

"A PORTRAIT OF HUMANITY": BALLET, BEAUTY, AND THE AMERICAN REGIME

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I love ballet and am more interested in it than in anything else... For the only form of scenic art that sets itself, as its cornerstone, the task of beauty, and nothing else, is ballet.

– Igor Stravinsky

Introduction

Classical ballet, similar to many other classical art forms, has faced a great deal of challenges in American culture. Today ballet is seen by many as an outdated and boring art with no excitement or originality to offer the entertainment-crazed audiences of the twenty first century. Other dance forms such as hip-hop and modern dancing are prominent on popular television shows such as “America’s Got Talent” and “So You Think You Can Dance?,” but ballet has all but faded from the national picture. Ballet companies which once flourished, now struggle to keep the doors open, while many troupes invite new choreographers to set modern dances and appeal to a broader base. Classical ballet is on the precipice of extinction in the United States and as an art form it appears to have lost its luster across the world. The only place where ballet seems to continue on as a consistent popular icon is in Russia, where it is deeply rooted in cultural tradition, and inseparably connected

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to national heritage and identity. It is certainly sad that ballet has experienced such a decline but why should we care? Why should the decline of such an antiquated art draw our attention and concern? The answers to these questions lie in the relationship between the arts and the nature of a regime, a connection which may reveal something very important about the state of the American soul.

Americans no longer have a taste for ballet just as they no longer have an appetite for classical music, opera, and poetry. These symptoms all point to the larger disorder in our regime: A loss of love for the true, the lovely, and the beautiful. The purpose of this thesis is to determine why classical ballet is no longer popular in America through considering the history and development of ballet and to what extent it has been shaped by the democratic regime. Arts such as ballet have always had a slow start in the United States. Though ballet was formally created during the Renaissance, it did not truly come to America until a Russian ballet company toured the West in the early 20th Century. It grew from there and with the assistance of genius and extraordinary circumstances, ballet was established as a serious performing art. Americans once recognized ballet to be beautiful and valuable but somewhere between the chaos of the 1960s and the current era of apathy we find ourselves in now, that value has been lost.

Before approaching the decline of ballet, it is necessary to understand what ballet is, what it seeks to achieve, and if it is in fact something worth preserving. Ballet is an art which seeks to convey transcendent ideas

and themes through the medium of music and bodily movement. Ballets can be tragic or comedic, romantic or abstract. A ballet can tell a beautiful story or be completely plotless. It has many different forms but the one defining feature which makes an authentic ballet is its adherence to the classical language of movement. These steps and movements are at the foundation of the practice of ballet and they must be performed with precision and carefully used to interpret the soul and theme of the musical piece it is set to. Some words which are used to define ballet are grace, elegance, strength, and fluidity, but the sole purpose of ballet is the revelation of beauty through the harmonious relationship of music and perfected movement. Excellence and beauty are what drives the ballerina to practice for nine hours a day in a ballet studio for merely 90 minutes of performance on stage. Excellence and beauty are also what draws the attention of the audience; it is the exhibition of perfection which has captured the hearts and souls of audiences for centuries. It is for this reason alone that ballet is worth appreciating; it is timeless and transcendent. Most importantly, ballet's existence is a reflection of humanity's endeavor to discover and define that which makes us human, and to contemplate and pursue the possibility of perfection.

The forms which have replaced ballet are also reflective of the problem at hand. Since the 1960s many forms of dance have emerged in the performing arts realm, but the clearest examples of the departure from ballet can be found in hip-hop and modern dance. These forms often use contemporary music and are focused on the display of desire and emotion. As opposed to ballet, hip-hop displays the more vulgar side of human nature and pairs it with seductive music to arouse passion. Instead of dance seeking to inspire and elevate the audience, it is now a mere exhibition of physical ability and amusing entertainment. Modern

dance has also made great strides in the past few decades. Focusing primarily on self-expression and unusual presentation, modern dance seeks to engage the audience not through the use of transcendent themes, but as a pure appreciation of creativity and design of the movement. This degeneracy in the world of dance is not just a result of the apparent sexualization of popular culture, but also reveals a larger issue in the American regime.

In his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom discusses how the theories of nihilism and relativism have infected American culture. In his chapter on music and how it has affected the American mind, Bloom concludes that the unmoderated progression of rock and roll has led to the demise of the appreciation of beauty and goodness. In describing the current music culture, Bloom writes that "Nothing noble, sublime, profound, delicate, tasteful, or even decent can find such tableaux. There is room only for the intense, changing, crude, and immediate, which Tocqueville warned us would be the character of democratic art." (Bloom, 74) It is clear to see how dance has also been affected by this movement of nihilism. Ballet is intended to ennoble, inspire, elevate, and awe the audience, not accept and promote vice and depravity.

Many factors have contributed to the decline of ballet. The arts realm itself may be to blame as well as our culture's departure from the classical understanding of beauty. It is clear to see that ballet itself has also changed: the dancers and choreographers do not come close to the level of excellence attained by those in the past. In order to fully understand ballet's decline and its connection to the state of the American mind, it is necessary to consider what we as Americans consider to be beautiful and why. It is through this connection that we can determine why ballet was so important and if it is possible for it to return successfully to the American stage.

CHAPTER ONE

The Arts in America

In his book *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observes the character and function of democracy in early nineteenth century America. Tocqueville claims that the effects of democracy infiltrate every corner of American life. In his section on “intellectual movements” in the United States, Tocqueville discusses the way in which democracy has shaped the way Americans approach philosophy, science, literature, and the arts. Tocqueville first observes the peculiar fact that democratic nations scarcely ever produce exceptional works in the areas of science, literature and the arts: “One must recognize that among the civilized people of our day there are few in whom the advanced sciences have made less progress than in the United States, and who have furnished fewer great artists, illustrious poets, and celebrated writers” (Tocqueville, 428). Tocqueville goes on to explain that the lack of prosperity in these realms is due to both our foundation in puritanism and tendency to only focus on the “pursuit of wealth” in our daily lives, as opposed to valuing the immaterial results which leisurely activities bring about.

Tocqueville ties the history of Puritanism in America to our tendency to look upon arts and literature with indifference or even at times with disdain: “The religion that the first emigrants professed and which they bequeathed to their descendants, simple in its worship, austere and almost savage in its principles, hostile to external signs and to the pomp of ceremonies, is naturally little favorable to the fine arts and permits literary pleasures only with regret” (Tocqueville, 429). According to Tocqueville, the mores which puritanism inspired, endures in the American heart and mind and always will. These “austere” sensibilities are what cause us to be skeptical of any form which pro-

mote decadence or extravagance. Americans, in Tocqueville’s time and arguably still today, do not usually dedicate their time and money to fine arts. Arts such as theater, dance, and classical music seem to be separate from the mainstream culture and are instead reserved for a select group of people.

Despite his grim assessment regarding the fate of the artistic life in America, Tocqueville goes on to conclude that though democracy is not naturally conducive to the cultivation of the arts, it is not impossible. He explains that democracy in America also has its virtues in this respect: “It is therefore not true to say that men who live in democratic centuries are naturally indifferent to the sciences, letters, and arts; one must only recognize that they cultivate them in their own manner and that they bring in this way the qualities and faults that are their own.” (Tocqueville, 433) Tocqueville also claims that while democratic nations will cultivate the arts, it will be in a very democratic manner: “Democratic nations, in which all these things are encountered, will therefore cultivate the arts that serve to render life convenient in preference to those whose object is to embellish it; they will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful and they will want the beautiful to be useful” (Tocqueville, 439). Tocqueville believed that our natural love of material wealth would cause us to care little for anything which we deem to be “useless.” As opposed to an aristocrat who would spend an exorbitant amount of money on a single painting, the democratic man will care for all that is sensible and useful to him.

Tocqueville also perceived a close connection between the state of a regime and the character of both the artist and the consumer:

“When I arrive in a country and see the arts yielding some admirable products that teaches me nothing about the social state and political constitution of the country. But if I perceive that the products of the arts are generally imperfect, in very great number and at a low price, I am assured that among the people where this happens, privileges are weakened, and the classes are beginning to mix and are soon going to be confused with one another.”
(Tocqueville, 441)

Tocqueville viewed the way in which the arts are cultivated in a society to be a reflection of the state of that regime. When only a few great works are produced, it is a sign that only designated classes are producing art and only privileged classes are patronizing their work. When numerous “imperfect” works are created, it is a clear result of equality affecting every corner of the American mind.

Tocqueville asserts that in contrast to democracies, aristocratic societies are naturally more favorable to the arts and consider the pursuit of immaterial things to be of high importance. Tocqueville observes that the very nature and order of aristocratic societies is what causes great works to be produced: “It ordinarily happens in centuries of privilege that the exercise of almost all the arts becomes a privilege and that each profession is a world apart where not everyone is permitted to enter.” (Tocqueville, 439) The exclusivity of the arts realm in aristocratic societies is what ensures that artists are exceptional and that their works are masterpieces. Each artist has the time and resources to devote his energy and passion to his work. This lifestyle of leisure is reserved for the few and most capable of artists and more importantly, their legacy is carried through their posterity, who also devote their lives to that specific art. It is

their responsibility to immerse themselves in the realm of the immaterial and create something by which they will be remembered.

This is just the opposite in America. As Tocqueville explains, few men in the democratic regime will pursue greatness in the arts. Because the principle of equality is the ruler of the democratic soul, human ingenuity is always tempered nearly to the point of extinction. The democratic man, as Tocqueville explains, is constantly concerned with the pursuit of his material wealth, but furthermore, he is concerned with appealing to his peers. Thus the artist in America is not just striving to produce works for a small group of patrons (as is the case in aristocratic societies) but rather he is striving to sell his product to a vast number of people which consequently results in a decrease in the price and value of his product: “The worker easily understands these passions because he himself shares them: in aristocracies he sought to sell his products very dear to some; he now conceives that there might be a more expeditious means of enriching himself, which would be to sell cheaply to all” (Tocqueville, 440). This element of democracy, which equality lay at the foundation of, greatly changes the way in which the artist thinks and works and ultimately explains why there are many mediocre works but few masterpieces.

