Ballet as Ideology: *Giselle*, Act II

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In the past few years there has been a growing interest in the social nature of art production. This interest is frequently opposed from within traditional aesthetics on the grounds that it reduces art to a social symptom and thus fundamentally misses the locus of aesthetic value. Conventional aesthetics assumes that artistic expression exists most importantly within an autonomous aesthetic realm—that works of art indeed reflect society, but that this reflection should be understood from within a disinterested "aesthetic attitude."

The desire to preserve the aesthetic as a separate realm does not deny that art is a social product so much as it tends to isolate the social meanings of a work of art from those meanings that are seen to develop intrinsically, that are grounded in human universals rather than historical particulars. In this view the continued accessibility of classic works is taken to manifest the transhistorical qualities of art. The local conditions of production and historically specific ideas are seen to fall away, so that our present appreciation is of timeless essences.

In recent years, however, serious questions about this perspective have been raised by various cultural theorists.\(^1\) By focusing on the ways in which an art object expresses the interests and ideas of a particular social group even where the work seems to claim an aesthetic transcendence, some sociological approaches emphasize the constant and necessary entrenchment of both the

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Moreover, the very concept of aesthetic autonomy itself is perceived as exemplifying a social bias, a means whereby social elites privilege some expressive forms over others. This skepticism is partially a response to the different sense of art that arises from its relation to other spheres of contemporary cultural production. The uncertain dividing lines between "high art" and popular culture in a medium such as film, the reinforcement of regressive cultural stereotypes within traditional forms such as ballet, the use of "high art" imagery within advertising media, all suggest that art and the idea of art have a social power that cannot be accounted for either by traditional aesthetic concerns or by study of the overt social messages within some works.

This social orientation toward art must still come to terms with the actual experience of beauty. When we are moved by the beauty of something, it is difficult to see it also as expressing a specific social interest. In particular, classic works of art that have a continuing presence in our culture seem to escape any ideological entrapments of their moment of creation. What do the attitudes toward ballet displayed by members of the Jockey Club during the July Monarchy have to do with our present experience of the immortal Giselle? Quite a bit, I will argue, though in intricate and indirect ways. But to understand the connection, we must see how our appreciation of a classic work involves an arcing across historical periods that is ideological as well as aesthetic, and how our sense of the beautiful is itself ideologically conditioned. In order to understand how art functions in society, we have to perceive how ideology is projected in and through aesthetic value and not apart from it. And in perceiving this, we may recognize some of the ways our own subjectivity is socially organized, how the experience of aesthetic transcendence also re-places us in the social order.

In choosing to discuss ideology in relation to ballet aesthetics, I am obviously stalking easy prey. One of ballet's charms is the overtness with which it propagates socially charged imagery as a form of the beautiful. Of course, such insouciance has had its response: much of the tradition of modern dance can be seen as an ideologically grounded critique of the ideals of beauty embodied...
in ballet. The saints of modern dance from Isadora Duncan forward have characteristically harnessed some idea of the "natural"—that war-horse of ideological conflict—to ride against the dragon of artifice. More recently, several books have criticized the ballet world for its tolerance or even encouragement of anorexia nervosa and other physical and psychological perils. L. M. Vincent’s *Competing with the Sylph*, Joan Brady’s *The Unmaking of a Dancer*, and Suzanne Gordon’s *Off Balance* all, from somewhat different perspectives, describe what can only be regarded as a fairly perverse social order. But for the most part their criticisms appear reformist in spirit: these authors tend to see the perversities they describe as excesses of fashion rather than as phenomena having deep connections with ballet aesthetics. Their works thus remain vulnerable to the most characteristic defense against such charges by the adherents of ballet: "Yes, but it’s beautiful."²

