Balanchine's Formalism

BY DAVID MICHAEL LEVIN

What are the elements that constitute the singular beauty of classical ballet? One might say: Among other things, certainly, a tension between weight and weightlessness. But George Balanchine was one of the first to regard this tension as the concealed essence of the ballet art, and especially as the essence of the phenomenon of grace. Discriminating this essence as the telos of a new ballet aesthetic, Balanchine was also one of the first to demonstrate how it so informs the classical idiom that, when it is properly isolated, exhibited and—in a work—released, it can be exquisitely expressive entirely on its own. The expressivity of classical dance is indeed possible without the various resources of mimetic and symbolic convention. Or, in other words, classical ballet is not essentially mimetic, not essentially representational; rather, these functions merely enclose what *is* of the essence: the immanent sensuous beauty and grace of the dancing body.[1] Balanchine has mastered the

1 See André Levinson, "The Spirit of Classic Dance," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, IX/3 (March, 1925), pp. 165-177. Levinson does not fully espouse ballet formalism; but he does wish to repudiate the notion that ballet aesthetics must depend on analogies. Ballet, he asserts, is a distinct and autonomous art form; its aims, principles, and elements cannot be borrowed from the other arts nor can they be properly interpreted by means of the categories that fit other arts. Rayner Heppenstall, however, was indeed an ardent herald of ballet formalism: "Ballet is not expressive in literary senses. By its nature, it expresses only itself, which is to say, certain general qualities of style." See his *Apology for Dancing* (London, 1936), p. 195. "The Dancer," he argues, "must always be concerned, supremely, with muscle, not soul, not expression, not literary significance." *Op. cit.*, p. 125. Heppenstall is pleading, clearly, for a formalism in ballet semantics. This is not the same as pleading for a sweeping formalism in syntax. And indeed, he did not warmly welcome the syntactic freedom of modern dance. Ballet must present "the 'significance' of physical movement, in its own right." *Op. cit.*, p. 126. Thus ballet, possessed of its own quite peculiar "expressive functions," must be regarded as altogether distinct from the narrative arts, and especially from theatre. Heppenstall's formalism differs from Clive Bell's more extreme position. For Heppenstall says that, "the whole of life hangs together so completely, and the Dance is so profoundly rooted in the whole of life, that Ballet can be fully understood only by reference to every other order of human activity." *Op. cit.*, p. 147. Compare the foregoing with Bell's chapter called "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" in his *Art* (New York, 1958), pp. 15-34.

deepest logic of this intrinsic, expressive power of the human body; has followed, in particular, its surprising constraints on costume and stage décor. To release such an essence requires a very delicate touch. For it is most easily presented in concealment. As we shall see, costuming and staging can make all the difference.

Modernism, in this context, is the aesthetic principle that accounts for the privilege being given to the revelation of this essence, this sort of essence. And modernism demands the exclusion of every element that might veil, or mute, or distract from the conditions of the revelation. Formalism is a direct consequence of this chosen aesthetic. It is not, and never has been, for Balanchine, an end in itself. The cherished essence of classical ballet—its syntactical treasures—will remain deeply sublimated, to the extent that there are any semantic elements in the presentation of the dance that must be taken as mimetic or in some other way representational.

The timelessness of Balanchine's miraculous art amounts to this: that he found the possibility of drama in a ballet form, which lets the semantical transparencies of modernism articulate, or heighten, the innermost syntactical treasures of classicism. Or, considering this timelessness in a different focus, it amounts to the tense simultaneity of the body's weight and weightlessness. And in this supernatural instant, a sublime essence is brought to presence: the dancer's capacity to suspend the natural condition of his body in the very act of acknowledging it.

Agon (1957); *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* (1960); *Violin Concerto*, *Duo Concertant*, *Symphony in Three Movements* (1972). These are demanding works that offer a difficult and, for many of us, a perplexing pleasure. These are ballets which preserve the classical choreographic syntax of movements and attitudes, yet defy a venerable tradition of staging and costume. Their austere production, so exquisitely reduced and uncomplicated, allows us to perceive the most elementary, immanent expressiveness of the classical ballet forms; and somehow, in this very elusive process of illumination, the phenomenal presence of the forms is richly altered. Formalism, I want to show, can explain some of George Balanchine's most memorable and certainly most innovative ballets.[2]

What is this formalism? What is its particular modernity? We know

2 I wish to distinguish between the ballets that establish Balanchine's greatness and the ballets that mainly establish the originality of his genius. The latter are those produced in accordance with the principles of formalism, whereas the former certainly include numerous works constructed within the traditional conventions of the art. By no means am I disposed to argue that the formalist ballets, as such, are superior to the traditional ones!

that the modernist aesthetic has brought to articulation certain long-suppressed resources in painting and sculpture. What, then, does it mean to say that Balanchine's experiments with formalism have similarly demonstrated one of classical ballet's innermost possibilities?

The attempted modernity of *Chopiniana*, the recent issue of a misguided ardor, might seem to provide some grounds for doubting that ballet can tolerate the conditions of formalism. But we must remember that the New York City Ballet's *Chopiniana* is not an original ballet, but only a revised "modern" production of Fokine's *Les Sylphides* of 1909. Still, consideration of its aesthetic infelicities might gain us access to the secret ambition—and clear logic—of Balanchine's art.

In his review of *Chopiniana*, Dale Harris[3] rightly argues that this production purports merely to divest the original ballet of those romantic realms of meaning that constitute its historically right yet—from a metaphysical standpoint—quite "accidental" decorative scaffolding (principally, the décor and costumes), and to reveal thereby the hidden beauty of its simpler, quintessential structure. It has, in fact, robbed the ballet of a most delicate sense and charm.[4] In the case, then, of *Les Sylphides*, the apparently superficial embroidery of the ballet—which Rayner Heppenstall has aptly subsumed under the category "Moonlight and Muslin,"[5] and in which a particular texture and quality of sense are brought to life—cannot be detached from some apparently "hidden" choreographic structure without fatally touching its peculiar aesthetic essence. The hidden beauty is just an illusion, for the essential structure has been so tightly, so rightly, expressed through the immediate, sentimental intelligibility of precisely those "decorations." Costumes and décor, we find, cannot always be subsumed under the category of "mere decoration." (Similarly, the pedestal of a sculpture and the frame of a painting are not invariably added as mere decoration. Michelangelo's statue of Moses requires a pedestal, just as the paintings of Van Eyck and Corot, for example, works constructed in the knowledge of their final condition, quite evidently require their frames. But if we put a pedestal under Robert Morris' polyhedrons or under some of Henry Moore's huge sculptures; or if we put a conventional frame around Monet's *Water Lilies*, we are certainly adding mere

3 The Harris review, which it is an uncommon pleasure to read in these times of careless reviews, appeared in *Ballet Review*, IV/2 (1972), pp. 25-32.

