

MARK FRANKO

# OF FOUNDATIONS AND EVOLUTIONS:

## APOLLO AND IMPERSONALITY



*Photo: Adrian Danchig-Waring in George Balanchine's Apollo.  
Photo credit: Erin Baiano. Courtesy of the New York City Ballet.*

**NOT SURPRISINGLY,** the program for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New York City Ballet will give us an opportunity to look both backwards and forwards. The Fall program is dubbed “The Foundation,” and the coming winter season is to be called “The Evolution.” “The Foundation” has been dedicated almost exclusively to the works of George Balanchine (with one Robbins ballet—*Glass Pieces* (1983)—thrown in for good measure). Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine founded the company in 1948, though, of course, Balanchine’s choreography got its start earlier in the century, under Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Two of the oldest “foundational works” of the current repertoire—*Apollo* (Stravinsky 1928) and *The Prodigal Son* (Prokofiev 1929)—

were premiered in the Ballets Russes' final two years, and both ballets were on view this fall. Locating the Balanchine works in an area marked off as foundational also implies evolution, in both historical and performative terms.

Although it premiered in 1928, *Apollo* points ahead to the founding of the company in 1948. In December 1947, Kirstein published an important article in *Theatre Arts* titled "Balanchine Musagète" where he singled out *Apollo* (originally titled *Apollon Musagète*) as exemplary for the future of a fledgling New York City Ballet. Although Balanchine's choreographic innovations had marred the ballet's original reception in Paris, Kirstein suggested that, by 1947, the choreography could be viewed differently. In Paris, the inventiveness of Balanchine's choreography was at first considered distracting due to, in Kirstein's words, its "many ways of lifting women, of turning close to the floor, of subtle syncopation in the use of *pointes*, of a single male dancer supporting three women."<sup>1</sup> But twenty years later the same choreography could be received, no longer as overly-clever avant-gardism, but as "new" classicism.<sup>2</sup> In 1929, dance critic André Levinson thought that both *Apollon* and *The Prodigal Son* had "an ambiguous character, oscillating between pathos and caricature, edifying apologue and burlesque fantasy."<sup>3</sup> "He [Balanchine] uses and abuses classical dance to the point of literally torturing it; it is, one might almost say, with a sadistic satisfaction that he turns the natural principles inside out and forces the Leader of the Muses to play the clown."<sup>4</sup> Kirstein implicitly acknowledged this critique but also refuted it when he wrote: "*Apollon* has now lost for us the effects which offended, irritated or merely amused an earlier public."<sup>5</sup> Kirstein here discounts the skeptical and iconoclastic spirit of interwar neoclassicism that had pervaded much of Balanchine's earlier work.<sup>6</sup> How did the choreography's "ambiguous character" yield to "a spirit of traditional classicism absent since Petipa's last compositions almost thirty years before."<sup>7</sup> Or, to ask a more obvious question: What happened between 1928 and 1948?

In 1947, Balanchine had just returned from a stint at the Paris Opera, where he replaced Serge Lifar, who had been condemned before a tribunal as a Nazi collaborator and temporarily banished from French national stages. Had Lifar not inexplicably been called back from exile to lead the Paris Opera Ballet once again, Balanchine might have remained in Paris, and the New York City Ballet might not have come into existence. But once he'd returned to New York City, the moment was right

to transform Ballet Society into New York City Ballet. Kirstein's article appealed to a public that he believed was now less hungry for interwar avant-garde experimentation and would be drawn instead to a postwar classical pedigree. In 1945, Kirstein had served as a Monuments Man in war-torn Europe, seeking out and saving art treasures from destruction. This may have affected his view of the fragility of classical culture in the wake of the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> It could also be related to the phenomenon Serge Guilbaut describes in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.<sup>9</sup> The center of gravity of the art world shifted from Paris to New York after World War II, but the irony is that modern ballet frequently defined its modernity in terms of the rediscovery of the classical tradition. This is generally referred to as the Americanization of ballet, even if Kirstein had approached it quite differently under the Popular Front, when he saw ballet's potential as an art for the masses.

At this foundational moment for the company, Kirstein's emphasis on *Apollo* no longer allied ballet with the Popular Front; instead, it joined with a more elitist postwar consciousness, ready to put the destruction of the war behind it. In his article, Kirstein focused in particular on distinguishing Balanchine's classicism from wartime French neoclassicism—and from the latter's associations with fascism under the controversial influence of Serge Lifar, the ballet master at the Paris Opera since 1930. Although a new classicism might also have been expected to reject conventional narrative by relinquishing plot, it would appear this did not enter Kirstein's thinking in 1947. *Apollon Musagète* begins with a narrative gesture showing us the birth of Apollo. Balanchine cut this section in 1979.<sup>10</sup> Once deprived of its narrative trappings, the ballet looks far more chastised, as the French would put it, and thus more in keeping with the modernist aesthetics central to much of Balanchine's later choreographic creativity.<sup>11</sup> In other terms, Balanchine's cuts to *Apollo* in 1979 caught up with Kirstein's claims made for the ballet in 1947. In fact, the entire story of the foundation is one of a succession of belated revisions that negotiate the fraught relation between classicism and modernism.