The invocation of beauty as an absolute defense should remind us that one of the chief characteristics of ideological argument is to make tendentious positions appear natural and inevitable. This feature of ideology accounts for a curious doubleness in most discussions of it from Marx forward. In one of its definitions, ideology is a set of ideas and values that reflect the interest of the dominant group within a given social order. These values become instruments of social domination insofar as they are accepted by subordinate groups as universal truths. But there is a second aspect of ideology that is especially important for my purposes here: ideology is not just a "mask" of the dominant class; it is also a "veil" of perception. It is a structuring of social experience which sublimates group interests into a set of justifying ideals, ideals which from behind the veil appear as socially integrative values.³ In this definition ideology is an inevitable component of social experience, refracted through both individual experience and cultural history, and as such, necessarily engaged in the experience of art works. But the feeling of "rightness" in a work of art also acts as a persuasion; it may be exactly through the beautiful that ideological naturalization takes place, that the individual subjectivity in all its complexity is rejoined with a social order.
I want to pursue this double theme of joining—of the self with the social order and of the past with the present—through a discussion of *Giselle*, beginning where I believe more criticism should begin, with an account of personal response. I am ordinarily a rather temperate viewer of ballet, with my own biases and resistances to its formal beauties—certainly no balletomane. Yet at a performance of *Giselle* by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet some time ago, my critical response was at one moment thoroughly disarmed. Until well into the second act, I observed the proceedings with considerable detachment, though alive to such qualities in the production as there appeared to me to be. Then, at a moment in the second-act adagio—Giselle *en attitude* downstage right, Albrecht behind and reaching toward her, and both set off against the severe diagonals of the Wilis—a new and beautiful unity appeared whereby Evelyn Hart’s virtuosity, the forms of grace given in ballet, the unfolding story, the music and decor all seemed to become one thing. Criticism fell away; I was for that time seized by beauty.

Now, I do not wish to claim any special authority for this response, though I think it is not uncommon; as Théophile Gautier wrote of the work’s first reception in 1841, “More than one eye which thought it was seeing only *ronds de jambe* and *pointes* found to its surprise its vision obscured by a tear—which does not often happen in ballets.” I do want to suggest that my reaction stemmed from a pattern of affective dynamics within the work itself, one that links ideas and values of the work’s time of origin to those of the present. Thinking back on my response, I realized that I had been hooked on the point of my own desire: I had been “let in” through Albrecht’s longing for the absolutely faithful, absolutely unattainable woman whose death he had occasioned, because I share with much of nineteenth-century culture an attraction to what is sexually charged yet somehow pristine. I can thus be affected by the unity of longing, purity, beauty, and death which the second act proposes. The adagio was for me the time of transformation of Albrecht’s burden from guilt to sorrow, from the bearing of blame to an endless forgiveness, the time when I knew that he was loved, and that his own longing was justified.
The dematerialization of the object of his desire seemed a small cost to pay for such a beautiful redemption.

But there is more here than merely the sentiment of an unattainable ideal. Giselle's gratifying faithfulness, after all, not only forgives Albrecht his own duplicity, but also rescues him from a world of feminine vengeance. In the sources on which Gautier drew when creating his scenario, and also in his own writings on *Giselle*, there are numerous linkages among female sexuality, dancing, and vengeance against the male. In the legend that he used, the Wilis are the spirits of maidens who have died before their wedding day and who thus "could not satisfy their passion for dancing." This unsatisfied *Tanzlust* has converted them, in Gautier's words, into "cruel nocturnal dancers, no more forgiving than living women are to a tired waltzer." Their queen, the pitiless Myrtha, "resorts to an infernal and feminine device" in forcing Giselle to tempt Albrecht with "the most seductive and most graceful poses." Giselle’s ultimate gift to Albrecht is that despite her newly found sisterhood, she does not finally dance him to death. The fullest mark of her love is that she denies her own power in helping him to survive. Her femininity remains in the service of the male.