4 Just what Fokine wanted to achieve is stated in "Fokine's Theories on the Art of Ballet," in Cyril Beaumont's *Michel Fokine and His Ballets* (London, 1945), pp. 135-152.

5 See *Apology for Dancing*, p. 51. Note, in this regard, his prophetic statement: "Ballet may well come to dispense with decor altogether, except what the lighting can provide." *Op. cit.*, p. 168.

decorations, which would actually subtract from their aesthetic quantity. In the case of Anthony Caro's sculptures, the presence of a pedestal would contradict their sculptural essence.)

Let us dismiss, then, the problematic *Chopiniana*, and consider instead the numerous ballets that exhibit the particular innovations of Balanchine's aesthetic. My principal contention is that this master choreographer came to understand, more profoundly perhaps than anyone before him, the possibility of abstracting the pure classical syntax of the mobile human body as the defining condition, or essence, of the ballet art (the essence toward which, he thought, his favorite precursors were variously striving?); and that, consenting to this possibility, he boldly completed the development of a modernist formalism, which would be phenomenologically adequate—as no other possible aesthetic could be—to the consummate release and expression of this sublime, or implicit, essence.[6] (I do not mean to suggest that Balanchine never has chosen to set aside this formalism. He has, indeed, many times, preferred to produce ballets in the older, more "theatical" style. His traditional ballets—such as the narrative *La Valse*—will also be admired and remembered; but simply because they are exquisite inventions, and not because they introduce another possible aesthetic.) More particularly, I would like to concentrate on the striking affinities I am wont to discern between Balanchine's altogether original interpretation of the ballet art and the no less original aesthetic that defines the paintings and sculptures we shall call, after Clement Greenberg, "modernist art."

According to Greenberg, modernist painting and sculpture consummate an intrinsically logical progression of these traditional arts, which have passed through four stages: first, a painterly aesthetic (the theory of Alberti's treatise *On Painting* of 1435), committed to the simplicity of actual *mimesis*, the faithful representation of the human reality; second, an aesthetic which subordinated the demand for exact representation to the demand for a sensuous yet still lucid figuration (as in Matisse's 1916 *The Piano Lesson* and Klee's 1912 *Actor's Mask*); third, an aesthetic which kept figuration, but distorted and perplexed it

6 Balanchine's indebtedness to Marius Petipa is, of course, well documented. See, for example, Lincoln Kirstein's studies "Balanchine Musagète," in *Theatre Arts* (November, 1947), and "Balanchine and the Classic Revival," *Ibid.* (December 1947). See also Balanchine's own gloss on his *Le Baiser de la Fée* (1928), in *Stravinsky in the Theatre*, edited by Minna Lederman (New York, 1949). I am not saying that Balanchine invented the formalist aesthetic, nor am I claiming that he was the first ballet master to move in the direction of modernism. My point is, rather, that Balanchine was the first to accept it without qualification, and the first to work out the uncompromising demands, the exacting visual logic, of the modernist choice. Balanchine discovered how to accomplish the intentions of modernism.

and rendered it entirely abstract, so that the expressiveness of the art—powerfully heightened—became a function, not of some discriminable symbol or subject-matter faithfully transcribed, but rather of the sensuous properties of the abstractly presented structure (as in Picasso's 1912 *Torero* and de Kooning's 1957 *Parc Rosenberg*); finally, an aesthetic which demanded the total annihilation—or anyway, the precarious suppression—of all figurative tendencies. We might summarize this progression by saying that an aesthetic of immanence (an aesthetic of self-revealing presence) has come to replace the earlier aesthetic of mimetic connotation and transcendent symbolism. For the modernist aesthetic (exhibited to various degrees, for example, in the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella; the sculptures of Anthony Caro and David Smith) challenges the work of art to reveal, to make present (I do not say: to represent) its defining condition as art. It requires moreover that the work accomplish this in a self-referential, or reflexive, manner—solely in terms of the abstract, sensuous properties residing in, and constitutive of, the structure itself. Thus, for the modernist aesthetic, the "form" of the work and its "content" (prepared for its formal role because of its pure abstractness) are one and the same—identical in the strictest sense of this word. If the modernist painting or sculpture represents nothing, refers to nothing outside itself (refers to nothing transcendent), then the sense that it nonetheless expresses and makes totally present may be fittingly described as a revelation. Modernist art, to speak paradoxically, reveals. . . itself! Less paradoxically, it exists solely for the revelation of its own most (and latent, or immanent) defining conditions. (Needless to say, I am bent on purging the term "revelation" of every metaphysical association—using it, indeed, in a specifically Kantian, anti-metaphysical sense. Thus employed, the term implies a repudiation of all symbolism and intellectual interpretation and invokes, rather, the significant qualities that are immanent in the purely sensuous structures of perceptual experience.[7])

But what are the conditions that define its being and its unique mode of phenomenological givenness (or presence)? Greenberg and Michael Fried have suggested the answer. So too has Martin Heidegger, in his *Holzwege* essay entitled "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes." And it may be significant that here their lines of thought coincide. A work of art is of

7 The precedent for my usage comes from Jean Paul Sartre's discussion of perception in *Being and Nothingness* (special, abridged edition, tr. by Hazel Barnes [New York, 1971]) and from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception* (tr. by Colin Smith [New York, 1972]) and "Eye and Mind" (in the anthology *The Primacy of Perception* [Evanston, 1964]).

course a material object; yet, at the same time, it also is the negation of this objecthood. So what the modernist work of art is meant to reveal, what it must reveal, is precisely this contradiction. And if it suppresses one or the other of these two modalities of its being, it has simply failed to articulate the truth about art which seems logically imperative at this given point in its history.

