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Details and Reproducing Domination: The Birth of the Ballet School, the Prison, and Other Correctional Facilities

Regina Fletcher Sadono

On March 30, 1662, Louis XIV wrote:

Dance, besides the pleasures it accrues in *divertissements* for the eyes, forms impressions of decorum and resourcefulness in those who practice it, and in the minds of those who see it: these impressions can be of some use to the Nation, either for its politeness or for its facility in military exercises. (*The Establishment of the Royal Academy of Dance in the City of Paris*, quoted in Franko 182)

In his *Letters of Patent*, Louis XIV goes on to appoint thirteen dancing masters to safeguard the nobility of dance and to protect it from all degrading influence. These men are to meet once a month to discuss their curriculum, and anyone else who dares to call himself a dancing master will be subject to a fine. No one can join this elite group except by royal invitation, and these men and their heirs are to be in control of dance and dance pedagogy for all the days to come.

In the *Letters of Patent*, Louis XIV explains that the teaching of dance is much too important to be left in the hands of the unworthy. Dance has several important functions:

[T]he Art of the Dance has always been recognized as one of the most honorable and necessary for forming the body, and giving it the first and most natural dispositions for all sorts of exercises, and among others the exercise of arms, and consequently has been considered one of the most advantageous and useful for our Nobility, and for others who have the honor of approaching us, not only in wartime in our armies, but even in peace time in our Ballets . . . (Franko 176)

The connection between dance and the military is an important one and has had a long-term effect on the way ballet is taught, as well as on the aesthetic that ballet perpetuates. “Naturally, a great ballet always is an image of its epoch,” writes Jan Kott:

Moreover, it becomes its epoch. I understood this when I first saw “The Swan Lake” in the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow . . . The ballet dancers stand motionless with glassy smiles glued to their faces, stiff, prostrate, all of the same height—as the soldiers of the guard. They stand stiffly on two toes of one leg, the second they throw up high—as at an army parade. Then, suddenly, a *battement*, and the pirouettes begin. Corps de ballet busy themselves as the guard at the tsar’s inspection. This classical ballet *sur les*

pointes is abstract as a military muster, liturgical as an army parade, hieratic as a court ball. It has no face, and it is ready to react to a wave of hand—like the adjutants. A classical ballet is the guard and the court at once. Pushkin was the first to notice it. This ballet does not exist without a tsar. (Kott 20)

Kott, seeing the ballet in the late twentieth century, easily traces its relationship, not only to the military, but to the colonization of the body-as-subject that characterizes rulership by kings.

Ballet pedagogy, set in motion by Louis XIV in 1662, developed in a cultural climate that deliberately sought to colonize the body and enlist it in a form of socio-economic servitude. Ballet was a fertile ground for this predatory approach to the human body, since the aim of ballet, from its establishment during the reign of Louis XIV, was to appropriate grace and decorum in the service of a mystique of superiority that rationalized rulership by an aristocracy endowed with divine authority. The discourse of the contemporary ballet classroom is still permeated with this notion of genetic privileging: now referred to as “Genetic Pool.” This obsession with a particular body type reproduces the myth of Apotheosis that was structured into the first dance academy by Louis XIV.

The story of ballerina Merrill Ashley about her first class with the legendary George Balanchine illustrates this point. Here, Ashley’s story is linked to the stages in the myth of heroic ascension identified by Joseph Campbell in his book, *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (245-46).

Call to Adventure

Class with Balanchine! Class in the presence of this man who, like a god, embodied everything we admired and revered. Class given by this man who we had to please above all others. It was terrifying. Everyone in the class seemed straighter, more alert, expectant. We all had mixed feelings about getting his attention. We wanted to be noticed but we feared his corrections. What if we couldn’t do what he wanted right just after he showed us?

Appearance of a Helper

Balanchine entered the studio in a very business-like manner—no greetings, no idle words to create a friendly atmosphere. We were all at the barre, in preparation for the pliés that always started our classes at the School.

Crossing of the Threshold

Class began. We held the barre with our left hand, while our right arm was extended out to the side.

Encounter with the Shadow Presence

We hadn't done anything and we were wrong already!

"Stand like a turkey," he said, thumping his chest. "Chest out, shoulders back, head high. Look awake and alive."

Dismemberment and Descent

After we had straightened up a little bit, he said, "And what about your hands?"

He took the hand of a girl standing near me, tried to round the palm and make it more concave. He separated her fingers, indicating the right position of each one. He still wasn't happy: "Dear, too soft; looks like dead chicken. Must be strong, like this. Feel mine!"