I suggest that there is considerable sexual anxiety concealed within the libretto of *Giselle*, and that both the dance’s ideality and its aesthetic consolations should be understood in this light. Since Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* it has become a commonplace to perceive deflections of sexuality within various motifs of romanticism. Yet in relation to ballet there have been only tentative explorations of the intricate connections between, on the one hand, the resolution of private fantasies through imaginative creation and, on the other, the ideological resolution of social contradictions through the same aesthetic structures. Two critics of romantic ballet, John Chapman and Erik Aschengreen, have commented usefully in this regard. For Aschengreen, Gautier's "idolization of beautiful forms" is part of his search "for something deeper, the very thing that could lift him beyond the primal desires he felt as a man." The "pure, spiritual and completely un-sensual beauty that comes alive in the second act of *Giselle*" thus indicated Gautier's "love of art as a palliative for a painful
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life," as "all that remained as a prospect for escape in an intoler-
able world created by the bourgeoisie."9 The implications of this
position are that the desexualization of Giselle is one part of an
aesthetic transcendance that stood in opposition to the dominant
social order. In contrast, John Chapman emphasizes the direct
eroticism of much romantic ballet, placing that eroticism in the
context of "the owned woman" of the period, as given in the
odalisques and slave girls of juste milieu painting, as well as in the
actual social practices in the foyer de danse. For him, the sylph
is just another prospect: "Perhaps just as erotic as the harem girl
was the supernatural spirit. . . . The challenge and danger of the
seductive femme fatale only heightened erotic stimulation."10

I believe that both these critics misplace the eroticism of
Giselle in crucial ways. Certainly, Gautier's attitudes toward dance,
as given in his criticism, do include both erotic appreciation and a
proprietary sensibility. The spirit of his criticism lies in his declara-
tion that "an actress is a statue or a picture which is exhibited to
you, and can be freely criticized,"11 an attitude which he takes as
license for frankly sensualist appraisals of dancers like Fanny Elssler.
Yet the "school of Taglioni," with its "modest grace, chaste reserve,
and diaphanous virginity,"12 exercises a different kind of fascina-
tion. Here he is moved by just the visible contradiction between
sexuality and chastity. Writing on Taglioni's performance in the
1844 revival of La Sylphide, he comments: "What rhythmic
movements! What noble gestures! What poetic attitudes and,
above all, what a sweet melancholy! What lack of restraint, yet
how chaste!"13

In the tradition of ballet blanc, as modified in Giselle,
there is an alternative to both the sensualist and spiritualist posi-
tions, in which the erotic is given and yet simultaneously denied.
The "sweet melancholy" that results is a staple of romantic
imagery. In the sentimental novel, beginning with Samuel
Richardson's Clarissa in 1748 and flourishing for a century after,
the poignancy of sacrifice and regret is everywhere. What is particu-
larly to be noticed about this imagery is that it stems from a com-
plex and double view of woman, one that is at once heroizing and
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cence and virtue, but this virtue both invites victimization and
triumphs through it; the feminine power of virtuous self-denial is thus ambiguously both a saving gift and a mode of revenge. The fate of Clarissa herself sets the pattern. She suffers an extended threat to her chastity from an aristocratic admirer, and when her heroic resistance is eventually overcome by Lovelace’s deceit and rape, she dies. But she does so only two-thirds of the way through a very long book, so that we may see the powerful working of her virtue on the regretful Lovelace. In effect she, like Giselle, maintains a supernatural and saving presence over the final movement of her story.