Tocqueville also discusses why Americans are naturally skeptical of certain types of art forms and why we cultivate the arts which are simple, useful, and focus on reality rather than the ideal. Tocqueville views the lack of great art in America to be a reflection of a more vast and complicated issue. Tocqueville contends that Americans are not inclined to engage in leisurely activities such as reading long books. He claims that our lives are so consumed by the everyday distractions that we have little time nor interest for anything that would cause us to ponder anything above ourselves.

Tocqueville explains that one of the reasons Americans do not produce great literature is due to the fact that no consumer wants to invest in a thousand-page book with sophisticated language and lofty ideals. Rather the average American is “habituated” to a life of enjoying simple entertainment, on their own terms and in a form which pleases the democratic intellect: “Habituated to an existence that is practical, contested, and monotonous, they need lively and rapid emotions, sudden clarity, brilliant truths or errors that instantly pull them from themselves and introduce them suddenly, almost violently into the midst of a subject.” (Tocqueville, 449) Though Tocqueville made these observations about literature in America, it is clear to see that this also applies to the arts and specifically to ballet.

In his discussion of poetry in democratic nations, Tocqueville contends that as opposed to aristocratic nations, poetry written by American poets will hold a vastly different form. He explains that democratic poetry will no longer focus on the objects of gods and other divine beings, but will rather be concerned with analyzing man himself. Tocqueville asserts that poetry will take this form in democratic nations as a result of the nature of the regime: “One must therefore not expect poetry in democratic peoples to live on legends, to be nourished by traditions and ancient memories, to try to repopulate the universe with supernatural beings in which readers and poets themselves no longer believe nor to personify coldly virtues and vices that one can see in their own form” he then concludes “It lacks all these resources but man remains; and he is enough for it.” (Tocqueville, 463) In light of this premise, it is clear to see why ballet was initially rejected America. Ballets are deeply rooted in the history of western civilization and the tales and stories of supernatural events, god and goddesses, fairies and angels.

Ballet is everything that the average democratic American, as Tocqueville understands him, would reject. Ballet, more than any other fine art, focuses on the ideas of excellence, beauty and perfection. It appears to be classic and noble, conceited and demanding. It is an art that requires attentive focus of the audience and demands an almost religious devotion of the dancer. It is entirely concerned with presenting humanity in its most admirable form possible and doing so through the medium of classical music and elegant movement. Furthermore, the roots of ballet lie deep in the history of aristocracy and its very form and appearance reveals over three centuries of European tradition. Classical ballets, such as the *Sleeping Beauty* exemplify everything the democratic man disdains about the art. This ballet is French in origin, its music is from a Russian composure and the fairy tale story is full of royalty and magic, love and miracles. It is lofty and dreamy and everything the average sensible American would hate. Our Puritan sensibilities should reject it, our materialistic desires should ignore it. Yet despite our history and habits, ballet enjoyed an era of fame, a spotlight moment on the American stage. This phenomenon may have challenged Tocqueville’s understanding of us. The only way to truly know the answer and to see if Tocqueville was indeed correct is to consider the history of ballet and how it came to America. The story of ballet is full of revolutions and rivalries, conversations and transformations. It explains how ballet came to be what it is today and ultimately, what led to its moment of success in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

The Journey to *Beauty*: The Story of Ballet

The story of ballet reveals the way in which people of different regimes have embraced or rejected the art, but more importantly the way in which they have helped to shape it. In her book *Apollo's Angels*, Jennifer Homans writes about the history of ballet from the Renaissance through the American era of dance in the 20th century. She discusses not only the formal history of the art, but also explores the way in which the choreography and ballets themselves are living examples of the cultures and traditions which formed them. Homans presents not just a history of the technique of ballet, but the conversations and ideas which have always surrounded it. It is from this story that we can determine in what environments ballet has flourished and what forces cause its demise. Furthermore, if ballet is indeed a classic art that can teach us something about human purpose, then the decline of appreciation for the art in America may reveal something about the nature of people in democratic societies. But in order to make a clear judgment concerning the relationship between democracy and ballet's departure from our culture, it is necessary to recall the times and places where ballet did thrive and in what manner it came to the United States.

When discussing the origins of ballet in her introduction, Homans writes that "it is a classical art. To be sure, the Greeks knew nothing of ballet. But like so much in Western Culture and art, the origins of ballet lie in the Renaissance and the rediscovery of the ancient texts" (Homans, xxi). Before it came to France, ballet was a spectacle of the Italian Renaissance: performed during festivals and mainly consisting of waltzes and group dances. While folk dancing surely existed well before the 16th century, it is during the Renaissance that ballet and its steps

and positions were created and fashioned into a formal art. As Homans explains, ballet began in the Renaissance and continued to mature for years after, primarily in France where it would stand as the pinnacle of French Royal etiquette for years to come. It was first an art for royalty and nobility; performed in the French courts and meant to instill in its audiences the ideals of propriety and order. (Homans, 7) Ballet first became prominent in French public affairs in the middle of the 16th century when Charles IX ascended the throne and established the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*. This academy was formed to establish a new-found love for arts such as poetry, music and dance in hopes that this would bind together the nation of France which was becoming increasingly divided by religious conflicts. They hoped to achieve this through the transcendent ideas of beauty, honor, grace and the omnipotent God. (Homans, 8)

Charles viewed the academy as an opportunity to mimic the Italian Renaissance ideas and ultimately "remake the Christian Church" through redirecting the people's passions and pressing them toward a reverence for God. Homans explains that this academy was focused on revealing a sort of common "order" which the ancient philosophers wrote about: "Profoundly influenced by Neo-Platonism, these poets believed that hidden beneath the shattered and chaotic surface of political life lay a divine harmony and order – a web of rational and mathematical relations that demonstrated the natural laws of the universe and the mystical power of God." (Homans, 5)

The members of the academy viewed the practice of ballet as a great tool for political and religious sentiments – an opportunity to demonstrate externally the internal workings of the mind and soul. The sight of dancing mixed with the sound music formed an image of the potential harmony man could possess. Homans writes "Indeed, the Academicians saw in ballet a chance to

take man's troublesome passions and physical desires and redirect them towards a transcendent love of God." (Homans, 5) Dance soon became an art with purpose, no longer a mere physical practice, but instead an important tool in the transformation of French culture and was therefore greatly influenced by the intellectual and political revolutions to come.

The first ballet performances which sprung from the influence of the academy showcased the purpose of ballet in its purest form. Homans uses the example of *Ballet cominique de la Reine*, a performance orchestrated for a Royal wedding in 1581, to explain the motives of the academy: "The artists who created the *Ballet cominique de la Reine* genuinely hoped to elevate man, to raise him up a rung on the Great Chain of Being and bring him closer to the angels of God." (Homans, 9) This idea of ballet being an art that "elevates" human beings and seeks to press them to perfection is perhaps one of the core reasons that ballet has been appealing and awe-inspiring to audiences for hundreds of years. From 16th century France to 20th century America, the question of "Is human perfection possible?" is one which dwells in the minds of all human beings. Ballet attempts to elegantly answer that question through presenting the harmonic relationship of movement and music and the dancer's ability to combine and interpret both.

Ballet's purpose shifted once Louis XIII ascended the throne in 1610. Louis XIII was the first monarch in France to truly recognize ballet as a means to heighten and glorify the throne. Ballet's purpose thus shifted from the platonic purpose of finding order and harmony and instead focused upon adorning the majesty of the King. (Homans, 19) Louis XIII was a devout dancer himself and worked to implement ballet into the practices of the Royal French Court, a tradition which would continue and be

furthered by his successor. It was during this time that ballet became very prominent in French aristocratic circles and in the court and legacy of King Louis XIV. Homans explains just how connected Louis XIV's legacy was to ballet: "He made it integral to life at court, a symbol and requirement of aristocratic identity so deeply ingrained and internalized that the art of ballet would be forever linked to his reign." (Homans, 12) It is here that ballet begins to veer from its original purpose and instead begins to serve at the will of monarchs and aristocrats to demonstrate the implied inequality of man.

By the beginning of Louis XIV's reign, the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique* had disassembled and new Royal orders for dance emerged. Homans explains that Louis XIV formed the "Royal Academy of Dance" in 1661, a school that would serve as the support and guidance for the court ballet movement of the 17th century. This academy, in conjunction with the *ballet de cour* (the group of dancers who would perform ballet at court) sought to revolutionize the standard of etiquette at court as well as provide a powerful art to demonstrate the sovereignty of the King. Thus the purpose of ballet had greatly shifted: Instead of seeking to elevate man and bring them together through the acknowledgement of God, ballet was now used to glorify the King and unite the nobility through one uniform standard for proper etiquette.