Kirstein's claim for a new classicism was also intended to diminish the importance of the star turn in the ballet. The announcement of a classically unadulterated *Apollo* came on the heels of a French neoclassicism that had been politically compromised during the war years by the German Occupation and Nazi enthusiasm for the work of Serge Lifar.<sup>12</sup> "No one acquainted only with Lifar's recent shameful political career

and present status,” wrote Kirstein in the same essay, “can have any notion of the impact of his personal qualities in 1928.”<sup>13</sup> The operative term here is “personal”: Kirstein underlined Lifar’s personal success in the work to the detriment of the work itself. He argued that “Lifar’s individual success, the dreamed for dazzle that comes once in a career [. . .] obliterated the prime importance of the two factors most responsible for the triumph—Stravinsky’s music and Balanchine’s movement.”<sup>14</sup> We know that Lifar’s distinctive interpretation of the role—a performance that, for Cocteau, made the ballet suggest a crime scene—led to the dancer’s identification with the work to such a degree that Lifar was soon claiming he had choreographed it himself.<sup>15</sup> There was, therefore, a close association between Lifar’s shameful politics and his pantomimic approach to ballet.

*Apollo* now figured as the pièce de resistance for New York City Ballet because it undercut the appeal of the star personality that was potentially detrimental to the dignity of ballet as art and to the recognition of classicism per se as the most distinctive contribution of ballet to theatrical art. T.S. Eliot singled out the ballet earlier in the century as crucial to the future of verse drama, which he felt was the direction in which theater should go. If ballet had a “permanent form,” it was because its strength lay in “a tradition, a training, an askesis.”<sup>16</sup> In Kirstein’s rejection of pantomime one can find a veiled reference to what Eliot in 1919 had named “impersonality,” viz., the value of the poet’s relation to the entire past of literature. The poet can add to this past and change our relation to it, but his contribution should avoid seeking novelty by subordinating his own personal experience to tradition. Eliot maintained the poet must labor to cultivate “the historical sense,” which “involves the perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”<sup>17</sup> To figure out Eliot’s ideas here in relation to the ballet demands some translation. Impersonality in a modern dance aesthetic meant that the dancer could convey the meaning of choreography without illustrating it through a personally expressive style. And in ballet this would mean that tradition was lodged in ballet training, which was understood to be directly in the service of choreography.

Kirstein’s new classicism was therefore above all a choreographic classicism. Hence “Balanchine Musagète” meant that the choreographer, not the dancer, leads the muses. Balanchine’s resistance to the star system is well known, and the turn against narrative in his later work is also a form of rejection of the star system. It is odd that, in 1930,

Kirstein wrote of *Apollon Musagète*: “There is no plot.”<sup>18</sup> Yet clearly this underlines that for Kirstein plot and personality spelled pantomime, which was central to Lifar’s style of dancing. As early as 1930, the clearest expression of Kirstein’s credo was anti-Lifarian: “Always in the last analysis the classical dance is the most satisfactory; its cold multiplication of a thousand embroideries—divested of the personal, if more romantic charm of pantomime—never becomes cloying.”<sup>19</sup> Levinson’s earlier objections to Balanchine’s choreography were largely based on the choreographer’s brilliant, yet for that very reason also problematic, use of Lifar in both the roles of Apollo and the Prodigal Son. Lifar was imposed on Balanchine by Diaghilev. Here again, the emphasis is less on choreography itself than on Lifar’s interpretation of the choreography, which had become so successful that one could not tell him apart from the choreography. To be truly foundational, these ballets needed to be purged of the performer who had made them famous.



**FOR ALL THESE REASONS,** Apollo is a fraught foundational work. This season, Adrian Danchig-Waring has given us the anti-Lifarian interpretation of *Apollo par excellence* and has thus presented a new twist to this history of belated returns and updates of the Apollo role. Yet, in doing so, he departs from the tradition of how this role is danced at New York City Ballet. Danchig-Waring’s interpretation of the iconic role was to me both unusual and fully motivated. I believe he is shedding a certain diffidence that has been noticeable at times in the disconnect between his face and the inherent drama of his body in motion. Subtle black lines at his lower jaw now serve to reign in and focus his facial expression as a kind of mask. With this new stylization of his makeup, through which earlier suggestions of indecision or questioning have been erased, his true strength as a dancer finally emerges. What could previously be read in his performance style as withdrawn diffidence now gives way to an assertion of the autonomy of movement, with a straightforward speed and alacrity that one might expect to see in someone of a smaller frame. His movement itself emerges as a hieroglyph in space, detached from the character he is playing, which serves in turn to defamiliarize the choreography as the dance of a character: the beautiful god.