Certainly, the two heroines have their differences, but Giselle clearly elaborates the pattern. Albrecht’s betrayal of Giselle’s first-act innocence, even though it is set in a never-never land of happy peasants and princes in disguise, contains the basic lesson that sentimental novels of the time were endlessly and formulaically repeating concerning “the evil consequences of seduction.” The imaginatively more compelling second act makes explicit two possible avenues of feminine power—the Wilis’ aggressive revenge and Giselle’s forgiveness—and “chooses” the latter. But the satisfactions of this resolution depend upon the tensions that have been raised: a woman triumphs, but her power has been channeled in a way that confines male sexual anxiety, subtly condones male sexual aggression, and alleviates male guilt. The “completely un-sensual beauty” of Act II is a negation that contains its opposite, an example of “the sublimation, camouflage, or subterfuge of . . . elemental appetites and aspirations” that one cultural critic has cited as characteristic of bourgeois art.¹⁴

It is no accident that the century between Clarissa and Giselle roughly coincided with the triumph of the bourgeoisie, that family-oriented, capital-accumulating, industrious, and pragmatic social class that Gautier claimed to despise. The bourgeois self-concept required a center of social value apart from those given within an aristocratic order, in which definitions of virtue had tended to coincide with prior definitions of social rank. This center of values was required to be secular, status-conferring, and consonant with the unrestrained acquisition of material possessions. The social values imaginatively embedded within Giselle fulfill these requirements in complex ways. As mask, these values are
self-congratulatory, evasive, and power-seeking; as veil, these same values appear to manifest a deep respect for women (at least for bourgeois wives and daughters) and a profound interest in private experience, especially the domestic emotions. Moreover, they are infused with the sentiment for beauty. The romantic and ethereal beauty of Act II, then, has a more complex social function than either Chapman or Aschengreen contemplates. Whatever the lusts of the Jockey Club, ideality does not simply "heighten erotic stimulus;" instead it both captures and inverts it in the interests of sentiment and power. Whatever the avowed social oppositions of Gautier's aestheticism, he has not escaped "the intolerable world of the bourgeois;" he has become its ideologist.

Gautier called Taglioni "the dancer for Women," in order to contrast her style with Fanny Elssler's more sensuous appeal to men. Yet to whatever extent Giselle or its first star, Carlotta Grisi, combined the two styles, we should remember that it was Taglioni who defined what is now memorable in the style of romantic ballet. This definition was as much as anything a matter of technique: the rising on pointe as familiar practice, the domination of grace over visible effort, the remarkable lightness ("She descends without falling," said Auguste Vestris). Costumes and decor as well as libretti reinforced this emphasis of the vertical and its association with both ethereality and chastity. But of course the technical innovations also correspond to and reinforce a particular ideal of femininity, an ideal that has been so persuasive because it accommodates both masculine and feminine interests. The "dancer for women" images woman as both cynosure of eyes and epitome of virtue, but both beauty and purity depend upon a sexuality refined to the vanishing point. She presents a demure, perfected, admired body which projects disembodiment. And she is also a dancer for men—men whose attraction to this attenuation of the flesh both sentimentalizes sexual possession and spares them full acknowledgement of a sexuality they cannot control.

It should be clear that this coalescence of gender interests around a particular image of the female body is not an entire historical novelty, but simply a new form for an old pattern. That women might attract men through an ostentatious modesty was no invention of the bourgeois era, nor did the romantic ballerina
provide the first feminine image to channel the desires of both women and men. But the emergence of a new and potent image deserves sociological attention. One social theorist has argued that an important transition in gender relationships took place in Western Europe at about the time of *Giselle*, when legal and religious structures that had previously supported patriarchy were giving way under the pressures of bourgeois individualism. Thus, "capitalism produces patriarchalism by reaping the advantages of cheap labour and unpaid domestic services within the household; it also destroys patriarchy by creating, at least formally, universalistic values and individualism." In this situation, the persistence of male privilege comes increasingly to depend upon the persuasions of imagery that appears to give women a distinctive place in the order of things, whether this place is her closeness to nature, her moral purity, or the sexual allure created by such punitive engines of glamour as the corset.