On Fried's view, the two ineluctable defining conditions of painting are its flatness and its shape. No painting can conceivably exist unless it is reduced to flatness and has assumed a certain shape. But, since material objects are also shaped and may also be flat, painting can defeat, or suspend, its own objecthood if—and only if—it accomplishes what no mere object can possibly do: it must somehow materially acknowledge these conditions, rendering them totally present. Discussing modernist sculpture, Greenberg writes: "To render substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural, or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically, like a mirage."[8]

Not surprisingly, the role of color has posed a serious problem for the modernist aesthetic. Painters must take care lest their colors create an illusion that would prevent the wholly optical acknowledgment of the painting's flatness. Sculptors risk the danger that their coloring may create a surface be-speaking the objecthood of a sculptural mass whose interior it simply conceals: a surface unable to present itself as a merely optical extension. Robert Morris, we know, simply relinquished the use of color, while those sculptors who have dared to use color (David Smith and Calder) somehow succeeded in negating the very (material) surface, which color must logically also affirm. If the structure itself cannot jeopardize this implicit mass behind the color surface, the work will fail to halt its reduction to mere objecthood. Color similarly imperils modernist painting. The work must simultaneously acknowledge, or make present, the flatness and shape which root it in the earth, and yet somehow employ its color in a purely optical way, so that the space of the painting—the "world" created through the act of painting—will be truly accessible (aesthetically intelligible) only to a disembodied eye. (Unlike the visual illusion that emerges in the painting of a representation on a flat canvas, offering the illusion of a tactile accessibility, the modernist illusion offers itself as an illusion accessible

8 "The New Sculpture" in his *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), p. 144. Note Heppenstall's kindred position on the distance between ballet and theatre, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

only to the eye, hence only to an eye that does not have a tactile and mobile support.)

Fried asseverates, moreover, that the imperative defeat or suspension of objecthood entails that modernist art defeat or suspend its possible "theatricality."[9] Unfortunately, he does not establish the terms of this entailment with compelling clarity. The connection, however, can be made. The possibility of "theatre" requires the situatedness of a spectator with regard to the theatrical object. Thus, the theatricality of the object is possible only insofar as the spectator can be oriented towards it in a temporal and spatial perspective. This means that the spectator/object relationship is to be defined (in part) through a heightened consciousness of the limiting co-ordinates of the spectator's corporeality and the object's objecthood. Now, it is precisely this sort of relationship that the opticality of modernist art is meant to defeat. So Fried is right, after all, in claiming that theatricality and modernist formalism contradict one another.

We may note a parallel progression toward modernism in the history of the ballet. In Europe, ballet originated as a species of court entertainment. Long after it entered the public domain, however, it continued to be, in essence, a divertissement, a merely theatrical event. The early ballet consisted of artificial and rigidly determined dance movements. Gradually, though, it submitted to the desire for a more stylized, but also more "natural," expressiveness.[10] Beyond this stage, the ballet has mainly developed along four distinct routes. Two of these are rather akin to Abstract Expressionism. The one is certainly theatrical and, even in its incipient formal abstractness, it sustains the confident expressiveness of intelligible gestural symbols. (I am thinking, for example, of the works of Antony Tudor, and of the sort of productions we associate with Martha Graham.) The other belongs to those ballets that have tried to mix a formal abstractness of movement with a theatricality which often substitutes the expressiveness of stage décor, lighting, and costumes for the expressiveness of symbols intrinsic to the movements of the dancers. (Here I am thinking of the Joffrey Ballet's *Clowns* and *Astarte*.) A third, and very different sort of route is represented by the dance of Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, and perhaps Twyla Tharp. This form is entirely abstract; the movement is very expressive, although it rigorously excludes every quality of expression not wholly immanent in the dancers' abstract movements. At the same time, however, the production as a whole does not exclude

9 See "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June, 1967), pp. 12-23.

10 See "Fokine's Theories on the Art of Ballet," *op. cit.*

theatricality, which is latent in the various items (including costumes) that may be employed as props. In addition, the acceptable dance syntax, here, is unlike the classical syntax (however abstract), not only in regard to some of its formal properties, but also in regard to the extent of its vocabulary. (So the inventions of Cunningham, Tharp, and Rainer differ from those of Balanchine, even when they are scarcely more abstract.) The fourth route, of course, is the one paved and traveled by George Balanchine.

As a point of departure, let us refer to what Mr. Harris construes to be the defining condition of that ballet art exemplified in such works as *Les Sylphides*. He writes: "it seems to embody an entire theory about what ballet ought to be, one which, though capable of easy sentimentalization and by no means without its limitations, is nevertheless valid: the belief that ballet is a poetic experience whose purpose is to summon up transcendent longings through graceful movement." And with regard to *Les Sylphides* in particular, he observes that "Fokine's sylphs have evolved into powerful and universal symbols."[11] Whatever one may think about the rightness of the attempt to impose a formalist aesthetic on this venerable ballet, one must surely concede that, from the standpoint of their intention (to release the latent possibilities which "ensoul" the ballet art), the New York City Ballet was logically compelled to violate this Fokine aesthetic.

Viewed against the classical tradition, Balanchine's unique aesthetic can seem exceedingly austere. It calls for a "bare-bones" reduction of the ballet essence. Yes—but only because this asceticism is designed to release a beauty and a grace which the older, seemingly richer essence had in principle to suppress. Whereas the older art sought expressiveness, both in the decorations of stage and costume and in the familiar symbolism of immediately intelligible gestures and postures (a symbolism certainly meant to evoke "transcendent longings"), the new Balanchine art refuses the expressiveness of stage costumes and excludes, too, all those resources of corporeal syntax that cannot achieve their expressiveness without the encumbrance of some mimetic or transcendent symbolism.

