meaning and conciseness; they remain joined to them as if linked to them organically. And the dancer, when we see him again in memory, instead of effacing himself behind his gestures, stands out very clearly among their multitude, like a Hindu deity among its many arms....

Just now we have examined in what sense Nijinsky reacted against Fokine; what he rejected and what he destroyed. Now we must understand the positive aspects of his innovation. What benefit did he derive from doing away with artifice? To what end did he break up choreographic movements and groups? What kind of beauty lies hidden beneath this reduced and dislocated dance? Without taking into account his marvelous adaptation of the subject of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, it is easy to perceive where his innovation constitutes an improvement over Fokine's dance.

The latter is inherently unsuited to the expression of emotion; one can read into it nothing but a vague, entirely physical and faceless joy. Indeed, in the fluid and continuous motions

of which it is composed, as in the large arabesques of the Renaissance painters, the emotive power of the gesture, its secret and inner force, is diluted and dissolved. On this undefined road on which the dancer sets out, the emotions find a too easy outlet and spend themselves in vain. Instead of the emotion being the object that the movement tries to describe and make visible, it becomes a mere pretext for erupting into movement, and is soon forgotten amid the abundance of which it is the source; it quickly loses itself among the repetitions it engenders. The body sweeps everything away; its freedom reaches into the soul, demolishing its innermost recesses, its resources, and its reserves.

By breaking up movement and bringing it back to the simple gesture, Nijinsky caused expression to return to the dance. All the angles, all the breaks in his choreography, are aimed only at preventing the escape of emotion. The movement closes over the emotion; it arrests and contains it; by its perpetual change in direction, it deprives emotion of every outlet and imprisons it by its very brevity. The body no longer is a means of escape for the soul; on the contrary, it collects and gathers itself around it; it suppresses its outward thrust, and, by the very resistance that it offers to the soul, becomes completely permeated by it, having betrayed it from without. The restraint imposed by the body upon the soul conveys upon the body a peculiar kind of spirituality that is visible in all its ways. There is a profound and constrained quality in this captivated dance: all that it loses in spirit, in animation, in capriciousness, it gains in meaning.

Fokine's dance had so little power of expression that, in order to make the spectator aware of the performers' changes of mood, they had to resort to facial mimicry; scowls or smiles. By adding and superimposing this upon the gestures, it merely demonstrated their ineffectiveness. It was merely an additional property; another type of resource needed to supplement the poverty of the language of choreography.

In Nijinsky's dance, however, the face no longer plays a part of importance; it is merely an extension of the body—its flower. It is above all the body that speaks. Moving only as a

whole, it forms a block, and its language is a sudden leap with arms and legs outspread, or a sideways move with knees bent, the head dropped upon a shoulder. At first glance, it appears less adroit, less diverse, less intelligent. However, by its compact shifts of position, its sudden turnabouts, its ways of coming to a stop and shaking itself frenetically on the spot, it conveys ever so much more than the eloquent, fast, and elegant speaker represented by Fokine. Nijinsky's language consists of perpetual detail; he lets nothing pass; he seeks out all the corners. There is no turn of phrase, no pirouette, no preterition. The dancer is no longer being carried away by a trivial and indifferent inspiration. Instead of lightly touching upon things during the course of his flight, he lets his full weight fall on them, marking each by his heavy and complete plunge. He leaps in a bound upon each emotion that he encounters and wishes to express; he himself upon it, envelops it, and stays for an instant, to imitate it. He forgets everything so as to assume its likeness for a short while; for some time, he suffocates it with his form, blinds it by his very being. No longer obliged to fashion a link between each successive gesture, nor to think constantly of what is to follow, he leaves nothing of himself in the transition. He completely abandons himself to the invitation of the inner object; he becomes unique like the latter as he designates it by the momentary immobility of his entire body. Let us remember Nijinsky, the dancer! With what eloquence he curled himself, like a cat, around emotions! How he hovered over them closely! How well he knew how to arrange all his limbs in their image and to make himself their faithful effigy! He is both an inventor and interpreter. All that he breaks, all that he takes away from the dance, is done to attain a realistic and complete—as if opaque—imitation of emotion. He takes his dancers, rearranges their arms, twisting them; he would break them if he dared; he belabors these bodies with a pitiless brutality, as though they were lifeless objects; he forces from them impossible movements, attitudes that make them seem deformed. But he does this only in order to draw from them all the expression they are able to give. And at last,

they speak. From all those bizarre and twisted forms arises a strange materialization; they distinctly reveal a thousand complex and mysterious objects that now need only to be looked at.