Pervaded by a romantic ideal of femininity, ballet has played a part in promulgating its wider social acceptance. The romantic style and its immediate heirs continue to be highly visible in ballet production, even though cognate styles in literature have fallen from view, or at least from our idea of "art." Perhaps the imagery of *ballet blanc* has such staying power because it has entered a discourse of the body. Dance, after all, is an art that depends upon the entrenchment of its conventional imagery in living bodies: the technical training of a dancer maintains and reproduces the social bearing of the dominant style by actualizing it in the dancer's body. In some very important senses, Pavlova—as person, performer, and legend—became Giselle. The power her performances had on young women, touchingly described by Agnes de Mille in her autobiography, constituted an invitation also to embody that image. And alongside that invitation to women, the critical response to the romantic ballerina, even by her most sensitive appreciators, continues to reveal the connections among idealization, erotic distortion, and masculine possessiveness. Consider, for example, these words of Adrian Stokes:

*The ballerina's body is etherealized. She seems scarcely to rest upon the ground. She is, as it were, suspended just*
They don't want to grow up; they want to remain children.”

By “[Anorectics] don’t learn, as they grow up, to accept their interpretations of anorexia. Gordon quotes one authority as saying that “the look” and this particular pathology. Gordon cites estimates that 15 percent of female ballet students in the leading American ballet schools are true anorectics. If this disturbing statistic is anywhere near the truth, then possible reasons for the correlation should be considered. There have been plausible contentions that the ballet environment is compatible with anorectic susceptibilities: competitiveness, discipline, a desire for self-control, and a preoccupation with the body are requisites for ballet training and are also characteristics of the anorectic type. There are also connections between the willful childlikeness of some citizens of the ballet world and the denial of sexuality that is stressed in some interpretations of anorexia. Gordon quotes one authority as saying that “[Anorectics] don’t learn, as they grow up, to accept their sexuality and integrate sexual feelings into normal functioning. They don’t want to grow up; they want to remain children.”

In a slightly less blatant way, Balanchine’s equation—“Ballet is woman”—has the same tendency, for it implies that woman is not, or should not be, what ballet is not. In one of his glosses on the famous aphorism, Balanchine contrasts men and women as follows: “Man is a better cook, a better painter, a better musician, composer. . . . Man is stronger, faster. . . . And woman accepts this. It is her business to accept. She knows what’s beautiful.” The equation works both ways: ballet is the art form of beautiful acceptance.

Balanchine’s attitudes toward woman bring us back both to the defense of beauty and to the issue of anorexia nervosa. Balanchine has been called “the man who defeminized women,” and has been accused by Suzanne Gordon of establishing the fashion for emaciation in the American ballet world. Such charges are probably not fair to Balanchine, but there is clearly a relationship between “the look” and this particular pathology. Gordon cites estimates that 15 percent of female ballet students in the leading American ballet schools are true anorectics. If this disturbing statistic is anywhere near the truth, then possible reasons for the correlation should be considered. There have been plausible contentions that the ballet environment is compatible with anorectic susceptibilities: competitiveness, discipline, a desire for self-control, and a preoccupation with the body are requisites for ballet training and are also characteristics of the anorectic type. There are also connections between the willful childlikeness of some citizens of the ballet world and the denial of sexuality that is stressed in some interpretations of anorexia. Gordon quotes one authority as saying that “[Anorectics] don’t learn, as they grow up, to accept their sexuality and integrate sexual feelings into normal functioning. They don’t want to grow up; they want to remain children.”
There are deeper possible connections, however, between anorexia and the themes of this discussion, for the anorectic seeks power by means of embodying a culturally given image, an image she can fulfill only at the cost of disemboding herself. The anorectic pursues, with a vengeance, a particular ideal of feminine beauty. But it is an obsession with perfection that bases itself with chilling literalism on a symbolic system. Having within it a strong component of adolescent rebellion, anorexia can be described as at once a drive for autonomy and a cultural invasion of the body. This “compelling, peculiar path to selfhood”\(^\text{23}\) is a triumph of negation, deeply infused with the paradox of a sexual idealism that demands desexualization. In this sense the image of the romantic ballerina, and more particularly Giselle’s apotheosis in death, is a stylization, a socially sanctioned version, of some of the impulses that take a diseased—and unbeautiful—extremity in anorexia.