Ballets continued to be created apart from court procedure, there were ballet masters who taught privately and those who belonged to the academy. This division eventually sparked tension between the two sectors and led ballet to a crisis of identity. The Royal Academy taught ballet as a discipline for nobles and it was taught as a physical skill rather than an art. Homans explains that Louis sought to elevate the nobility and set an example to the people of France and other countries that the aris-

ocratic class held itself in discipline and practiced excellence through proper etiquette: "Louis signaled once again away from the martial arts and toward courtly etiquette: away from battles and toward ballets." (Homans, 16) For Louis ballet was a great political tool for his regime; it was an important part of the larger plans for reorganizing the aristocracy in France by uniting them all under his supreme will. He did so by attracting all nobles to Versailles and by instilling a new social standard for what was respectable. Instead of one's honor and respectability being dependent solely upon family name and history, the court of Louis XIV demanded the practices of grace and precision in dance. Ballet became an essential component of what it meant to truly be noble: "For to dance badly at court was not just embarrassing but a source of deep humiliation- a gaffe on a scale difficult for us to understand today." (Homans, 17)

This change in ballet led to heated conversation among ballet masters and the nobility concerning the true purpose of ballet. To the nobles and their teachers, ballet was considered a craft and a skill rather than an art. Nobles sought to transform it into a discipline that did not require music, but rather was self-sufficient and could achieve its true purpose without the assistance of melody. The ballet masters who worked apart from the academy were extremely hesitant to deviate from what they believed to be ballet's rightful place in the world: "Dance, they insisted (echoing the Pleiade poets) was a visual depiction of music, which itself was an expression of celestial accords. The relation between the two was 'built on the model of divine harmony and therefore... should have lasted as long as the world.'" (Homans, 17) The ballet masters who refused to accept the Royal Academy's principles wanted to preserve the tradition of the art and consequently the "model of divine harmony." They believed that without this, society's

balance and harmony would also deteriorate and ballet would cease to serve its purpose to provide order and unification in France.

Eventually the two theatres of dance: noble practice and performing art continued to separate from one another. At the end of Louis' reign in 1715, ballet was primarily an art for the stage: it was still performed at court, but the idea of ballet being only for the practice of the nobles was destroyed. The demand for ballet as a performing art increased and the creation of ballet stories such as

"The Sleeping Beauty" only added to the appreciation and love for the art by the French people. Homans explains this separation as a fundamental problem of ballet: "As an art, it was pulled between the strong poles of classical and baroque style. It was a vision and defense of nobility – not as a social class but as an aesthetic and way of life." (Homans, 48)

The end of Louis' reign marked the beginning of ballet slowly becoming an art for the people, rather than just for those of aristocratic blood. As a result of this, ballet's form and purpose would be shaped by the ballet masters, philosophers and choreographers who sought to return it to its purpose as representation of human excellence. The era of enlightenment is what returned classical ballet to its original purpose as the portrayal of poetry, but more importantly, elevated it further to be an art that not only reflects the harmony of the soul, but also the power and potential of the human mind.

During the Enlightenment, ballet was most influenced and reshaped by French ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre (1727-1810). Noverre sought to move ballet away from the aristocratic format and instead rekindle it to fulfill what he believed to be its true purpose. Homans explains that "He

wanted to turn the compass of ballet: away from a trivial and pleasure-seeking aristocracy and toward tragedy, moral dilemmas, and the study of man. It was not enough, he chastised, to perform beautiful movements against lavish sets and costumes that appealed to the eyes. Dancers must also “speak” to the soul and bring audiences to tears.” (Homans, 73) Noverre envisioned ballet as something more than royal spectacle or court-etiquette discipline. It was also no longer an instrument to turn people towards God, rather Noverre and the enlightenment era ballet masters and thinkers viewed ballet as a means to enlighten both the mind and soul of its audiences. It became, as Noverre once wrote, “a portrait of humanity.” (Homans, 73)

It is out of these years of the enlightenment in France that ballet would be able to stand independently from aristocratic pretenses or royal orders. Its masters during this time sought to preserve its elements of aristocracy “as an aesthetic way of life” in the sense that while they wanted ballet to be more than just an accessory of etiquette for nobility, they also wanted it to maintain its noble and beautiful form. Noverre was most recognized for his use of “pantomime” (bodily gestures used to communicate emotions and ideas to the audience), which helped form classical ballet into the story-telling art that we recognize today. In light of his desire to move ballet away from aristocratic restrictions and into the realm of poetic art, Noverre implemented pantomime into his ballets. This blended with music and dancing, allowed ballet to more adequately tell stories, independent of words or song. Noverre’s ballets were dramatic and at times mournful, he sought to display the deepest of human emotions within the movements and gestures of the dancers:

“The pantomime he was talking about would cut past the artifice of

court forms and strike directly to the human core. His pantomime would be like a “second organ” a primitive and passionate “cry of nature” that revealed a man’s deepest and most secret feelings. Words, he said, often failed, or else they served as a cover, masking a man’s true feelings. The body, by contrast, could not dissimulate: faced with an anguishing dilemma, the muscles instinctively reacted, twisting the body into positions that conveyed inner torment with greater accuracy and pathos than words could ever muster” (Homans, pg. 74).

For Noverre, pantomime was exactly what ballet needed in order to be elevated to the enlightenment level art he sought to create. He thought that ballet was superior to music or theater alone because it was the visual interpretation of music; but he firmly believed that pantomime was what would make it a truly powerful art comparable to poetry or paintings.

This form was criticized by many traditionalists who claimed that pantomime diminished ballet’s features of balance and control; however, Noverre’s ballets still drew attention. Noverre choreographed and held performances in Paris, Milan and Vienna: ballet was beginning to gain international ground. His ballets were filled with drama and passion; drawing strongly upon the theme of tragedy, Noverre’s productions addressed the aspects of humanity which court ballet, theater and opera could not. His style was indeed unique.

Homans explains, Noverre’s undertaking appeared to most to be contradictory in nature: “he wanted ballet to be elevated and ennobled and to aspire to the heights of tragedy, and he was a lifelong defender of the etiquette and formal principles of the high noble style of dance.” (Homans)

Noverre wanted ballet to be an expression of music and therefore a "portrait" of the human condition, while also preserving what he thought to be the necessary components of good ballet: its aristocratic form. This form was important to Noverre because while he strongly wished for ballet to be a performing art aimed towards tragedy and expressing the thoughts and experiences of human beings, he also considered the noble style of restraint and grace to be a crucial aesthetic component to the beauty of the art.

Despite the great feats that Noverre accomplished for ballet, his approach to re-directing ballet's purpose never really took hold. Noverre had extensive plans for ballet and what it could accomplish as far as an expression of the human mind and soul, however the political and social climates in France were rapidly changing. Noverre, after all, was an aristocrat and as Homans explains he "represented both French aristocratic style and the Enlightenment critique of it". The notion that ballet could look aristocratic, yet still be a "portrait of humanity" was something which did not hold well with pre-revolutionary France. By 1780, Noverre's ballets were obsolete to many Parisians who wanted nothing to do with the philosophies of an aristocrat. Ballet faded for a brief moment. Between the conversations of the enlightenment and the growing tensions of the first revolution, ballet took a brief intermission. It was awoken by the tumultuous shifts of the French Revolution and there it developed into a dramatic art form, manipulated for social-political purposes.

The ballets during the French Revolution portrayed the passions of liberated souls. These ballets were both sensual and at times controversial. They were performed at public balls and festivals for all to see: ballet was moving even further from an exclusionary art and into the hands of the people. Fairy tale stories were also appearing more in ballet. The performances were

no longer restricted to the adornment of kings or the presentation of the gods, but rather focused on the stories of peasant girls and lower-class French citizens. These ballets did not completely throw out the formal elements of noble style but the narrative of ballet had certainly changed. In many ways ballet during the revolution was directly reflective of the social and political climate of the time period in the sense that both had reached a turning point: both were no longer under the oppression of monarchy, yet neither had clear direction for where to turn from there.

Perhaps what was most significant about the French Revolution for ballet was the development of the concept of the *pas de deux* which began to be a central part of ballet. The *pas de deux*, roughly translated as "not two", is where two dancers (typically male and female) dance romantically in harmony with one another, but more importantly: they dance *to* each other. Their bodies intertwine in fluid movements to give the visual depiction of two people falling in love. Overall, ballet during this time was vehemently passionate like never before: "It was not just its seductive rhythm or the fact that dancers turned away from the King and towards each other: it was also the dancer's erotic freedom and sense of release from old constraints." (Homans, 116) During the French Revolution, ballet appeared to finally be free from the chains of noble etiquette: It was an art performed by the people for expression of the passions of humanity. Similar to the nation of France itself, however, this period of undirected and passionate freedom did not last forever.

The enlightenment had opened the conversation for what ballet should be, Napoleon's reign halted that conversation with the reinstallation of aristocratic principles but in a new form. His regime was to be built upon a foundation of discipline and specific order: "It rested upon a new social base: merit and wealth mattered more than

birth and ancestry, and military heroes and men of the French campaigns along with wealthy bourgeois families crowded into the new ruling class.” (Homans, 120) This new standard for superiority greatly influenced ballet in France, and consequently Napoleon’s reign forever left its mark on ballet. Homans explains that “It is no accident that to this day ballet remains (for better or worse) imbued with the principles Napoleon legislated across his realm: professional rigor and a meritocratic ethic joined to military-style discipline.” (Homans, 122) This transformation of ballet began when Napoleon took power and proceeded to directly control the operation and productions of the Paris Opera Theatre.

Napoleon appointed members of his administration to oversee the compositions and productions of ballet to assure that they were compatible with the ideals of order and obedience. Napoleon understood ballet to be an important part of the French society and culture; he saw how ballet was influenced during the time of the revolution and how it stirred the passions of its masters, performers and audiences. Ballet was the representation of everything that Napoleon sought to dismantle and in order for it to be of use in his regime, he would have to centralize and unify it. While Napoleon sought to “restore ballet and opera to their former grandeur,” (Homans, 119) he believed that ballet had been distorted by the chaos of the revolution and needed to be placed back into the hands of the state in order for it to serve its true purpose. Under Napoleon’s rule, ballet was limited to eight theaters in Paris and its masters were under strict supervision of the administration. Napoleon believed that ballet could be a powerful tool to demonstrate the greatness of the French state. Homans explains that “Pomp and magnificence were its essential tools of trade, and censors routinely rejected

ballets on light themes that lacked sufficient pageantry.” (Homans, 120)

Thus ballet was snatched from the hands of the people and once again diverted from attaining its true purpose as a performing art. It was instead manipulated to serve at the power of a superior for the benefit of the state, a theme which would reappear many times in ballet’s story. But if ballet was to reflect the order and discipline of the French nation, it had to be cultivated from the foundation upward. It was under this principle that Napoleon reinvented schools for ballet in France. The revolution had created many ballet schools across Paris, with varying techniques and styles. In order to truly perfect ballet as a means for demonstrating the perfection of the state, Napoleon instituted new ballet schools with strict orders and guidelines. “The idea was to take full control of the artistic machinery so as to ensure a smooth and professional product.” (Homans, 121) As Homans commented, Napoleon’s regime certainly left an undeniable imprint on the aesthetic appearance of ballet. During this era, ballet became more disciplined and organized by ability and merit, rather than by the muses of aristocrats and Kings. This era also demonstrated the idea that perhaps ballet’s purpose was not to glorify Kings or to dignify the people but rather to show the power of a Nation.