Indeed, it has all become clear and easy; it has taken on the very shape of that which must be understood. Here, before our eyes, has emotion been designated, held fast, and interpreted. Here it is, like a large doll, left behind by the dancer while he goes on. What could be more moving than this physical image of the passions of the soul. How different this is from their expression through articulated language. Not that there is any greater depth, any observance of detail, or any subtleties the spoken word could not render, but by means of this tangible figure we are brought closer to them and put into their presence in a more immediate manner; we are able to contemplate them before the arrival of language, before they are pressed upon by multitudinous and subtly varied but loquacious crowds of words. There is no need for translation; this is not a sign from which the subject must be interpreted. But though our intelligence fails to grasp it, we are there; we are present through our body, and it is the body that understands. A certain predisposition, a certain inner awareness. . . . Each of the dancer's gestures is like a word that I could have said. If at times it seems strange, it is so only in the light of my thoughts, since it immediately enters into my limbs, into the depth of my organism, in a low, complete, and perfect harmony. Just as music had us absorb its narrative in "large, easily manageable pieces," it is thus that we face this extravagant dance with a peculiar barefaced credulity and with a feeling of intimacy that "goes beyond words." We stand before it like children at a puppet show: they don't need to have things "explained to them"; rather, as the show goes on, they laugh, they tremble, they understand.

Nijinsky has given the dance a power of interpretation it had lacked. But would not his effort to relate the dance more closely to the body, to cause the dance to interflow with and confine it to the bodily strength of our limbs ultimately risk depriving it of its beauty and grace? Where, indeed, is there grace in these mean and clumsy gestures, forever held captive, forever

brutally interrupted whenever they are about to soar forth? There seems to be something cacophonous in the choreography of *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

However, grace does not signify smooth roundedness; it is not incompatible with angular design. I claim that there is grace here, and one more profound than that of the *Specter of the Rose*, being more closely bound up with its theme. This grace is not of the independent kind; it does not come from above to alight upon objects like a bird; it is merely the outward emanation of an absolute necessity, only the effect of an impeccable inner adjustment. In the choreography of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, all has been perfected with the utmost rigor; in order to arrive at the motions, as we see them, that compose it, Nijinsky had to cultivate and develop them over a long period of time; he chose them from among the confused tangle of our instinctive movements; he preserved them from others; he gave them a slight push and led them a little farther away from the body than they would have gone on their own. In short, he patiently gave them their singular perfection, and from that achievement a new and original harmony was born. As soon as one ceases to confuse grace with symmetry and with arabesques, one will find it on each page of *Le Sacre du Printemps*; in those faces turned in profile over shoulders turned front, in those elbows held tight to the waist, in those horizontal forearms, in those hands held open and rigid, in that trembling descending like a wave from the dancers' heads to feet; in that shadowy, straggling, and preoccupied promenade of the Maidens in the second scene. One will find it even in the dance of the Chosen Maiden, in the short and abortive tremors that agitate her, in her difficulties, in her frightful waits, in her prisonerlike and unnatural gait, and in that arm raised to heaven and waved straight above her head in a gesture of appeal, threat, and protection.

All during my analysis of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, I have considered the means employed by Stravinsky and Nijinsky as though they had an intrinsic value of their own, independent of the subject to which they are applied. This separation may seem artificial, and one may rightfully

object that I am trying to see an entirely new technique in something that has been created for and is meaningful only with regard to a very specific work. Some will say that this angular choreography is suited only to represent the still unformed and awkward gesticulation of primitive beings. This muted music can serve only to depict the deep anguish of spring. One as well as the other is well-suited to the chosen theme; neither goes beyond it nor can be separated from it....

Appendix B: Adolphe Boschot, "Le Sacre du Printemps, ballet en deux actes de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky, et Nijinsky," trans. Truman Bullard.

I should have liked to tell you how the audience received this new Russian ballet. But the critics were invited only for a rehearsal; I saw the work, but I could not know how the spectators would react under this double shower of acid.