With that the girl took his beautifully sculpted hand and squeezed it as hard as she could. Not a finger moved.

"Yours should be like that, dear."

Wonder Journey

To me it seemed like magic. Where did the strength come from? I tried to imitate him, but my hand simply looked like a claw.

Balanchine's immediate involvement in our first gestures fascinated and frightened me. Before, he had been only a distant figure, but now he was suddenly among us, touching us, chiding us, elaborating on the basics that we thought we had already mastered. He seemed so alert and animated, he didn't act at all like a man in his sixties. Slender, erect, quick and energetic, he didn't look like one either.

Tests/Helpers (Assumption of the Magical Object)

Slender, erect, quick and energetic, he didn't look like one either. That quiet, impassive figure on the platform high above the class was quite unlike the man now in our midst, who was tireless in his pursuit of perfection.

As we began our pliés, he demanded a perfect fifth position, with the heel of the front foot even with the tips of the toes of the back foot. Most teachers would give you a half-inch leeway or more, but he gave you nothing. Overcrossing was just as bad as undercrossing: the position of the feet had to be exact.

Then came the *battements tendus*: sixteen in each direction, more than we had ever done at one time. While we were doing them, Balanchine was down on one knee, next to various students, repositioning feet and guiding legs.

Supreme Ordeal

Each successive combination of tendus was faster than the last, and soon we were trying to do them faster than we had ever done them before. It was all so extreme and made our muscles burn with fatigue.

As the barre progressed, we did exercises in which he wanted us to move our limbs as if they were meeting resistance. He would provide that resistance by pushing and pulling us with his hands.

Apotheosis or Transfiguration

But it was when we moved to the center that the real surprise came. Suddenly Balanchine was jumping, landing, catlike, executing steps like a dancer half his age. He seemed more godlike than ever.

Return Flight as Emissary, or through Obstacles and Transformations

What a relief when it was all over! The class had been terribly stressful—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Fear of the unknown had been the worst part. We had wondered whether he would be patient and understanding or stern and unforgiving. We feared his high standards, yet he proved to be reasonable.

Return to the Threshold and Re-emergence into the World, Bringing Restoring Elixir

He never raised his voice or got angry, but he was very definite about what he wanted. He didn't praise anybody; the most he said was, "That's right." (Ashley 14-16)

This story of blatant hero worship rests on a narrative scaffolding around which Ashley constructs Balanchine in her imagination, and for the reader, in god-like proportions. The master has kept himself apart from these students, who have danced in his school for years without knowing him. They have seen him (Ashley tells us earlier in her book) only when he came in to stand high above them, Olympian, on a platform. Here is the reigning King

of Exclusivity, that private and privileged Wonderland where only the most radiant beings may ever hope to shine. Balanchine holds the mystical key to this world, the restoring elixir, the magic words: *That's right*.

The master delivers judgments. He makes pronouncements, thumping his chest. Next, the master seizes upon the *merest detail*, the position of a finger. This detail, as we will see, is the Glorified Obstacle that is constructed into the ballet classroom discourse. Ashley remarks how the master's hand is so beautifully sculpted, so magically strong that, by comparison, the hand of the young girl *seems like a claw*. One senses her hope that the alchemy of the class may someday transform her into a golden being such as she sees now before her *kneeling next to various students, repositioning feet and guiding legs*, symbolically dismembering these youthful organic beings into an assortment of mechanical parts.

"The training of the dancer is not unlike the initiation of a shaman," writes Joan Blackmer—a Jungian analyst—in *Acrobats of the Gods: Dance and Transformation*, "though it often takes *ten* years in the underworld space of the dance studio to complete the process of the body's dismemberment and renewal. Certainly, and above all, 'the candidate must watch his dismemberment with his own eyes'" (Blackmer 43-44). In ballet, the detail is the scalpel by which the dancer is separated from her body, so that she can be reassembled by the teacher. "I frequently received verbal corrections addressed to each part of my body in isolation," remembers ballerina Gelsey Kirkland, "figuratively dismembering me and dispelling any semblance of grace" (Kirkland 33).

When the mono-myth of heroic ascension is mapped onto Ashley Merrill's story, the reader of the Ballet Myth can locate a synthesis of light and dark forces in the figure of the ballet teacher, who is both Helper and Shadow Presence. This phenomenon reflects certain peculiarities of the ballet teacher/learner identification process, whereby the master absorbs the identity of the student, which then polarizes into the aspects of the Self that are idealized and those that are disowned. In the ballet classroom the individual is configured by *correctness*, discarding any aspect of her being that falls outside this narrowly prescribed aesthetic. The ones whom society casts as inferior, and therefore in need of reformation, are the most likely to be vulnerable to this process.