Under Napoleon’s reign, ballet’s purpose once again changed and consequently so did the technique and training for the art. Because ballet was to demonstrate power, strength and order; its masters transformed the steps from grace and beauty towards robust and uniform acrobatic steps. It was during this time that male dancer gained prominence for a brief moment “The most dramatic consequence of the French Revolution for dance, however, had to do with the image of the male dancer. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century,

the male dancer in the noble style all but disappeared, and men went from being paragons of their art to pariahs chased from the stage." (Homans, 122) During the first few years of Napoleon's reign male dancers were prominent in ballet and were used as exemplary models in the schools for the new style. These new schools sought to extend the abilities of their dancers primarily by training young men in intensive exercises that produced precision and strength in the dancers. The ballet master Auguste Vestris (1760-1842) was the most prominent teacher of this new style of dance in France.

Vestris was dedicated to elevating ballet, but not in terms of its philosophical purpose to portray poetry, but rather through heightening the difficulty of its steps. Vestris believed that ballet was meant to be a spectacular practice that would show to the audiences the abilities of the dancers who dedicated themselves to a life of improvement and practice of excellence. This new style was certainly in direct contrast to the old noble form, which appeared delicate and effortless, Homans explains that "Vestris's dancing was exaggerated even to the point of contortion and appealed in part precisely because he violated a central premise of aristocratic composure: he deliberately showed the physical work and strain of virtuosic dancing." (Homans, 123) Vestris and his col-leagues turned ballet away from the aristocratic style of elegant "composure" and towards the spectacle of strength and the virtue of ability. This new style also contorted the old steps and practices to serve the purpose of furthering the overall ability of the dancer: "Vestris devised new lessons that broke down the old dances (traditionally practiced as a whole) into single steps – building blocks – performed in order of ascending physical difficulty. Repetition was key, and dancers began with adagio movements and then progressed to pirouettes and small and large jumps." (Homans, 127) This new practice of technique is one

which remained part of ballet long after Vestris's school had closed.

While Vestris's style remained an essential part to ballet, male dancers soon faded out of the picture. Parisian society had changed after Napoleon's reign and male dancers were viewed as strange and distasteful. Homans explains, "At this point, and not coincidentally, male dancers began to look suspiciously like dandies, those elegant and effete descendants of the *incroyables* of the Directory who became a prominent feature in Parisian social life in the years after Napoleon's defeat at the Waterloo." (Homans, 131) Despite the fact that the technique was strong and rigid, the very idea of men dancing in costumes (strongly resembling aristocratic dress) was absurd and offensive to the Parisian audiences: "By the late 1830s male dancers were being reviled as disgraceful and effeminate creatures, and by the 1840s they had been all but banned from Parisian stages." (Homans, 131) Homans goes on to explain that while the male dancer would disappear from the stage until the 20th century, the influence of Vestris's school and the conversation it started would remain part of ballet all the way through present day ballet schools and companies: "To this day ballet contains a strong tension between classical purity and vulgar distortion: between restraint and exaggeration. Thanks to Vestris and the new school, every dancer feels the press to extremes built into ballet technique: a physical drive to virtuosity struggling against the constraints of an older noble image." (Homans, 132)

During the period of Napoleon and after, ballet's technique and purpose seemed to have been distorted, but this change proved to be an important part of the overall development of the image of ballet. It is from this important era that ballet gains its alluring paradox of portraying at the same time both strength and elegance, freedom and restraint. In many ways ballet's image

was literally transformed by the French Revolution in terms of its steps and technique. It progressed from court etiquette to passionate displays of freedom and finally came forth out of the Napoleonic era as a composition of both noble and virtuosic style.

Even during the revolution and the period of Napoleon's empire-style ballet, women's style of dance somehow stayed true to the ideas of grace and elegance: "If men distorted ballet in the aftermath of the French Revolution, women preserved it." (Homans, 132) While Vestris and his students sought to strengthen ballet and make it heroic, women moved to captivate audiences with their charm and beauty. Male dancers nearly disappeared from the stage by the early 1800s, but another figure took their place, she became the physical representation of the very essence of romanticism: the ballerina. The rise of the female dancer during the romantic period was very significant; mostly it was the developed style of the ballerina which revealed over a century of conversation surrounding the art:

"We might even say that the seventeenth-century debates between Ancients and Moderns has come full circle- not because they were resolved, but because they were internalized and had become part of the machinery of the art. Henceforth, the battle between antiquity and a more contemporary style fit to current tastes would not be an abstract discussion; it would take place in the bodies of the dancers." (Homans, 132)

The romantic period produced some of the most memorable ballerinas, and a mixture of the noble and virtuosic styles manifests itself in their performances. The heroine who brought us the idea of the ballerina was iron-

ically greatly influenced by virtuosic style, she transformed the image of the female dancer and brought it closer to what we recognize in ballet today.

Marie Taglioni (1804-1884), daughter of an Italian ballet master, dedicated herself at a young age to creating a new kind of ballet technique, one which included both delicate appearance and strong movements. Her style, stage presence, and unique training all worked together to create the illusion of elegant posture mixed with strong technique. Homans explains that Taglioni's style was unique because it transformed the image of the female dancer: "As she worked, Taglioni pushed her dancing in two seemingly opposed directions: simplicity and virtuosity. She stripped away a century of aristocratic effect and honed the exploits she and her father had picked up from Italian dancers." (Homans, 139) Her success inspired other dancers and led to what Homans refers to as "the rise of the ballerina": "Yet Marie Taglioni was one of the most important and influential ballerinas who ever lived. She galvanized a generation and drew some of Europe's best literary minds to dance: she was an international celebrity – ballet's first – and set the pattern for Margot Fonteyn, Melissa Hayden, Galina Ulanova, and others to follow." (Homans, 136) Taglioni's unique style was renowned: she performed all throughout Europe and left each audience breathless with her enchanting presence. She was the embodiment of Romance.

Marie Taglioni's role in the development of ballet was significant; she influenced not only the image of the ballerina but also served as the symbol of the Romantic period, which made a lasting impression upon ballet. In many ways, Taglioni and her contemporaries were the last glimpses of excellence of their generation. Taglioni gave us the image of the ballerina, the concept of Romanticism in ballet and the unforgettable

memory of ballets such as *Giselle* and *La Sylphide*. Her artistry was invaluable to the story of ballet, but not exclusively to the Paris Opera. Taglioni: made ballet popular internationally, her example inspired many other dancers in cities such as London, Vienna, St. Petersburg and elsewhere. The story of ballet shifted after Taglioni, and its future was held in an unlikely haven: Imperial Russia.

The story of Russian classical ballet is unique in part because of its origins: while authentic Russian style did not come to fruition until the Romantic era of the early 19th century, ballet was a part of Russian culture since the beginning of the Imperial era in the 17th century. This early history is important, for it is here that we find link between French and Russian culture and the affect this relationship would have on the art. Ballet began as a practice for courtly etiquette in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725) in an attempt to essentially westernize the Russian nobles. Peter sought to remake the image of Russia and particularly St. Petersburg in an attempt to move the nation towards his vision of greatness, which was undoubtedly, a mirrored image of France: "The idea was not only to shift the country's center of gravity away from Moscow and "open a window" onto the West; it was to radically recreate Russian society in a European image – to *make* Russians into Europeans." (Homans, 246) Ballet was a vital component of this transformation. As Homans explains, Peter was similar to Louis in many ways and saw ballet as a great tool for redefining the standards of aristocracy and redirecting the attitudes of the nobles: "Classical ballet thus came to Russia as etiquette and not as art. This mattered: ballet was not initially a theatrical 'show' but a standard of physical comportment to be emulated and internalized – an idealized way of behaving." (Homans, 247)

Despite coming to Russia through aristocratic circles, ballet was transferred to the hands of the serfs under Catherine the Great in 1762. (Homans, 251) It was during her reign that the state theatres in St. Petersburg were founded and opened ballet up to the general public, which eventually led to the expansion of the Russian style and movement away from French replicas of ballet. This change proved to be significant to the future of the art in Russia; primarily because of the change in selection of dancers: "despite its relatively short life, serf theater cast a long shadow over ballet. For generations to come, dancers were generally serfs or children of serfs, orphans, or from other low backgrounds. They were 'civilized' and 'made European' at state expense." (Homans, 253) This concept of ballet dancers being selected by merit rather than by station was similar to the system followed in France by Vestris and other ballet masters at the time. In fact the principles of imperialism are at the very foundation of Russian ballet, and while it did eventually develop into a more refined style, these principles, to some extent, always remained: "To this day Russian classical ballet bears the imprint of its roots: the way that Russian dancers submit to authority, their sense of duty, and the reverence and humility they bring to their tradition far surpass that of French or Italian dancers." (Homans, 254)

Ironically enough, ballet in Russia was essentially French in both manner of practice and aesthetic form, this all changed when the nation was faced with the invasion of Napoleon in 1812. After the war ended, a period of reviving Russian nationalism in all areas of the state ensued, including in the ballet realm. One French ballet master, Charles-Louis Didelot (1767-1837) who created several widely-cherished ballets based upon Russian folk tales commented on what ballet should look like after the war: "I need Russian peasants, all Holy Rus. Let

them do their folk dances... Your guests have become enough like Parisians; let them again feel that they are Russians.” (Apollo’s Angels, 257) Despite these attempts to “make ballet Russian,” it typically ended in disaster: either the dances were simply Russian folk dances, or they were too French in form for Russian audiences. Ballet seemed to have come to a halt and it required a revival which could only be accomplished through recreating the image of ballet in Russia. A French ballet master, an Imperial aristocrat and a Russian composer formed the coalition which saved ballet from ruins and ultimately established it as a truly Russian art.