Danchig-Waring can personally fit this description of classical

beauty, but the beauty of Apollo has also been recognized to contain a certain vision of authority. Lynn Garafola has argued that, with *Apollo Musagète*, ballet neoclassicism “acquired a profoundly conservative aura.”<sup>20</sup> Of course, Eliot’s stance on tradition has itself been discussed as authoritarian.<sup>21</sup> The ballet shows us the emergence of Apollo’s mastery of art and thus of the muses themselves as compliant to an order Apollo dictates. Danchig-Waring now shows us the emergence of choreography itself, rather than the mastery of dance that Apollo embodies. And in this way, his performance echoes Kirstein’s position in 1947, to wit that Apollo does not lead the muses because he is not a choreographer. Perhaps by chance, he has discovered a strain of performance suggesting Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Marionette Theater” (1810) and Edward Gordon Craig’s 1908 essay, “The Actor and the Übermarionette.”<sup>22</sup> Both texts espouse a depersonalized vision of the performer.<sup>23</sup>

Craig proposes the idea of a super-marionette, a puppet who would substitute “calculation and design” for the actor’s wayward personality, with its unreliable moments of inspiration.<sup>24</sup> Craig took the idea from Kleist, who explained that grace as the perfectly repeatable gesture is inaccessible to the mere human being. The perfect and therefore repeatable gesture is a work of art, a stable, unchanging art object against which fulminates personal inspiration: the performer dependent on his own personality has always already fallen from grace. Craig took this idea one step further when he said that the ideal performer should be devoid of any human intentionality. I understand him to mean that the dancer should aspire to be highly choreographic, in the sense that the dancer aspires to become himself the choreographic object. Kleist wrote, “[G]race itself returns when knowledge has gone through an infinity,”<sup>25</sup> and he equated this ideal state with either the god or the puppet. Transposed to our somewhat more mundane reality, the knowledge gone through in the performance history of *Apollo* progresses from Lifar’s personal triumph in the role to its reconceptualization as a rite of passage from the untutored Dionysian figure juxtaposed, by the ballet’s end, to the mature embodiment of mastery. And, finally, it also confronts the necessity to purge the narrative elements so that the symbolic meaning concerning the evolution of ballet itself in modernity can emerge. At this historical juncture, Danchig-Waring has emerged as the Apollo *übermarionette*. A new episode in the performance of this role has been engendered, a major evolution in the history of the piece.

With Danchig-Waring’s approach to the choreography, we now find

ourselves in a less narrative mode than we are used to. Nonetheless, the formality of his approach effectively becomes more intense—precisely, if also paradoxically, because of his personal reserve and refusal to entertain. Here is no *Bildungsroman* for a God. While this may not amount to any new understanding of classicism in Kirsteinian terms, I think it does call upon the early depersonalizing and self-magnifying techniques of Martha Graham.



*Photo: Lesley Andrea Williams in Martha Graham's Lamentation.*

*Photo: Mark Franko*

The phenomenon of impersonality in dance has previously been understood more readily in modern dance of the 1930s. At that time, it was associated with the solos of Martha Graham, whose projection of a symbolic presence—for example, in *Lamentation*, the presence of the mourner—transcends the expression of individual personality in order to promote the expression of the idea or feeling at a supra-personal level.

This fall I had a chance to see an excellent and rare example of such danced impersonality, when the Martha Graham Dance Company presented several solos of the 1930s at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a complement to an exhibition on Popular Front art, *Art for the Millions*. I would not consider *Lamentation* (1930) a Popular Front work, but, for other reasons, seeing it in the museum was nonetheless a powerful experience. Danced by Lesley Andrea Williams, against the sort of backdrop that only a museum can provide—*viz.*, a marble Roman sarcophagus (220-230 A.D.)—the effect was stunning. The synergy between the sarcophagus and Graham's modernism was palpable, and even more striking due to Williams's brilliantly achieved impersonality. For Graham, the innovations of modernism relied on the costume enveloping the human figure and the relinquishment of locomotion through space: the dancer is seated throughout and pushes her movement out from her body through the enveloping, stretch-jersey material. *Lamentation* seemed to be a more adequate illustration of Kirstein's reflection on tradition as "not merely an anchorage to which one returns after eccentric divagations but the very floor which supports the artist, enabling him securely to build upon its elements which may at first seem revolutionary."<sup>26</sup> Williams achieved a timelessness both through her ability to stand apart from the role, allowing its gestures to speak through her, as well as through the unique *in situ* décor, which allowed the mythological traditions present in the solo—Demeter's mourning for Persephone—to be the environment, thanks to which innovation was achieved in 1930 and available to be captured again in 2023.