The abstractness of dance formalism does not exclude the sensuous expressiveness of the body. Indeed, this is the only truly intrinsic expressiveness that is possible in the formal syntax; what formalism excludes, rather, are such modes of expressiveness and meaning as do not directly reveal their presence through a wholly abstract, a purely syntactic medium. A form, as such, may be either representational or abstract, and if abstract, either abstracted from the semantic materials

11 *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

of a prior representation or else originally abstract. A form may be abstract, and none the less sensuous, insofar as the perception of the form is capable of inducing modes of kinetic and kinaesthetic pleasure. So, odd though it may seem, the Balanchine aesthetic has adopted a profoundly anti-theatrical approach of ballet, amply demonstrating that the theatricality of stage and costume, as well as the theatricality of distinctly allusive movement, are not, in fact, the necessary conditions of drama in a performing art. (I have described the tendency of Balanchine's works as "anti-theatrical." But I am most definitely not suggesting that his ballets mute, or are meant to defeat, the tensions and resolutions of drama.)

If the failure of *Chopiniana* was possible only because the New York City Ballet confused the rightness of sentiment with the wrongness of sentimentality and, in consequence, excluded both, still, in the creation of his own ballets, Balanchine himself has not failed to distinguish between theatrical expressiveness (the semantics of sentiment and allusion) and "classically pure" formal expressiveness (modes of corporeal presence which are latent in, or immanent to, the "classical" syntax of human mobility).

Such formal expressiveness, however, requires not only that he suppress the theatricality of stage and costume, but also that he purge the classical dance syntax of its theatrical allusiveness. In fine, it requires that he reduce the mimetic "content" of traditional ballet movements to the expressive presence of an entirely abstract syntax. Structure and content, then, become indentical to the degree that each submits to the process of abstraction. In some Balanchine ballets—extraordinary works such as *Agon* and *Violin Concerto*—a traditionally expressive "content" coincides with the expressive presence of structure. Content *is* structure. For structure has been allowed to refer exclusively to, and to reveal, itself: it can speak—we discover—in its own language, a language by no means less poignant, less expressive than the other, more conventional address. (Sara Leland, who has danced thirteen years for Balanchine, is quoted as saying in an interview: "Mr. B. depends on the movement itself to bring out the quality he wants in a ballet, he does not try to develop 'expression' in the dancers. It is there, he tells us, in the choreography—we have only to dance the choreography to express it."[12])

12 *Dance Magazine* (August, 1972), p. 32. In this respect, Balanchine's method resembles the reductive, sparse methods of such film directors as Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson. In *Late Autumn* and *An Autumn Afternoon*, for example, Ozu's method evokes that emptiness, that silence, that serenity which, in Zen, is called *mu*. (See Donald Richie, "The Later Films of Yasujiro Ozu," *Film Quarterly*, [Fall, 1959], p. 22.) Bresson's method seeks in the visibility of the icon the invisible touch of supernatural

The kind of movement, then, that can reveal itself is ontologically distinct from the kind of movement that cannot reveal itself. The movements of the human body are different in essence from the movements of inanimate objects. The human body is through and through intentional; even at rest, it transcends its objective actuality towards some immanent and virtual state. So an aesthetic can take it as imperative that, in the art of dance, the movements of the human body shall exhibit precisely this ontological distinction. If it is of the essence of the human body that it is a moving object only in the mode of surpassing (i.e., simultaneously acknowledging and defeating) its own objecthood, then it can be, correspondingly, of the essence of ballet that the movements reveal in dance this essential condition. This is precisely the principle that defines modernism.

To achieve a modernist drama, the syntax of dance must be so presented that it is aesthetically accessible neither as purely literal movement (an objective modification, in Euclidian space, of the dancer's "real" body) nor as wholly figurative movement (a subjective qualification of the dancer's formally expressive "phenomenal" body), but rather as both simultaneously. This possibility derives from the fact

grace. Both methods require that the actors sublimate the natural expressiveness of personality, and that they learn, in effect, how to eliminate the drama of acting. Bresson states: "It is not so much a question of doing 'nothing', as some people have said. It is rather a question of performing without being aware of oneself, of not controlling oneself. Experience has proved to me that when I was the most 'automatic' in my work, I was the most moving [and expressive]." See James Blue, *Excerpts from an Interview with Robert Bresson* (Los Angeles, 1969). See also Roland Monod, "Working with Bresson," *Sight and Sound*, 26 (Summer, 1957), p. 31. Bresson's theory of acting, like Ozu's, is: "Forget about tone and meaning. Don't think about what you're saying; just speak the words automatically. When someone talks, he isn't thinking about the words he uses, or even about what he wants to say. Only concerned with what he is saying, he just lets the words come out. . . ." Balanchine certainly seems to have given analogous instructions to his dancers. Consider, further, Selma Jeanne Cohen's study, "Antony Tudor, Part Two: The Years in America and After," *Dance Perspectives* 18 (1963). Lucia Chase is quoted as saying: "Tudor does not explain the feeling he wants; he shows emotion by motion, by demonstrating the movement. You have to sense the meaning from him; to find out what he is after, you have to keep doing the movement until you feel it." (p. 73) Thus, the dancer, 'as character,' may contribute movement ideas to Tudor choreography. But as a dancer he is never allowed to 'interpret' a movement. Margaret Black says: "In Tudor's choreography, you never have to superimpose feeling. You don't have to make the movement speak; it does." And Diana Adams elaborates: "Tudor does not want interpretation; he wants simplicity of execution. . . . The movement in itself should suffice, without interpretation being added on to it." (pp. 75-76) But Tudor's approach to dance movement, while technically similar, in some measure, to Balanchine's, has a very different intention behind it. Balanchine's aim is to articulate the maximum degree of sensuousness in form; Tudor's is, rather, to release that maximum of dramatic energy which is contained in the tension between the visible expression of the psyche and its invisible ground.

that the human body spans a dynamic tension between the objectively actual and the inwardly virtual. Formalism can heighten this tension to the degree that it achieves a disclosure of the body that demonstrates the dancer's objective spatialization, at the same time that it suspends, or annihilates, this condition through the peculiar, deep expressivity of a syntax reduced to pure self-reference. The syntax must utilize and acknowledge the tangible weight, the massive balances of the body, but only in order to defeat or suspend them, and to render the objective body as a magically weightless, optically intangible presence. (Actually, as we shall see, this *presence* of the dancing body is also a sort of *absence*, since the sublimity of grace, unlike the beauty of poise, is up-lifting, and releases the body from the horizontal space-field of the stage.)