Marius Petipa (1818-1910) was ironically a French ballet master. After encountering many challenges as a choreographer and dancer in Western Europe, Petipa left for Russia at age 29 in hopes of creating his own unique style of ballet. Being a Frenchman influenced strongly by both the French Napoleonic and Romantic eras of ballet, Petipa was an unlikely person to change ballet into a Russian art. Despite his background, maintaining his native language and Catholic religion, Petipa chose to live in Russia for the entirety of his life and consequently, organically laid the foundation for Russian ballet. Petipa was trained by both Vestris and also in the style of French Romanticism: His technique and training was strongly Parisian and it was this combination of elegance and Imperial order that assisted in the formation of the Russian style.

When Petipa arrived in Russia in 1847, Alexander III was Emperor of Russia. Alexander was deeply concerned with maintaining and cultivating Russian culture, this sentiment strongly manifested itself in the ballet realm during his reign: “He saw himself as a ‘true Russian’- naturally soulful and blissfully lacking the false manners and etiquette of the St. Petersburg elite. For the

first time in two centuries, Russian and not French became the lingua franca at court, and the tsar turned his sights and sympathies away from St. Petersburg and toward Moscow.” (Homans, 270) The new emperor formed a committee to oversee the reconstruction of the state theaters and move ballet to reflect Russian sentiments rather than mirror the French style. The committee accomplished two very important tasks: they moved to appoint a new director of the theater Ivan Vsevolozhsky (1835-1909), and instructed him to work with Russian composers such as Pitor Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) and composers to create new ballets. Homans explains that the committee’s appointment was somewhat strange: “At first glance, Vsevolozhsky seems an unlikely choice. A cultivated aristocrat and ardent Francophile, intelligent and with a keen sense of humor, he had worked at the Russian consulate in The Hague and in Paris and his tastes were distinctly European.” (Homans, 272) Despite his curious background and sentiments, Vsevolozhsky was a faithful lover of Russian art and his collaboration with Petipa and Tchaikovsky proved to be the most crucial and elevating moment for classical Russian ballet.

The first work which the three gentlemen worked on was a recreation of the French classic story *La belle au bois dormant* – *The Sleeping Beauty*. Tchaikovsky’s powerful and complex music broadened Petipa’s vision for choreography and challenged him to reconsider the steps and technique of his dancers in order to match the level of the music. Petipa’s choreography for the ballet was both unique and perplexing: “Petipa did not shy away from virtuosity – the dances are full of difficult jumps on pointe, multiple turns and fast footwork – but he tamed these bravura steps, ordered them, and pinned them into elegant, architectonic, and musically disciplined phrases.” (Homans, 276) Petipa’s choreo-

graphy inspired a new chapter for Russian ballet, one which was lucid and expressive. *Beauty* was the artistic representation of nearly two hundred years of history of Russian dance and compressed them into an elegant and alluring style: “*The Sleeping Beauty* was thus the first truly Russian ballet. It was an impressive act of cultural absorption: this was no longer Russians imitating the French but instead a pitch-perfect summation of the rules and forms that had shaped the Russian court since Peter the Great. With *Beauty*, Petipa found a way to take out the seams of French ballet, to expand its technique and expressivity while paradoxically reinforcing its strict formal rules and proportions.” (Homans, 277) Petipa’s ballet was a sensation amongst audiences in Moscow and the talented ballet master continued to choreograph these awe-inspiring ballets. The three men continued in collaboration and brought us some of the most memorable and cherished Russian ballets such as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. Through the support of Vsevolozhsky and the musical inspiration of Tchaikovsky, Petipa created the core repertoire for classical ballet as we recognize it today: “Under Petipa’s stewardship, the entire axis of classical ballet had shifted. For two centuries, the art form had been quintessentially French. No more: from this point forth, classical ballet would be Russian.” (Homans, 288)

Petipa accomplished what many of the ballet masters before him had attempted: he transformed the technique of ballet into an image that was appealing to Russians, while maintaining the important aspects of its fundamentally French nature. Petipa’s legacy inspired many ballet masters after him and it was the success of his works that shifted the stage of ballet away from Paris and to the theatres of Moscow. By the end of the 19th century, the political and social climate of Russia was shifting away from imperial and aristocratic ideas: “Their

ballets – indeed, ballet itself – stood for the past and a dying aristocratic principle, for a way of life that was rotting from within and under attack from without. Ballet would have to change. A new and defiantly Russian century in dance was about to begin.” (Homans, 289) The beginning of the 20th century proved to be a time of tumultuous change for Russia as nation. It was during this era, however, that Russian ballet was transported to the halls of Western Europe and eventually, to the skeptical audiences in the United States.

The Ballet Russes was the company that brought Russian ballet to Western Europe and America. Founded by ballet master Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) in 1909, the Ballet Russes toured all throughout Europe and across the Atlantic to bring Russian culture to their audiences. While the company was based in Paris, its origins and purpose were very much so Russian: “But although the company had its greatest successes in the French capital and drew deeply on the city’s artistic traditions and anarchic chic, the inspiration and source of Diaghilev’s ballet always came from Russia itself.” (Homans, 291) Diaghilev was an important figure for Russian ballet in the 20th century, primarily due to his innovation in Russian choreography. Diaghilev made ballet compatible with the modernism of the turn of the century, while maintaining its elegant appeal. It was through this transformation that the export of ballet to Western Europe was possible.

The Ballet Russes was world renowned by the 1920s and brought forth the dancers which would slowly integrate classical ballet into American culture. The dancer who became widely famous in the United States through touring with the Ballet Russes was prima ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881-1931). Pavlova was a graceful enchanting figure and successfully brought an element to the stage that made ballet appealing to Americans who had previously been

cautious of such lofty and foreign dance. The company did not originally tour alone, ballet was brought through the channel of other theatrical performances. Pavlova and her contemporaries were the pioneers of Russian ballet and were responsible for softening the hearts of American audiences for the eventual development of their own ballet. The ballets which first came to America included both classical ballets such as *Giselle* and the more modern productions such as *The Firebird*. This balance of bringing both aristocratic forms and new cutting-edge dances to American theatres is what sparked the interest of American audiences. In this sense ballet was viewed as both beautiful and antique, yet new and inspiring.

While ballerinas and groups had previously toured the United States and a few aristocratic immigrants formed small dance schools in the late 19th century, the Ballet Russes was the first successful mission to plant the seed of ballet on American soil. This was accomplished, as Homans explains, through the deliberate attempt to transplant Russian ballet, intact with its Imperial sentiments, to American dancers: "Performance by performance, class by class, over many years over many years, these itinerate Russians passed on their tradition. Not only the steps and techniques: they brought to their lessons the entire Imperial orthodoxy of Russian ballet, and it was in their sweaty encounters with students that the long process of trans-planting ballet to American minds and bodies began." (Homans, 451) Russia had given America the gift of Russian ballet, but more importantly, the man who would successfully make ballet appealing to the democratic heart and mind.

George Balanchine (1904-1983) was born in Russia and trained in St. Petersburg at the Theater School through his teenage years. His Father was a musical composer

and fled Russia shortly after the revolution of 1917, leaving young Balanchine to complete his ballet studies alone. Balanchine was trained in the midst of the modernist movement of ballet in Russia. Rather than embracing the new and abstract forms, Balanchine expressed distaste for such ambiguous and distorted ballets: "Balanchine came of age in this high-octane artistic atmosphere, and he was anxious to bring classical ballet- dismissed by many as an outmoded 'aristocratic' relic- into the world of 'progressive' ideas and art." (Homans, 325) Balanchine had a very clear and strict understanding of what ballet ought to look like, and it was extremely similar to that of the first ballet masters in France. In her book, *History of Ballet and its Masters*, Joan Lawson describes Balanchine's ballets: "These ballets are abstract in content and have a single musical purpose, to display the classical dance qualities of the participants as they reveal the purely musical context of the composition Balanchine chooses to interpret." (Lawson, 145) Balanchine sought to present ballet as a visual interpretation of music in a very intellectual manner. He often referred to some of his ballets as "essays" and they were always well-ordered and reached for perfection in delivery.

Despite his greater aspirations, Balanchine found his artistic vision to be extremely limited by the new regime. New orders from the Soviet officials mandated that all new ballets must be approved by the state before performed at the public theaters. In 1923, Balanchine requested to set his new ballet *The Rite of Spring*. When his request was denied, Balanchine left Russia to tour and choreograph for the Ballet Russes in Western Europe and eventually to the United States. It was during this time that Balanchine parted with the Soviet Union, both artistically and as a citizen. He rejected the ideology of the Soviet regime as well as the oppression it placed on the arts. Though

the ballet world at the time did not know it, Balanchine's departure from Russia was significant. While Balanchine set out with the Ballet Russes to explore boundless opportunity for new choreography in the United States, the Russian ballet schools and their masters would face decades of struggle and oppression: "Theaters were on their way to becoming bastions of an ideologically hardened and wooden classism. It was an ironic situation. The revolution had unleashed a maelstrom of artistic activity which the revolutionary regime itself could not contain – or, in the end, tolerate." (Homans, 327) In the following years, ballet's story shifted from Russia to stages in America, where even some of Russia's best ballerinas would leave their homeland to pursue a career under the tutelage of their defected comrade, George Balanchine.