The aspects of the self, the body and the being that can't be assigned the value of correctness are disowned by the dancer and collected into the aura of the Shadow Presence, who can carry them back to her in the form of threats and admonitions. Thus in the ballet classroom the student can be blamed and even abused for an incorrect performance. Fused with the dark-

ness of the Shadow Presence is the shadow of the dancer's self-abnegation. In short, she becomes her own enemy. While the dancer constructs an external ideal to enact for the teacher's validation, she also constructs an inner antagonist to conspire with the teacher's dark side. "In the dance world," writes Gretchen Ward Warren in her recent book, *The Art of Teaching Ballet: Ten Twentieth Century Masters*, "of course, it is not unusual for dancers to forgive cruelty or eccentricity in teachers or choreographers if they sense they are in the presence of greatness" (184).

During a ballet class, the student projects herself into the teacher, and she also projects herself into the mirror as a screen which frames the Ballet Myth, forming a kind of self-policing gaze that merges with the omnipotent gaze of the Helper/Shadow Presence to colonize her body and her being. The conscious dancer lives out a sense of incorrectness and strives for an ideal correctness, which can only be awarded to her by the omniscient teacher/mirror. However, this process is hazardous to the soul:

To the extent that a dancer becomes a complacent reflection, he or she does not learn how to test beauty, how to discover its inner life. In this way, the mirror can trap a dancer's soul, ultimately breaking creative spirit. Such a dancer is created, but does not know how to create. (Kirkland 73, my emphasis)

The final product, glittering on the ballet stage, is the successful narcissist having a fulfilling and intimate romance with her teacher/mirror-self. "The relationship between the dancer and her mirror image," writes Kirkland, "is an intimacy of extraordinary power and potentially perilous consequence" (73).

The body in our culture is often linked to the feminine as a lower form of being, and ballet is a process that can elevate this feminine body into a higher state. "Ballet a woman's world?" asks Sigrid Nunez, in *A Feather on the Breath of God*:

But it was men who invented ballet—and the ballerina. It is men who put her feet in those shoes, and who take the food out of her mouth. All this to get the desired creature, more boy than woman, a kind of third sex—could it really be?—a woman with a penis, a woman capable of an erection. (Nunez 115)

Thus, little girls who feel outcast by the male-dominated society can go through a glass darkly into the miraculous world of ballet, and be *corrected*. Joan Blackmer, the Jungian analyst, writes:

I remember, when I was one of a class of rank beginners, being told by the teacher never to expect any help whatsoever from our bodies. The body, appallingly subject to the pull of gravity—the Great Goddess at her most insistent—longs to sit still, to sink into its mother soil. It reacts with pain, lethargy, obstinacy to the efforts of the dancer to move and train it. From the very start of dance training one is torn between the opposites of the body's lethargy and the ego's will. (Blackmer 26-28)

According to this doctrine, the body—with its appalling relationship to gravity—is the dancer's burden, it is her enemy, and must be lifted up into a realm of higher values by extraordinary measures.

This calls for heroic efforts on the part of both dancer and teacher, creating the ballet class as a proving ground for heroic ascension. In *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, Catherine Clément writes, "I recall having heard a very young choreographer explaining in disjointed words why she had come up with the idea of having her dancers dance along a wall, vertically. There is no longer any other way to reach the sky, she said, there is no longer any other way to rejoin something like a god" (230). Over the course of three centuries, ballet has conserved a technology that rationalizes the divine right of kings.

In support of this, Balanchine tells us in his inspirational Preface to *101 Stories of the Great Ballets*, that "The arts point to the glories we might attain as human beings, perfecting as they do God-given gifts some are lucky to have" (Balanchine and Mason x). Balanchine, as we have seen, was able to play his part in this script to the hilt, appearing to the young dancers in his school as a god-like entity with magical powers. Clément goes on to write that "Another dancer said without hesitating for a second: 'it is like the salt in food. It is the pebble in your shoe, the obstacle.' If, within the moral norms that are imposed on us, it is a matter above all of getting over obstacles and of overcoming resistance, dance on the contrary glorifies and sublimates the obstacle" (Clément 231).