The reader of Nabokov's *Ada* will find, near the beginning of the novel, the following curious passage: "Presently the vegetation assumed a more southern aspect as the lane skirted Ardis Park. At the next turning, the romantic mansion appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels. It was a splendid countryhouse, three stories high, built of pale brick and purplish stone."[13] Nabokov, of course, has used language, here, so that it accuses itself. The words create, or posit, a world of representational validity; at the same time, they nullify this world by an acknowledgment of their act of creation. Similarly, George Balanchine sometimes deploys the dancer's weight in a way that especially fits the human body to betray this declaration of objecthood, and indeed to betray this in the very act of declaring it. The drama in the metamorphosis of corporeality (objecthood)—the drama we behold in the sublime immanence of grace—thus replaces the older ballet intention, transcendence through the grace of "longing."

Sartre rather briefly discusses the phenomenon of grace.[14] It is much to his credit that he recognized the relevance of this matter for a complete phenomenology of the human body. And his analysis is certainly fascinating. I am convinced, however, that, in addition to being incomplete, it calls for some rectification. In Sartre's view, grace "refers obscurely to a transcendent Beyond of which we preserve only a confused memory and which we can reach only by a radical modification of our being. . . ." I would like to invoke, here, a grace of whose possibility this most fastidious of phenomenologists seems only dimly sensible: the possibility that, in a graceful disposition of the body, in the radiant immanence of a grace that Balanchine's modernist ballets exquisitely detail, it is the body itself—but as a sublime and sacred presence—that is revealed.

13 Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada* (New York, 1969), p. 38.
14 *Op. cit.*, pp. 376-378.

We shall find it helpful, at this point, to make use of Kant's distinction, in *The Critique of Judgment*, between the beautiful and the sublime. To Kant, the beautiful is that which, through the commodiousness of an objectively embodied form alone, can induce a pleasure whose immediate ground is the harmony of the understanding (as the faculty of lawfulness, canons of taste) and the imagination (as the faculty of playful perceptual organization). The sublime, on the other hand, is that which induces a mediated, and more difficult sort of pleasure: that which has its ground entirely within the subjective conditions of productive (imaginative) consciousness itself, and for which the sublime is merely the original occasion. For the sublime, unlike the beautiful, does not offer an immediately commodious (purposive) form; on the contrary, it offers something which is manifestly formless, or which, in any case, defeats the straightforward perception of sensible form. Thus, the sublime challenges the imagination to surpass its perceptual rootedness, summons it to strive for a glimpse of some possible, but very obscure, form. The sublime, then, requires that the imagination strive to produce, entirely out of its own most latent (or transcendental) resources, an adequate image of a form that is not at all embodied in the natural or sensible world. According to Kant, the sublime presents the imagination with an occasion to discover, within itself, and beyond the "pain" of its striving for a higher form, its supernatural destination.

Now the art of dance can induce two very different modes of aesthetic sensibility. The one mode is induced by the beauty of the natural, or immediately sensible, form of the dance, while the other mode is induced, rather, by a sublime suspension, or perhaps defeat, of the immediately sensible form of the dance. The beauty of dance is the traditional beauty of the phenomenon of *poise* (Middle English *poisen, peisen*, to weigh). Beauty belongs to the poise, the tensions and equilibrations, of the self-moving body expressing itself through movements and attitudes, tensional vectors of force, within the horizontal space-field of its objective stage relationships.[15] (This field is principally constituted according to the right/left, forwards/backwards, and near/far schemata.) The beauty of dance resides in the classical manner of the body's original spatialization of, and thereby its spatialization within, the horizontal field of the stage; it

15 For my analysis of the horizontal field of poise and the vertical field of grace, I am greatly indebted to my colleague, Samuel J. Todes. See his "Comparative Phenomenology of Perception and Imagination," Parts I and II, *Journal of Existentialism* (Spring and Fall, 1966). It is an exciting fact, though, that Curt Sachs had described the horizontal/vertical axes of dance many years earlier in his *World History of the Dance* (New York, 1937), pp. 25-26.

resides, if you will, in the dancer's poised excursions into the density of an architectural field of space. This field is traditionally staked out, in part, by the surrounding objects (which may include other dancers) in the stage design, and it is around these entities that the dancer pivots; but the field is also "inflected" by the traditional costuming which, in virtue of its circumstantial appropriateness, further installs the dancer within it. The classical beauty of dance requires the equipoise, the lucid presence, of the dancing body.

The sublimity of dance, however, is the sublimity of the phenomenon of grace. Sublimity belongs to the grace of a body whose movements and attitudes make it appear no longer to be inhabiting, no longer to be installed in, the surrounding horizontal field (the object-coordinated, object-pivoted space of the stage).[16] In the instant of grace, the dancer seems, rather, to be up-lifted, to be released into a purely optical space, weightlessly suspended in the vertical time-field of a supervenient Grace. It is as if the dancer's body, released from its condition of poised objecthood, is being rewarded precisely for its ecstatic, and gratefully disciplined, revelation of this very condition.

The Persian dervish poet Rumi tells us that, "Whosoever knoweth the power of the dance, dwelleth in God."[17] In the myths of cosmology, Grace is a gift from the Sky of God. Grace acknowledges the supernatural destination of the soul, everlastingly released from the circumstantial field of Earth. Through Grace, the soul casts off its autochthonous embodiment (and consequently its objecthood) and returns to the Sky of God. Thus, in beholding the spectacle of Grace, our productive imagination surpasses its sensible ground, and we witness the joining of Earth and Sky.

We have seen that the graceful dancer appears to be weightless. But now we can see that Grace is the necessary condition for this weightlessness, this unearthly suspension of objecthood. For it is precisely from the Sky of God that the supervenient order of Grace, up-lifting, descends. But why is the gift of Grace thus bestowed upon the dancer? Is it not—paradoxically—because, through the skillful body, the dancer is so eloquently praising the gravity of the body,

16 For a distinction similar to that between the mimetic and the formal, and for a parallel analysis of their respective illusions, see Sachs, *op. cit.*, p. 60 and *passim*. He distinguishes the "image dance" and the "imageless dance". In the first, the dancer, as he correctly observes, seems "bound to the body," whereas in the second, the dancer appears to be "free of the body." This is akin to saying that mimetic dance mainly exhibits qualities of poise, while formal dance is especially suited to the showing of grace.