Balanchine's success with the Ballet Russes was not immediate, nor did he accomplish his innovative ballets alone. Similar to the relationship which revived ballet in Russia, Balanchine's partnership with Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) inspired and created some of the most memorable ballets of the twentieth century. Stravinsky was a controversial composer and his complex compositions were often criticized for being too eccentric for proper choreography. Though Stravinsky was referred to as neo-classical and at times crudely progressive, he thoroughly understood the purpose of ballet: "I love ballet and am more interested in it than in anything else... For the only form of scenic art that sets itself, as its cornerstone, the task of beauty, and nothing else, is ballet." (Apollo's Angel's, 290) It was through this simple understanding that Stravinsky was able to work with Balanchine to create some of the most renowned ballets which the Ballet Russes performed in the United States. Balanchine moved to the United States in 1933 and began to lay the groundwork with many

other Russian ballet masters for the era of American ballet which was about to begin.

CHAPTER THREE

Elevating the American Heart and Mind: Ballet in the United States

The story of ballet in America began with George Balanchine and his tireless journey to inspire Americans to love ballet as he did. Despite many challenges Balanchine, more than any other ballet master of his time, was able to grasp the attention of American audiences. This is in part due to the fact that he was a defected citizen of the Soviet Union and therefore embraced his new homeland, but furthermore, it was his understanding that Americans were capable of appreciating such an art. Balanchine believed particularly in the younger generations and in the potential to turn their souls and minds toward the arts: "The new generation which would come to the performances will be the future citizens of the United States... We have to do something for their souls and minds." (Homans, 466) Balanchine's passion to, as Homans puts it, "build a new civic culture in America" (Apollo's Angels, 466) manifested itself in his efforts to build ballet companies and schools in America, but also successfully working with politicians, artists and other patrons to display America as a culturally-rich nation to the rest of the world. Balanchine used both patriotism and criticism to rescue ballet from the embarrassment of circus shows and establish it as a serious and uniquely American art.

In 1934, George Balanchine in collaboration with American ballet choreographer and dancer Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996), founded the School of American Ballet (SAB) in New York which eventually led to the development of the renowned New York City Ballet company. Balanchine and Kirstein's partnership was the found-

ation of American ballet. The two men came from vastly different dance educations and personal backgrounds, yet they both held the same vision for making ballet intriguing and relevant to the American audience. This endeavor was not easy, ballet was still not rooted in American culture by the 1930s and lack of funding caused Balanchine and Kerstein to seek other employment while still trying to keep the ballet school alive and work towards establishing a company. In 1936, Balanchine and Kerstein split ways. Kerstein went to find dancers to join their effort while Balanchine embarked upon a short-lived career on Broadway. Balanchine's time working with many famous artists such as Fred Astaire and others proved to be a valuable experience. Though he was not working directly with ballet dancers, Balanchine gained a sense of the American entertainment scene and when he did return to work with Kerstein, he had a clearer understanding of what elements a successful ballet company required. He had also achieved some name recognition through choreographing in the mainstream culture – connections which proved to be useful when he established the New York City Ballet in 1948.

The years following WWII were when ballet truly found its place in America and experienced an era of fame: "In these years ballet became a prominent American art and an icon of high modernism. It was a cultural transformation of the first order: after decades of chorus girl marginality and Russian exoticism, ballet suddenly seemed to represent something urgently important and quintessentially American, both in its dances and its dancers. It mattered in ways that it never before – or since." (Homans, 451) During these years Balanchine worked with donors such as the Ford Foundation to grow the New York City Ballet. He also created programs for ballet demonstrations in New York public schools and shared his

ballets with area companies in order to attract more audiences and grow the field of dance. Balanchine was not concerned with presenting ballet exclusively to privileged classes who would in turn support the companies, but rather cultivating the capacity to appreciate arts such as ballet in all Americans. His approach was unusual but it was through his efforts that connected the average American to the immaterial beauty of ballet: "Deliberately or otherwise, he tapped into a long tradition of anti-intellectualism in American culture- he brought ballet down to common folk, even while he also worked to bring them up to his more demanding and radical dances." (Homans, 465) Balanchine had achieved what formerly seemed impossible: he transformed ballet to fit the American narrative, while preserving the art's classical language.

Ballet's era of fame was indeed extraordinary, especially in light of Tocqueville's understanding of the arts in the democratic regime. Balanchine in many ways may have proved Tocqueville wrong in the sense that he gave democratic souls an appetite for an aristocratic form. Balanchine saw great opportunity for ballet in the United States. He chose to leave the Ballet Russe and work with Kerstein in New York because he knew that ballet was not just a European art, but a human art. It was Balanchine's profound understanding of beauty and its relation to the soul that enabled him to elevate the American audience to enjoy ballet, without degrading the integrity of the art. Ballet embodied everything that democracy ought to reject, yet history shows that for a moment, America accepted ballet and it thrived on stages across the United States. Balanchine's genius was at the center of this phenomenon, but was certainly not the only contributing factor. The time and context in which Balanchine worked was important. While the despotic nature of the Soviet regime drove

Balanchine and many other talented artists out of Russia, the generous patronage of Americans helped launch ballet's career in the United States.

It is no accident that the New York City Ballet was founded and began to be funded extensively in the late 1940s. Post-war America was the opportune moment for ballet to thrive. Homans explains that "the scale and speed of change in the ways people lived and how they spent their time was breathtaking. Leisure activities exploded." (Homans, 454) Americans were shifting from the mindset of war to focusing on how live well in peace, this included more attention and appreciation for the arts: "Ballet was quick to catch up: between 1958 and 1969 the number of ballet companies nationwide with more than twenty members nearly tripled. And as the middle classes grew more affluent, children flooded into suburban music and dance schools and new audiences flocked to the theaters." (Homans, 454) In addition to the cultural changes that made it possible for the arts to thrive, the political climate of the Cold War era also contributed to ballet's success.

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union produced a sudden urgency to demonstrate American superiority – not just in fields such as science, but also in the arts. During these years, ballet became more important than ever. The idea was not just to prove America's superiority, but to show that a regime of liberty, not tyranny created the most industrious, yet enlightened human beings. It was in this spirit that George Balanchine received a grant from the Ford Foundation to create an initiative to join the New York City Ballet with the School of American Ballet in order to create programs to grow dance schools across the country as well as bring many young dancers to New York on scholarships. This project was one of the many which sought to expand ballet, primarily for the purpose of Soviet Com-

petition: "It was no accident that the grant came just four years after the Bolshoi Ballet's first-ever tour to New York, amid widespread discussion of the "Soviet advantage" in state funding for the performing arts." (Homans, 467) The New York City Ballet finally gained the support it needed to sustain itself and the result was astonishing. Ballet enjoyed a time of widespread fame, not only in New York with Balanchine, but everywhere. In his biography of Balanchine, Bernard Taper explains that Balanchine's initiatives truly did establish ballet across the United States:

"In New York, by 1963 almost as many people attended ballet during the course of the year as baseball... Nor was it New York alone that had taken to ballet. Still more significant was the fact that regional semi-professional companies were springing up all over the United States, supported by small town bankers, shopkeepers, and others who not long before would have sneered at anything to with such a thing." (Taper, 1960)

Balanchine and his contemporaries had indeed established a stronghold for ballet. They did so through the grassroots efforts of educating Americans about how and why they should love beauty. Balanchine's ballets were the strongest testimony to what he believed dance should achieve. His ballets were all very different and at times seemed to be in contrast with one another. Despite these differences, Balanchine's ballets never failed to convey what he deemed most important: a clear picture of beauty and perfection.

While many of Balanchine's dances expanded the definition of ballet, all of his choreography was held together by his classical understanding of the steps and movements. Many of his ballets even seem-

ed radical and modern, but the music and movement always worked together to present a meaningful and lovely work. Balanchine extended the classical movements to their limits and beyond but they never crossed the boundaries of what classical art ought to convey. His ballets told the story of the music so precisely that the movements seemed to be in perfect harmony with every note. At times his ballets were plotless, yet the performance of the dancers conveyed more emotion and meaning than visionaries like Noverre could have ever imagined ballet would achieve. Balanchine's ballets in many ways fulfilled the unrealized dreams of many ballet masters before him. His ballets wrestled with transcendent themes yet demonstrated technical excellence. They appealed to a national audience, yet did not sacrifice the essential forms in order to appeal to a broader base.

Balanchine's works seemed to embody a piece of every major chapter in ballet's formation. His ballets were classic and noble yet provocative and romantic. His dancers often performed virtuoso movement yet possessed effortless elegance. The ballets ranged from love stories to tragedies, classic tales to modern narratives, but above all they upheld the highest purpose of ballet: the harmonious depiction of beauty and excellence. An example of how Balanchine attained this elusive balance can be found in his first American ballet: *Serenade*. *Serenade* is a plotless ballet which is set to Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C*, it has no cohesive story line yet the movement and emotion of the dancers reveals the themes of love and fear, joy and heartbreak: "It has themes: blindness and seeing, love and fate, death and submission. It has the arc of a lifetime: from innocence to experience from the first simple positions of ballet to the final ritual procession into a distant unknown." (Homans, 517) As Homans explains, *Serenade* was Balanchine's first

attempt to show American dancers and their audience that ballet was more than just a European spectacle – it was a deeply human art which revealed over four centuries of an evolutionary endeavor to depict perfection through the mediums of music and movement.