An audience is occasionally so strange, so estranged, (so estranged from culture), so anxious to appear intelligent and up to date, so quick to side with the Unbelievables or the *Précieuses Ridicules*.... Because man does not change, and beneath the modes of 1913 one can easily find an eternal human obsequiousness. The crowd is always the parade behind Panurge: it follows those leaders who consider themselves an elite.

Therefore one had to admire the Russian Ballet. And, in fact, for several years people have acclaimed their splendid barbarism. They possessed certain new features, a violent glow, an irresistible seething—and, at times, the music had a delectable exoticism.

For the last two years, we suggest that the Russian Ballet has proven to be incapable for renewing itself. When they try to apply themselves to other subjects their fine qualities move us less, their faults grow worse and irritate us. One need only point to two obvious failures: *L'après-midi d'un faune* and *Jeux*. So the audience, even though it be confronted with the most foreign

esthetics, begins to perceive that it is being mocked, and it revolts. It loudly protested *Jeux*—did it protest *Le Sacre du Printemps*?

If the rehearsal was any indication, there are nine chances out of ten that this ballet was sabotaged—and sabotaged by one irresistible impulse: to die laughing.

They wish to show us the dances of prehistoric Russia: they offer us, then, to “go primitive” the dances of savages, of the Caribs and Kanaks.... So be it, but it is impossible to keep a straight face.

Imagine these people rigged out in the most shrieking colors, in pointed bonnets and bathrobes, in animals skins and purple tunics, gesticulating like dervishes as they repeat the same gesture a hundred times over: they paw the ground, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp and they stamp.... Flash! They break into two groups and salute each other. And they stamp, and they stamp, and they stamp.... Flash! A little old lady falls on her head and shows us her third petticoat. And they stamp, and they stamp....

And then we see the groups close into a tight bunch. The ladies are pressed against one another, jammed together like sardines, and all their charming heads plop on their right shoulders, fixed in the contorted pose by an unanimous crick in the neck.

The analysis of this choreography and of this mimicry could go on and on, and everywhere one is moved to laughter. Now why should we bother about all those jaded pirouettes?

In the second act we have a delightful dancer, Mlle Piltz. [But] the choreographer destroys her as it pleases him: he deforms her legs by making her stand motionless with her feet pointed in as far as possible. It is hideous.... And afterwards, when she moves, she has to hold her head between her hands glued to one shoulder to show us that she is suffering at the same time both from a miserable toothache and from that atrocious crick in the neck, which is the “poet-choreographer’s” personal signature.

Evidently all of this is defensible; it is prehistoric dance. The more ugly and deformed it is the more prehistoric. Well, it is one conception of it. I should prefer another, which leads one to beauty and not to ugliness. And perhaps such a conception would contain an equal measure of truth. One of the deformations in which M. Nijinsky delights is twisting his dancers to make them life figures on the oldest bas-reliefs. But the faults of design found in primitive artists do not prove that men themselves were deformed, anymore than paintings by *cubists* prove that our esteemed contemporaries are made up of a hodge-podge of tetrahedrons....

The music of M. Stravinsky is disconcerting and disagreeable. Without doubt it was supposed to resemble the barbarism of the choreography. One can only regret that the composer of *L'oiseau de Feu* allowed himself to fall into such errors.

One does find in *Le Sacre du Printemps* an incontestable virtuosity in orchestration, a certain rhythmic power, a facile invention of melodic fragments or samplings of sounds, combined with a view to accompany, or place, or characterize the scenic movements. Here we have a genuinely gifted musician; ingenious, subtle, capable of great power and emotions, this much he has already proved.

But in the desire, it seems, to *go primitive*, prehistoric, he has attempted to *synthesize his music with noise*. To accomplish this he set about destroying every impression of tonality. I should like to follow this eminently *amusical* work with the score (which I have not received). You can get an idea of it which matches my own impression [by doing this]: play on two pianos, or with four hands, transposing one part up a [whole] step but not the other: thus, for example, when you have *c – e – g* in one part you will have *d – f – a* in the other, *and at the same time*. And, by the way, if you should prefer chords separated by a half-step, don't worry for a moment. You need only avoid as much as possible any of those ignoble chords which up until now passed for consonances.

And this savage music, lasting for a half an hour accompanies the dances of Caribs.

Will the audience, which is the ultimate judge, see through all this? Will it understand that it had the right to laugh? Will it be angry?... Or will it proclaim all this remarkably admirable?

On that little point concerning contemporary mob psychology one would love to head the verdict of impartial and independent critics.