The Glorified Obstacle is the key to the discourse of ballet, and is reproduced in the ballet classroom by the teacher's use of language. "Nobody knows how to stand," is just one example. In Warren's *The Art of Teaching Ballet*, there are hundreds. In today's ballet classroom, there are thousands. The dance student must struggle relentlessly against these Glorified Obstacles, which are more than just the physical challenges faced by an ordinary worker.

An illustration of the Glorified Obstacle and its importance in the construction of the Ballet Myth can be found in the Hans Christian Andersen tale of *The Princess and the Pea*. The pea is the Glorified Obstacle, manifested in the discourse of ballet by a scrupulous attention to the Almighty

Detail. "For the disciplined man, as for the true believer," writes Foucault, "no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it" (Foucault 140). "Details make the difference between the amateur and the professional, and between the professional and the artist," says contemporary ballet teacher, Larisa Sklyanskaya (Warren 193). "She has an incredible eye," says a student quoted in Warren about her ballet teacher, "and will find nuances and details to bring out an individual's personality and technique" (84).

Who owns the nuances and the details of the dance performance? The teacher or the learner? The performance of dance and language intersect, since the dancer can no more be conscious of all of the nuances and details that make up a successful performance than a speaker can be conscious of all the rules of grammar and pronunciation that combine to produce a successful spoken communication. The language student takes possession of the information that is presented to her in class so that she may use it to put across her own message. However, in ballet, the teacher remains in sole possession of ballet information. She seizes the Almighty Detail for the sake of the power it gives her. Ownership of ballet information remains a privilege bestowed by higher powers upon the worthy, the chosen ones. The teacher/choreographer performs, using the student as a mouthpiece. The dancer has nothing to say for herself, she is the trained soldier who marches in step.

"Balanchine's disciples still speak of his ballets as being dancer proof," writes Gelsey Kirkland. His ballets are "dancer proof" because the dancer is a living VCR who records and plays back the movements in a way that completely bypasses her own creative process. She is reciting, not speaking. "Balanchine's conception of the human form was essentially mechanical. The body was a machine to be assembled" (Kirkland 185). This conception of the body as something mechanical that must be policed by the teacher permeates the Ballet Myth. "When you move you belong to the world of physics and mechanics, just like any other machinery," says Gabriela Taub-Darvash (Warren 88).

Dance, like language, has existed in every civilization since the dawn of recorded history. It is a natural and necessary expression of the human spirit. In 1662, Louis XIV recognized dance as a way to cultivate the body and harness its "decorum and resourcefulness" in the service of "the Nation." On the other hand, the body has an innate wisdom, a *dance instinct*. "I believe that the dance instinct inside of young students must be encouraged," says ballet teacher Anne Williams, "then, very slowly, you add the

medicine" (Warren 263). The dance instinct is diseased, it needs the medicine of ballet training; the body is a machine for the choreographers in their dancer-proof works. "The individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others," writes Foucault (164).

Every ballet student must subscribe to the glorification of the detail in the context of an anxiety about time that penetrates her life: the pressure to start young, the relentlessly ticking biological clock, musical time, classes and schedules and contests and curtains that go up and down like clockwork. Most of all there is the cry of the ballet teacher: "There's never enough time!" mourns Christiane Vaussard (Warren 237). "There is *never* enough time!" yells Larisa Sklyanskaya (Warren 175). "Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power," writes Foucault (151-52). "This means that one must seek to intensify the use of the slightest moment, as if time, in its very fragmentation, were inexhaustible" (Foucault 154).

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Sites of Memory

Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness



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*Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*

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Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness

Selected Proceedings from
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Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
April 17-18, 1998

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELÉES

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
<i>Stacey Meeker</i>	
Sites, Sights, and Silences of Memory	9
<i>Eugen Weber</i>	
Oublier l'avant-garde?	19
<i>Jean-François Fourny</i>	
Details and Reproducing Domination: The Birth of the Ballet School, the Prison, and Other Correctional Facilities	33
<i>Regina Fletcher Sadono</i>	
Memory as Construction in Viollet-le-Duc's Architectural Imagination	43
<i>Aron Vinegar</i>	
Clichés of Unity: History and Memory in Postwar French Film	57
<i>Marc Siegel</i>	
Naming <i>la Guerre sans nom</i> : Memory, Nation and Identity in French Representations of the Algerian War, 1963-1992	65
<i>Naomi Davidson</i>	
Swann, Vinteuil et Marcel, et la mémoire involontaire	91
<i>Joseph Jenkins</i>	
French Folie: Memory and Madness in Buñuel's <i>Belle de Jour</i>	101
<i>Mary M. Wiles</i>	
Conference Program	119
Ordering Information	122