Balanchine's ballets were at the center of the dance movement but he was not alone, many other choreographers such as Anthony Tudor, Jerome Robbins, Robert Joffrey, and others all contributed to the era of mainstream attention that ballet enjoyed. Ballet even continued to be popular throughout the cultural revolution of the 1960s, a time when contemporary dance forms such as modern dance and jazz were growing in popularity. Homans explains that the contrast between ballet and contemporary dance created a conversation which gave deeper breath to each form: "It was not that ballet and modern dance were merging; aesthetically and intellectually they were ever more opposed. It was the contrast and collision of ideas and techniques, hotly debated by dancers at the time, rather than any peaceful commingling that stood behind the tremendous dynamism in dance in these years." (Homans, 469)

Thus despite a cultural era which promoted rebellion and complete self-expression, ballet was more popular than ever and Balanchine was certainly behind that success. Balanchine intended to instill an appreciation for the beautiful in the hearts and souls of his dancers and the American audience. Balanchine, more than any other ballet choreographer was able to take the ideals of ballet: grace, elegance and perfection and reform it aesthetically to make it valuable to the average American: "His ballets did not translate words into dances: to the contrary, he made ballet fully its own language – a physical, visual, and musical language – and created dances that could be seen and understood in their own terms."

(Homans, 539) In many ways Balanchine was able to accomplish what no other ballet master had before: he was able to preserve the elements of ballet which makes it so timelessly valuable while adding modern aspects which make it appealing to the modern audience. He took an art which would typically be deemed lofty and aristocratic and transformed it into an important and purposeful art for Americans.

This success was also possible, in part, because of the nature of the democratic regime. Balanchine's work would not have been possible in Soviet Russia or even if he had worked alongside Petipa under imperialism. As the history of ballet reveals to us, the art has always been manipulated by those in power. In France under Louis XIV, ballet was utilized for the larger purpose of asserting the all-encompassing power of the monarch. In Russia it was used again by Peter the Great to transform the nobility and improve the rapport of the nation. Only when ballet came to America was it able to fulfill its true purpose. An aristocracy would not have tolerated the works of Balanchine—his way of thinking about ballet was expansive yet fundamental, abstract yet strikingly clear. The genius of Balanchine could only thrive in America because his ballets were about real human themes.

Ballet's era of fame was possible through the special circumstances of the post-world war two era, but its success was altogether peculiar in light of the transformations America was facing internally. What's most perplexing perhaps is the fact that ballet reached its peak in the midst of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. During this time there was a movement which sought to challenge the classical understanding of the purpose of art. It was in many ways the continuation of the modernist movement from the beginning of the twentieth century. These artists were more concerned with the use of the body over the soul, valued self-expression over excellence

and ultimately sought to create works which did not deal with high ideals, but rather depicted the realities of the world which surrounded them. This conception of the purpose of art manifested itself in every corner of American culture: music, film, theater and even dance.

This ideology has produced what we know today as modern dance and strangely enough, modern dance is what has taken ballet's place in the arts realm. Rooted in choreography from the early 1920s, modern dance is the companion of nearly every ballet company in the country. Modern dance is difficult to describe; not only is its choreography opposite of ballet's, but its very purpose stands in opposition to what ballet seeks to achieve. Dance critic of the *New York Times* Jack Anderson describes modern dance's peculiar existence: "One reason modern dance is hard to define is that it is not so much a system or technique as an attitude toward dance, a point of view that encourages artistic individualism and the development of personal choreographic styles." (Anderson, 165) It is clear to see why we as democratic people would eventually embrace modern dance over ballet. Modern dance is focused on self-expression and freedom of movement, rather than high ideals and restrictive tradition.

This period of the rise of modern dance should have provided a hostile environment for ballet, but instead a counter-movement concerned with pre-serving the elements which make us human, attempted to hold art to the classical understanding. It was successful for but a moment, Balanchine's works were a beacon of light for the world of arts which was being blindly led into the darkness of narcissistic and nihilistic ideals. Something certainly changed between then and now, Balanchine's death in 1984 seemed to be closely related to the decline in appreciation for ballet, companies began to decay from within and externally audiences lost interest. It is difficult to

explain this moment in his-tory but as Homans explains in her extensive history, ballet's success, transitions and failures have always been tied to the state of the regime.

Balanchine's ballets were an example of the kind of poetry Tocqueville wrote about. Balanchine's ballets very rarely involved supernatural or divine themes, but rather they were stripped down, simplified, and strictly focused on the presentation of human excellence in movement and form. They were indeed very democratic, but as Tocqueville tells us, democratic poetry is not necessarily inferior to that of aristocratic nations. Tocqueville asserted that poetry in democratic regimes would present profound and transcendent themes, not through the unimaginable, but by the means of contemplating humanity. He claims that because democracy will constantly "reject the imagination of the ideal", poets will therefore be prompted "constantly to pierce beneath the exterior surface disclosed by the senses in order to catch a glimpse of the soul itself. For there is nothing more to depiction of the ideal man than so viewed in the depths of his immaterial nature." (Tocqueville, 462) Balanchine in this sense was a poet, who understood very well how to depict poetry to a democratic audience, and consequently cause them to be elevated to imagine and ponder the ideal.

Balanchine sought to direct democratic souls toward a love of beauty through ballet and moderate our pursuit of mere material enjoyments with the ideals of beauty and grace. This proved to be a difficult task and perhaps was only achieved through the collaboration of many unusual circumstances. Americans were inclined to reject ballet because of its aristocratic form and lack of rational appeal, as Tocqueville explains, democratic people detest any form which bows to an authority beyond rational human understanding. Tocqueville suggested that the American approach to philosophy

is different from any other nation in the world because we rely greatly upon our own individual reasoning when considering intellectual concepts: "I discover that in most of the operations of the mind, each American calls only on the individual efforts of his reason." (Tocqueville, 403) He goes on to conclude that this practice inevitably causes Americans to seldom consider the thoughts of previous generations: "Amidst the continual movement that reigns in the heart of a democratic society, the bond that unites generations is relaxed or broken; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors or scarcely worries about them." (Tocqueville, 403) This habit of self-reliance leads the democratic mind away from the contemplation of the unexplainable and toward all that is practical and rational. True ballet requires the unwavering devotion of the dancer and demands the undivided attention of the audience. Without the virtues of intellectual and physical discipline, ballet would be nothing. As Tocqueville tells us, democratic peoples are naturally repellant of any idea or discipline which requires us to go above our own realm of reason and understanding. Ballet invites the audience to depart from the earthly realm of systematic practicality and leads them into a world of proper order, harmony and ultimately, pure beauty.

Ballet directly conflicts with the natural intellect of Americans because it is an art which dedicates itself to depicting what words cannot explain and challenges the audience to contemplate ideals above the material realm. It is a form which is for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. This seemingly useless nature of the art is what causes many people to reject it. As Tocqueville explains later chapters, the use of "forms" are essential for a healthy regime, yet democratic people are naturally inclined to abandon them: "Men who live in democratic centuries do not readily comprehend

the utility of forms; they feel an instinctive disdain for them.” (Tocqueville, 669) He then goes on to explain that these very forms which we naturally want to reject are incredibly important for us to preserve in democracy: “Forms are more necessary as the sovereign is more active and more powerful and as particular persons become more indolent and debilitated. Thus democratic peoples naturally have more need of forms and they naturally respect them less. That merits very serious attention” (Tocqueville, 669). Tocqueville goes further to emphasize that our practice of forms ought to certainly be different than aristocratic peoples, if we want to preserve any vestige of human greatness in democracy: “In aristocracies, they had a superstition of forms; we must have an enlightened and reflective worship of them.” (Tocqueville, 669) Balanchine established ballet as a form, through teaching Americans the value of appreciating and adorning ideals beyond our earthly realm. In the midst of a movement seeking to force individuals further into their own selves, Balanchine and his ballets sought to elevate the American mind to ponder truth, goodness and beauty.

Ballet challenged the democratic philosophy of Americans because it requires the dancer to abide by rules which appear to be useless and the ballets themselves lead the audience into contemplation of high ideals. Balanchine’s ballets achieved this better than any others. They were precisely ordered yet visually and musically complex, this seemed to draw the attention of the American audience. His ballets had a sort of logical feature to them, yet the themes which the ballets conveyed were poetic and beautiful. Balanchine appealed to the democratic intellect while at the same time teaching the audience (and his dancers) how to appreciate beauty. Balanchine’s alterations of ballet were significant – without such changes ballet may have never succeeded in America.

Before Balanchine began to change classical ballet, the art was inseparably tied to its aristocratic past. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Diaghilev certainly expanded the technical structure of ballet with many of his modern pieces, but all of his works were stringently attached to the idea of presenting ballet as form to be appreciated for its own sake and nothing further. The new ballets during this time were shockingly radical and at times strange, embedded with themes which would attract the curious minds of aristocratic Europeans. Meanwhile the classics such as *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* were constricted in the aristocratic prisons of their original choreography. Without Balanchine and his innovations, ballet would not have found a place on the American stage. The haughty costumes, restrictive choreography, and inaccessible nature of ballet had to be challenged and transformed in order for ballet to allure and captivate the democratic heart.

Part of this transition for ballet involved altering the external forms which would offend the sensibilities of the American people. As Tocqueville explains in section on mores in democracy, certain social aspects that are supported in aristocracies, are vehemently rejected in the democratic regime due to our love of equality. He asserts that the practice of manners are among the customs which are fundamentally different in democratic societies. Our pursuit of absolute equality ultimately leads us to only practice etiquette and manners which are useful, simple and encourage reasonable interaction – as opposed to the practice of manners in aristocracies which require extravagant adornment of form and precise adherence to tradition. Tocqueville explains that democratic people thus only submit to manners which are in accordance with our rational understanding of utility and purpose:

“In democratic peoples, manners are neither so learned nor so regular; but they are often more sincere. They form as it were a light and poorly woven veil, through which the genuine sentiments and individual ideas of each man are allowed to be seen easily. The form and substance of human actions are therefore often encountered there in an intimate relation, and if the great picture of humanity is less ornate, it is truer.” (Tocqueville, 580)

Democratic peoples rarely ever submit themselves to anything which is beyond their own ideas or sentiments and as Tocqueville concludes, we will never observe the manners and etiquette which aristocratic societies hold in such high value: “Thus not only are democratic peoples unable to have the manners of aristocracy, but they can neither conceive of them nor desire them; they do not imagine them; for (these peoples), it is as if they had never been.” (Tocqueville, 581) Tocqueville asserted that Americans would never accept or acknowledge the manners of aristocracy. While our society has certainly never adopted the stringent code of conduct which 18th century Europe upheld, remnants of aristocratic forms made their way into America, but disguised under the cutting-edge nature of George Balanchine’s ballets.