17 Quoted by Sachs, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Note that, according to Christianity, the body upon which grace is bestowed becomes "the temple of the Holy" (I Cor. 6:19).

acknowledging in gratitude the Earth of the body? And is it not because, in order fully to acknowledge this, the dancer has skillfully perfected the releasing possibilities of the body? The dancer's grace-fullness is a sublime presence (or, more accurately, a presence/absence), which belongs to the horizontal field of gratitude, of spatialized skill, but—at the same time—belongs totally and immortally to the vertical time-field of Grace, the Sky of God. And finally, we are in a position to understand the costuming and stage requirements for the modernist presentation of grace. For costuming and staging are elements that constitute the horizontal field of space within which the dancer must move. But, if modernism is to reveal the sublime essence of grace, and not just show the beauty of poise, the stage-space must be cleared of everything that would locate the dancer within the binding coordinates of the horizontal field, thus defeating the possibility of a vertical release into the Time of Grace.

Modernist ballet certainly preserves the innermost resources of the older syntax; and it still entertains—through the drama of tension and the grace of release and resolution. But it gives birth to its aesthetic presence entirely within the syntax of a constant tension between the phenomenal body yielding itself to objecthood and the same body, at the same time, artfully suspending its objecthood. In the same interview quoted above, Sara Leland observed that, "In the Balanchine *plié*, you are perched for flight." An acute and important point. In the Balanchine *plié*—which is, after all, an incontestable acknowledgment, or demonstration, of the dancer's objective weight and necessary effort—the choreography has also made present, but at first only in the tensed mode of suppressed virtuality, the graceful arc of flight, which is about to suspend the force of gravity on behalf of its own phenomenal space.

Concepts such as "simultaneity" and "virtuality," which are indices of temporality, turn out to be fundamental to an understanding of formalist space. Much, certainly, needs to be said about the properties of formalist time;[18] but I shall limit myself to the observation that Edwin

18 And ultimately, something should be said, too, about music, since it is in this medium that temporality is most immediately constituted in its sensuous aspect. In his piece on Igor Stravinsky (*Ballet Review*, III/6), Dale Harris writes: "The reduced importance of extrinsic forms of expressiveness, the parallel emphasis on structure, the identification of subject with form—these Stravinskian qualities have been the chief influences upon ballet in our time." (p. 6) I would like to add that it is these same qualities (which plainly constitute a formalism within the possibilities of the medium of music) that explain, in part, the many successes Balanchine has had in setting his ballets on Stravinsky scores. The formalism of the one complements and heightens the formalism of the other.

Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*, first performed in 1941, is, in some respects, a modernist ballet. But in two respects it remains mimetic. First, the movement of individual dancers and of partners often provides intimations of the aristocratic

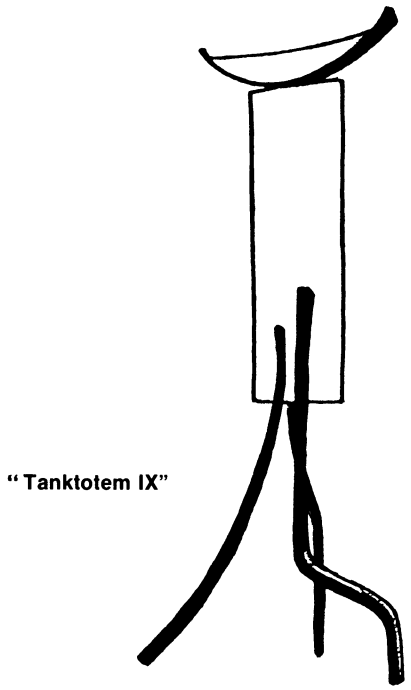
Denby made in an interview recorded by Arlene Croce and Don McDonagh: "Well, to me the big difference [between gesture in dance and gesture in mime] is that a dance gesture is like a dance step—it has a limit in time. If you enlarge on it, you enlarge on it in relation to a definite time. . . . If the various moves the body goes through to make a step—say it goes through four moves, A-B-C-D, and B, is, say, one and a half times as long as the others—then if you want to diminish B, you diminish it still within that musical time. Or enlarge it. You don't just enlarge it without any relation to anything in time that the rest of the dance has. But in acting gesture, there isn't any [such] time. The time is real, it's everyday time. If you lift up a cup of coffee this way, it means something in everyday time that you do it slowly, instead of grabbing it and pulling it up. But in dance, it might be necessary to lift it up that slowly simply because that is the time [appropriately] choreographed for it." And Denby's next remark explicitly distinguishes "formal" time and "real" time: "When I'm watching dancing, my eye expects a certain time. More than one's eyes, really. If you start to believe in a character and a story, inside yourself you shift to that other time."[19] In Balanchine's modernist ballets, a formal—or abstract—time must replace real time, because it is a factor altogether fundamental to the possibility of an optical space in which weight and mass are suspended at the same time that they are acknowledged.

What made modernist ballet possible, I think, was Balanchine's discovery that there is exquisite drama concealed in the equilibration of corporeal contraries: the virtual position, which almost imperceptibly emerges from an actual movement; the defiant pulse of a self-conscious form, which threatens the objecthood of perfect poise; the mass, which seems—for one intensely magic second—to be stolen from the body, as

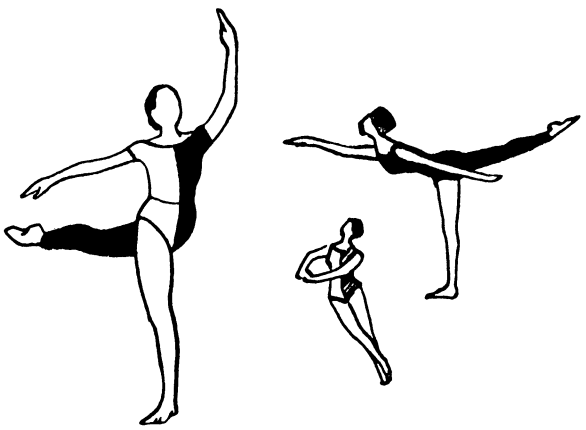
manners which were appropriate to Bach's time. Second—and more importantly—the patterns of the dancers in their larger groupings often translate abstract musical space into an aesthetically equivalent corporeal stage-space. Chords, for example, and counterpoint, inversions, and discrete melodic phrases, as well as figures of musical time, or rhythm, have their unique counterparts in both the floor-plane and the frontal spatializations of the dance-groupings.