Anorexia has been described as an illness of consumerism, a neurotic version of the obsession with appearances within a “culture of narcissism.” If *Giselle* in 1841 participated in and expressed a developing bourgeois culture, *Giselle* in modern performance participates in ours. Of course, the terms of its participation have changed, for now it is a classic. As such, the beauties and comforts it offers to us are legitimated as transhistorical. The eternal feminine rearticulates an idealism of feminine sacrifice, whether that sacrifice is for a man, for one’s art, or to the labor of glamour. Anyone who surveys the slick dance magazines with sensitivity to cultural signs will be aware that romantic ethereality still occupies a central place in the image of the female dancer, and that the image of the female dancer is largely a servant of the glamour industry. In this way the inherent innocence of dancing bodies—which Giselle also celebrates, but converts in Act II to the poignancy of unfulfilled desire—is turned toward economic purposes. In our present North American culture, the extraordinary continuing popularity of *Giselle* reflects a society in which sentimental imagery has been deeply confused with attainable achievements, and for which the practical exactions of ethereality provide an ironic model of endless consumption.\(^\text{24}\)

The conflict between sociology and conventional aesthetics can now be restated as it applies to dance. From the perspective
of phenomenological aesthetics, David Michael Levin has called
dance the "poetizing" of bodily experience. From the perspec-
tive of sociology, Bryan Turner has seen control of the body,
particularly the female body, as one pervasive task of Western
ideology. My central contention is this: in its poetizing of
bodily experience Giselle gives us also and at once a poetizing of
bodily control. This bodily control has an aspect that faces in-
ward, toward the specificity of ballet and its pleasures—the tech-
nical mastery, the sublime tension with gravity that Levin, among
others, has analyzed so compellingly. But intricately related to
these formal issues, and regardless of the focus of our attention,
Giselle also poetizes the control of bodies, the ways in which the
body is socialized in at least partial accordance with the structures
of power within society. The bodies we admire in their fulfillment
of an extraordinary technique, the sense of a rare perfection, the
feeling of ultimate simplicity in the "rightness" of it all—these also
invoke our loyalty to a social order.

The ideological persuasiveness of ballet, then, operates at a
deep level of the art form, one that is inextricable from its aesthetic
values. This integration is deeply historical, most especially in
works that have continuing appeal. Thus I have argued that the
etherealization of the female body that is imaged in Giselle repre-
sents a particular moment within the general history of patriarchy
in which the ascendency of private economic relations called forth
an image of woman as at once private and powerful, sacred and
spectral, a figure of desire that by inversion of physical presence
both accommodates and imaginatively controls feminine sexual
power. The moment of our response to this classic work is a
moment of convergence—of past and present, of self and society,
of imaginations at a distance. If we are affected by the work's
provisional, aesthetic resolutions to tensions between desire and
belief, it is because those tensions are alive in us, as they were in
the culture of its creation. Such imaginative resolutions are indeed
aesthetic; they may be experienced—quite simply—as beautiful, and
are not to be taken for social prescription. Yet our assent to this
beauty entails a further assent to a network of social ideas. For
this reason, a summary of our tastes is also a summary of our
allegiances, however confused and self-contradictory both of these
may be. An adequate aesthetics will enhance our awareness of art as social form.

Notes


12. Ibid., p. 86.

13. Ibid., p. 70.


22. Ibid., p. 147.


24. In pointing to a special and probably transitory relationship to fashion in contemporary North America, I am not ignoring other regions of *Giselle’s* ideological reach. Ideological forms have some measure of both stability and change, and the capacity to adapt, within limits, to local circumstances of power. An equivalent argument could be made about the place of this ballet in the Soviet Union, which would point to a somewhat different but no less ideological functioning of its current reception.