Ballet’s history proves it to be a deeply aristocratic art: it was conceived in the midst of the Renaissance and was cultivated in the halls of one of the most infamous monarchs in history. Ballet’s language reveals these influences, not just in the stories or names of the movements (which are all primarily French), but in the very practice of ballet itself. One of the most fundamental movements in the classical ballet technique is the *demi plié* – a seemingly simple movement which requires the

slight bending of the knees while keeping the heels firmly attached to the floor. This movement is elementary and requires little ability, however, if performed even slightly incorrectly, does not fulfill its correct purpose.

This strict adherence to correct form is in direct contrast to everything the American heart and mind is drawn to according to Tocqueville. Ballet requires the absolute commitment to the pursuit of excellence in form and movement, unlike other forms such as modern dance, every movement and step in ballet are meant to be precise and correct. This ideology is naturally offensive to the democratic tendency to value self-expression over disciplined etiquette. Balanchine was able to alter ballet just enough to make it acceptable to the American heart and mind. He changed ballet in a way that had never been done before or since- he altered ballet to make it compatible with the American spirit, yet challenged the democratic audience to consider and appreciate the human exhibition of excellence found in ballet. America rose to the proposition and for a moment, democracy was refined. Balanchine challenged Tocqueville and proved that as vulgar as the democratic mores can be, Americans are still human beings, and arts such as ballet reach across the boundaries of the regime and dig deep into the heart and soul of all men.

CONCLUSION

Returning to Our Poetry

"If man were completely ignorant of himself, he would not be poetic; for one cannot depict what one has no idea of. If he saw himself clearly, his imagination would remain idle and would have nothing to add to the picture. But man is uncovered enough to perceive something of himself and veiled enough so that the rest is sunk in impenetrable darkness, into which he plunges constantly and always in vain, in order to succeed in grasping himself."

– Alexis de Tocqueville

Balanchine contributed a beautiful chapter to the story of ballet: he established the first American ballet company and ultimately set the stage for ballet to continue as an important art form. After Balanchine's death in 1983, however, ballet entered into a slow decline. Homans ties this decline partly to the fact that ballet everywhere has adopted a "common international style" and that in ballet companies across the world "the lines have been visibly blurred. Rather than perfecting a native tongue, they speak a mellifluous hybrid language." (545) The conversation between ballet masters about the rightness or wrongness of movement is what formed ballet and what solidified it. Today there is no such conversation. There is little debate over the quality of ballet because there is little room for people to discuss it on such objective terms. To say that one ballet is fundamentally better than another would imply that that one could make such a judgment, this element of discernment has been largely absent from the arts realm for some time. This decline is not exclusively a result of a change in the ballet world, but rather a shift in the American understanding of beauty. Ballet may not be as alluring as it was to Balanchine's audience, but that does not mean that

ballet itself has fundamentally changed. Ballet's decline is a reflection of a more complex disorder in democracy.

Currently, ballet seems to lack direction for the future and is hopelessly obsessed with a past that no artist can present in an intriguing manner to the American audience. Homans claims that the ballet realm is cautiously "safeguarding the past until the next genius comes along and lifts ballet's fallen angels back into the sky." (Homans, 547) The New York City Ballet, which remains the icon troupe for American ballet across the country, provides a clear example of what Homan's described. The 2014-2015 performing season of the NYCB was filled with Balanchine's ballets, a few modern pieces, and lastly a premiere of the French classic *La Sylphide*. There is little effort to create ballets similar Balanchine's; most choreographers are either desperate to preserve the original choreography of Balanchine and others, or completely focused on modern dance. Ballet has thus lost its message not only to the audience, but to the arts world entirely.

Tocqueville tells us democracy requires great men of genius to direct the people toward what they know to be true and to elevate them toward the good. Balanchine's efforts in many ways directed the American soul toward a reverence for the beauty ballet portrayed, but this is an endless effort that requires continual vigor. Tocqueville describes the character and duties of the statesman as "To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts." (Tocqueville, 7) Democracy requires greatness, even to invigorate the arts. Balanchine was a foreigner but he understood what the American audience both wanted and needed. Balanchine's experience on Broadway and in Hollywood made him

very attuned to popular culture and public opinion. He undoubtedly produced pure ballet, but he did so in such a way that the democratic man could take pleasure in viewing it. It was through his focus on humanity in his works that Balanchine was able to capture the American audience without sacrificing the meaning of the art.

The explanation for why Americans have lost interest in ballet delves into a subject much deeper than the arts – ballet’s decline is a symptom of a greater illness in the American soul. A 2008 survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts reveals that attendance to ballet performances among college-educated adults has dropped nearly 50 percent since 1982 (*Commentary*, 2010). This evident downfall is reflective of the larger problem of the loss of appreciation for the fine arts and more specifically, the classical fine arts. In his essay, *Our Listless Universities*, Bloom discusses how nihilism has infested the American mind. He describes how this ideology threatens the foundation of the western world and furthermore how relativism has destroyed the desire to explore the greater themes of humanity: “An easy-going American kind of nihilism has descended upon us, a nihilism without terror of the abyss, The great questions – God, freedom, and immortality, according to Kant – hardly touch the young.” (Bloom, 1982) It is clear to see how this brand of nihilism has worked its way into the arts and also why it is at war with arts such as ballet. Modern dance certainly existed during the time of ballet’s rise to fame, but it was not nearly as prevalent as it is today. Modern dance in many ways dismantles everything ballet sought to attain. The core principle of modern dance is freedom through self-expression: it seeks to allure dancers and the audience to appreciate art with no forms, no rules, and no higher ideals than the pure

exploration and presentation of the individual.

Originally ballet was slow to succeed in the United States because of its aristocratic nature, today it is rejected because very few Americans care for the themes ballet has to offer. Ballet, even Balanchine’s works, represent everything that the democratic man today despises: “Aristocratic and formal, it celebrates hierarchy and discipline rather than free self-expression; it places women on a pedestal; and it prizes courtship and feminine beauty over gender equality or ethnic diversity. Not exactly correct in today’s America.” (Homans, *The Balanchine Couple*). We have lost our sense of what makes art *good* or *bad* and without such distinctions, no wonder ballet is seen as irrelevant. Bloom explains that it is this form of relativism which has diminished the importance of the classics: “Yet without the belief that from Plato one might learn how to live or that from Shakespeare one might get the deepest insight into the passions and the virtues, no one who is not professionally obligated will take them seriously.” (Bloom, 1982). Ballet is not popular because we no longer have use for its story and relativism even grants us license to despise it. After all ballet’s stories are about right and wrong, good and evil, even the plotless ballet seeks to teach the audience about a transcendent truth.

Tocqueville anticipated that greatness in art would be rare in America, but ballet’s current plight is more than just our democratic mores leading us away from arts that focus solely upon beauty. Balanchine’s era proved ballet to be important to the American-democratic audience, its decline today, is clearly due to the distortion of democracy through the relativism that has caused us to turn away from beauty. The relativism which seems to have infected the American mind is what has caused the American audience to be turned from

appreciating pure and lovely beauty, to settling for mere entertainment devoid of virtue or high purpose.

Now more than ever before the future of ballet does seem quite grim. America was the safe-haven for ballet at a time when everything the art represents was under attack. Ballet flourished in America because it was the free regime, not the despotism of the Soviet Union that paved the way for the future of the art. Somewhere between Balanchine's death and the era of hostility to beauty we find ourselves in now, ballet's path has been lost. If the history of ballet in both Europe and America can teach us anything, it is that ballet's message cannot be destroyed, so long as there those who understand its purpose, and are able to effectively communicate that purpose to the audience. Ballet has often succeeded in unexpected circumstances, even against forces which sought to distort it. The force which is suffocating ballet now, however, is not the pride of Louis XIV or the tyranny of Stalin, it is a much friendlier foe that faces ballet currently and it is of our own making.

In this sense, democracy has been both the benefactor and destructor of ballet. The nature of the regime is what allows men of genius such as Balanchine to thrive, yet the natural tendencies of democracy, left unmoderated, have led to the demise of appreciation for all that ballet stands for. The problems with democracy that Tocqueville assessed have certainly contributed to the decline of appreciation for beauty, but this "easy-going nihilism" Bloom described, has turned our focus and appreciation to things such as modern dance. Ballet's story reveals that it has always required a purpose in order to be revived. It is reasonable to believe that ballet does have a future, especially in America. It may require another hero such as Balanchine, but ballet's return will also need an enlightened audience longing to rediscover what ballet can teach us about humanity.

Ballet has always sought to convey most poetically what words can only struggle to confess. It has faded from American memory because we are no longer concerned with the themes ballet has to offer: beauty, harmony, elegance, perfection. These are the profound elements that composed ballet and have made it timeless. In order to restore ballet, we must return to an appreciation of all that it represents. Ballet's fate is certainly not hopeless; the history of ballet and its journey to America reveals that the art can be reclaimed because of its importance to humanity. Ballet itself provides hope for America's current disillusionment: in *Swan Lake*, Prince Siegfried was deceived by the wicked black swan Odile who cunningly portrayed herself as the pure white swan, Odette. Despite genuinely falling in love with the elegant swan princess, his base desires and ignorance lead Siegfried into the arms of a malevolent impostor. *Swan Lake*, like so many other ballets, is a story about the weakness and strength of human nature, about our capacity for evil and beauty, vice and virtue, and the ultimate triumph of truth over deception. We can only hope that the American mind has been temporarily misled, that our souls will soon be freed from this deceptive prison, and that eventually we will again embrace art which is true, excellent, and beautiful.

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