19 *Ballet Review*, II/5, p. 5. Denby seems close to pointing out how a choreographer can get theatrical meaningfulness *entirely within a formal time-framework*, simply by means of a sudden modification in tempo (see p. 6). For me, one of the most memorable instances of this intention—an instance which also involves an unexpected break in the formal space constructions—occurs in Frederick Ashton's *Enigma Variations* (1968). There is a moment in the "Nimrod" variation when Elgar breaks through the formal space of *arabesques* and *pas de basques*, hesitates, and then moves toward his friend in a delicate demonstration of affection. This sudden shift in tempo, which is not only a shift from formal to real time, but also a moment when the formal space of ballet has yielded to the natural expressive space of sentiment, creates a spectacle of exquisite tenderness and beauty.

its very movement denies, through form, the constraints of weight. The drama does not take place, for us, in an always tangible space; it exists, rather, in the tensional revelation of a sublime, precariously optical modality.



"Tanktotem IX"



Left to right: *attitude, soubresaut, arabesque allongée.*

Thus, for example, there are moments when we perceive the weight-presence of the dancers in the intricate *pas de deux* of *Violin Concerto* very much the way we must perceive the modernist mass of, say, "Tanktotem IX," a late metal work from the factory of the sculptor, David Smith.[20] At the juncture between plate and tripod, exactly where we should expect the demonstration of weight, we discover that the line of the tripod can become, instead, a purely pictorial element. Opticality has suspended the natural weight of the steel plate! Since "Tanktotem" in fact resembles a human body—resembles, even, a dancer in pose—it is especially rewarding to notice points of correspondence between this phenomenon at the juncture of plate and tripod, and the suspensions of weight that can seem to occur, for vision, in some of Balanchine's ballets.

The possibility of achieving, through formalism, a purely optical reduction of corporeal mass and weight in accordance with the modernist aesthetic is certainly latent in most of the classical ballet positions—the *attitude croisée*, for example, and the height of the *soubresaut*, and the *arabesque allongée*. What so forcefully strikes me about the first and third positions is, first, the fact that in both cases, though in different ways, the dancer's vertical leg is made to seem as if it were carrying a weightless mass. Like the tripod of Smith's sculpture, this vertical leg is metamorphosed, and its one and only role is to present to vision the spectacle of a purely pictorial—no longer material—line. In the *attitude croisée*, this metamorphosis is mainly the harmonic effect of the arms and the raised leg; whereas, in the *arabesque allongée*, the secret of the illusion may be said, rather, to be contained in the extended torso.

In the *attitude*, the raised, turned-out leg inscribes a dynamic plane of space, which reproduces, or translates, and thus enhances, the centrifugally constituted planes inscribed by the two arms, so that the juncture of the torso, the elevated leg, and the vertical leg—a juncture that otherwise would be the center of dramatic energy—becomes, instead, a point on the periphery of a radiant force whose center is suspended above the ground. Thus, the dancer's weight appears to be lifted off the vertical leg (or, more accurately, the weight appears to depart from the leg in a breathtaking instant), producing the illusion that this leg is a pictorial line in a merely optical space. In the *pas de deux* of *Agon*, there is a sustained *adagio*, within which a similar metamorphosis takes place. The male dancer, on his knees, is bending forward and extending his arms upward behind him, while the female

20 See Rosaline E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, 1971).

dancer executes an *arabesque penchée*, leaning over him from behind and joining her hands to his. This time it is the raised leg, rather than the vertical grounded leg, that creates the optical paradox. The one raised leg, accentuating the trajectory of the two pairs of arms, projects the bodies upward and even seems to lift the dancers off the floor. Thus, the leg steals away the weight of the two floored bodies—it is as if their substance has magically evaporated!—and turns them into a purely abstract structure, itself becoming, within this literally time-less phenomenon, a purely pictorial structural line.

What, now, is the effect of the torso? In the *attitude croisée*, it forms a simple continuation of the line of the vertical leg, so, that, in effect, it suppresses one geometric plane and allows itself to appear as an event in only two spatial dimensions—an event in optical space. In the *arabesque allongée*, the torso—visually weightless—certainly touches the vertical leg, but touches without "really" resting upon it. Somewhat as a balloon is connected to its string, the torso seems to float, meeting the leg only to contrive—for a breathtaking interval—an optical, or flat, pictorial symmetry. It is as if the leg/torso juncture were the intersection of two mathematical lines.

And consider the height of the *soubresaut*. This position, too, can prove the modernist possibility—another variation of the optical, or sublime body. The dancer is in a jump-and-fall movement, and this declares her obedience to objecthood; yet, at the same time, the articulation she has imposed on her movement utterly annihilates the body as an object of nature—steals it, I want to say, from tangible space, and then re-creates it, a purer form, in the ether of an optical, vertical field. The arms define the small circular limits of a tilted, but still fairly horizontal plane; while the line from head to feet presents the segment of a very much greater circle, whose approximately vertical plane cuts through the plane of the smaller circle. And we do not reckon these lines, circles, and planes—need I hasten to add?—among the common entities that occupy our tangible universe!

Consider, now the *sous-sus* and the *pirouette à la seconde*. In the first disposition of the body, the dancer's feet are tightly closed and on pointe, and one of the legs hides the other, so that it looks as though the dancer's body is a weightless extension, a mass that somehow is not a mass: the torso and head are not so much a distinct quantity supported by the legs, as they are a qualitative and linear continuation of the legs. In the other example, the dancer moves dramatically from second position in *demiplié* (a disposition of the body that forcefully reveals its weight, its objecthood) into a wondrous turn that seems to suspend this

condition. And to these particular figures and modalities of the body, in which the dramatic, tensional possibilities of formalism reside, we should add the great classical leaps, most positions on pointe, and numerous lifts and dives and *portes*, performed in partnering.

My contention is that by means of his choreography (quite subtle, yet daring innovations on the classical syntax), and no less by his choices in costumes and staging, Balanchine has revealed these possibilities in all their lucid beauty, and demonstrated on the stage of history that the modernist illusion is the essence, and even perhaps the perfection, of the classical ballet art.

But, whether or not we hold that the works of Balanchine's modernism represent the perfection of classical ballet, we cannot deny that, in these works, a new mode of spatialization has appeared. That is, we must at least grant that the classical ballet, as a unique art form, has been metamorphosed, in the Hegelian sense of being *aufgehoben*, and that modernist ballets inaugurate a new moment of ballet history. Lincoln Kirstein has divided the history of the spatialization of ballet into two modes: originally, the stage-space was "planimetric" (designed on the flat plane of the floor for the privilege of a bird's-eye view); subsequently, it became "stereometric" (designed for a frontal spectator's view).[21] This is an accurate history. But modernist ballets oblige us to recognize the emergence of a third mode: I shall call it "optical," for it is akin to the illusionist space of the paintings and sculptures that established modernism. Ballets made according to the older principles of spatialization constitute a field-space which, for the eye of the beholder, always seems to be corporeally accessible. The ballets staged according to the principles of modernism always seem to exist in a forbidden, unearthly field, accessible only to the disembodied eye. Thus we see that the principles of modernism do govern and account for the peculiarities of stage décor and costuming in many of Balanchine's ballets.

From the standpoint of ballet formalism, the presence of color in stage and costume can only be problematic. Balanchine, however, understands the perils of color. (Some of his critics, though, have missed the point of his imperturbable black-and-white logic.) The perils, it may be gathered, are not unlike the ones we have already discussed with respect to modernist painting and sculpture. Unless the colored items

21 *Movement and Metaphor*, (New York, 1970), pp. 10-11. Kirstein's terms are anticipated by those of André Levinson, who distinguishes a "horizontal" choreographing of the dance, "based on outlines and figures marked by the feet of the dancer on the floor" from the later "vertical" choreographing, "the [frontal] configuration of motion in space." *Op. cit.*, pp. 170-171.

(stage décor and costumes, for example) are used with exquisite care; unless they are modalized with great subtlety, they will sacrifice the grace of opticality for the charming diversions of mere "theatre." (I recall, at this point, what Kant had to say, in his *Critique of Judgment*, about the difference between "*Schönheit*" and "*das Reizende*." I do not share, however, the Kantian thesis that the latter is in any way aesthetically inferior; it is simply, I believe, a different sort of art. Likewise, I repudiate Fried's rather Kantian decree that "theatricality" is an aesthetic deficiency, a weakness. I am unable to find any ultimate criteria that would elevate the "formal" above the "theatrical.") Color improperly introduced will simply destroy the formal drama of the body, which charms by means of theatrical illusion—when it is corporeal weight that needs expression; or else it imposes a theatrical presence, a straightforward corporeal reality—when it is rather the opticality of the sublime suspension of weight that asks to be revealed. So if we allow the possibility of Balanchine's modernism, we must recognize that his color asceticism is a matter of aesthetic principle.

The familiar open stage of the Balanchine production, uncluttered by props and scenery and rather uniformly illumined by a chromatically homogeneous backdrop, is also an aesthetic necessity within the modernist framework.[22] The staging must permit the expressive energies of the dance syntax to condense and disperse as fits. Traditional stage décor, on the contrary, tends to attract and absorb (into its own reserve of space) such energies as should condense, or else to obstruct the space of energies that should magically disperse and uplift. In fine, it works by a logic which is independent of the inner imperatives of the dance syntax itself and which, all too easily, can contradict the modernist experience. The chromatically simple backdrop, however, provides a uniform illumination for the dance events. There is no painterly light source to constitute an autonomous surrounding space, possessed of its *own* discriminations and figurative compositions. (You might ponder, here, the lighting of space in Caravaggio and Flemish Renaissance paintings.) Thus, the dance

22 In the June 25, 1973 issue of *New York*, Alan Rich asseverates that "the principal reason the City Ballet is losing touch with its audience is that it has been allowed to become a vast blank wall on which Balanchine sketches his infinite variations on a single theme." And, while admitting that there are very "subtle" differences, which make each of his ballets unique, Rich contends that "too many Balanchine ballets look alike". Just how blind can a ballet critic afford to be? To know the consummate Hollywood-style showmanship of which Balanchine is capable, one has only to see his *Stars and Stripes* (1958). In the light of such proven genius for the dazzling ballet spectacle, Mr. Rich should have asked himself what aesthetic grounds there could be to explain why Balanchine did not choose simply to multiply the number of such spectacles.

events, instead of being enveloped and partitioned within an *externally* generated (real) space, become the constitutive *source* at the interior of their own total space.

In *Duo Concertant*, a spotlight on the dancers chases away a powerful negative space—darkness—and encloses them in a bright chrysalis that condenses their energies at the same time that it denies the phenomenal space any constructive independence, any aesthetic validity of its own. And if it truly seems that the dancers are dancing into being a space that their bodies occupy exhaustively, it can almost seem, too, that the uncanny causality of this creation is reversible, and the dancers' movements are just the optical inventions of a supervenient luminosity. Such a space—a total, surrounding space, which is truly the invention of the dance movements themselves—will appear as magically dematerialized, optical. It is nothing at all, in effect, since it comes into being only as (and only for) the moment when a human body traverses it. Having in itself neither temporal nor substantial permanence, it can bestow on the feat that traverses and occupies it the sudden grace of eternity.

Such are the necessities of this chosen aesthetic. "Balanchine's formalism!"—Yes, you might wish to say this. But if there is any difference between an artist who produces some formalist ballets and an artist who simply *is* a formalist, then in the art of George Balanchine, we shall find, thank goodness, that his genius soars high above the limits of a *parti pris*.

I want to declare, here, my gratitude to Mr. Robert Sealy, who read an earlier version of this paper, for his penetrating criticisms and encouraging suggestions. I also wish to acknowledge an indebtedness to my colleague, Mr. Samuel Todes, whose comments helped me to articulate a deepening dissatisfaction with Sartre's account of grace, and whose own published work on the body helped me to formulate the account of poise and grace which I have presented here. Work on this paper was partly supported by a Northwestern University Faculty Grant-in-Aid for Summer, 1973.