**DANCHIG-WARING'S PERFORMANCE** situates Apollo in the modernist canon. By comparison, *The Prodigal Son* appears to be a period piece, mainly because it remains faithful to an original narrative intent. Yet *The Prodigal Son* contains many details that are potent even today, such as the brutality of the bald Drinking Companions and the



grotesque eroticism of the Siren sitting on the Prodigal's head, traits that have left their mark on much subsequent twentieth-century choreography. I think of the work of Anna Sokolow and Paul Sanasardo for a similarly raw dramatic quality. On October 15th, Daniel Ulbrecht had the right exuberance and bravado as the Prodigal and Miriam Miller played her role as the Siren vividly, fairly dripping with lasciviousness. The historical feeling of *The Prodigal Son* is underlined by Georges Rouault's backdrop and costumes (he is not credited for the costumes in the program). The tension between biblical parable and interwar ballet is highlighted in the seldom-remarked-upon circus setting of the scene. Like Picasso, Rouault painted circus figures; seen from this angle, it becomes evident the bald Drinking Companions are clowns.<sup>27</sup>

This characterization fits with the cynicism of the Prodigal's humiliating relation to the Siren; the Clown has been the sexually humiliated figure par excellence ever since Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci* and yet again in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Naked Night*. And the Siren is the very figure of theatrical personality. The circus is a sordid world outside the law, and the humiliation of the Prodigal is related to his escape into the forbidden world of the circus. The most striking moment of the entire ballet is when the Siren and her entourage take on the appearance of a mute orchestra performing on a bench while her cape flutters in the background. Their truly grotesque nature emerges to the fore and the return of the Prodigal to the fold appears to have been preordained. This moment taking place downstage right can best be seen if you happen to be sitting on that side of the orchestra, given how subtle it is and how quickly it happens, in a corner of the stage.

If one compares the revisions of *Apollo* to the relatively stable rendering of *The Prodigal Son*, it will be noted that the latter ballet has grotesque characteristics, generally not part of ballet classicism except as burlesque elements. Kirstein could not have used *The Prodigal Son* in 1947 as his example of a new classicism, but the ballet does suggest a modernism that falls outside classical bounds—as Levinson claimed with his derogatory references to the circus. But the anti-classical elements in *The Prodigal Son* were encoded in the work's dramaturgy. If truth be told, neither Denby nor Kirstein got it right about Balanchine's classicism: the choreographer drew both on Goleizovsky and Petipa, which is to say on the Russian avant-garde tradition, as epitomized in theater by Meyerhold, and on the classical Russian tradition of Petipa. Balanchine had a broad sense of the historical presence of the medium

and his contribution to that tradition in the sense Eliot described it. For this reason, Eliot's definition of tradition in ballet is also lacking; by the 1930s, this tradition was richer than earlier supposed. Kirstein's belief in the importance of impersonality in the guise of a new classicism was perhaps not ecumenical enough. But we must remember he was both a critical mind and a producer of dance. It is the dancer, in this case Danchig-Waring, who can set the record straight — by performing Apollo as a composite of what is otherwise considered a fractured tradition.

MARK FRANKO'S *Text as Dance: Walter Benjamin, Louis Marin and Choreographies of the Baroque* will be published later this year by Bloomsbury Academic.

#### NOTES

1 Lincoln Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," in *Theatre Arts* 31/11 (November 1947), 39.

2 Ibid.

3 André Levinson, "Les Ballets russes: "Le Fils Prodigue," in *Comoedia* (May 23, 1929).

4 "Il use et abuse de la danse classique en la mettant littéralement à la torture; c'est dirait-on, avec une espèce de satisfaction sadique qu'il en applique à rebours les principes naturels et force le Musagète à faire le pitre." André Levinson, *Les Visages de la Danse* (Paris: Grasset, 1933), p. 41 (my translation).

5 Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," 39.

6 Kirstein referred in 1930 (presumably based on his impressions of the premiere in Paris) of "the slight crassness that accompanies elaborate conceit" in *Apollon Musagète*. Lincoln Kirstein, "The Diaghilev Period," in *By With To & From. A Lincoln Kirstein Reader* edited by Nicholas Jenkins (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 125.

7 Lincoln Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," 39. This shift from Kasyan Goleizovsky to Marius Petipa as the major influencer of Balanchine's was first asserted by Edwin Denby. See Andrea Harris, *Making Ballet American. Modernism Before and Beyond Balanchine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 157-160.

8 See Ibid, 68-74.

9 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

10 See Susan Jones's description of these changes in "Nietzsche, Modernism and Dance," in her *Literature, Modernism and Dance* (London: Oxford University

Press, 2013), 63-69.

11 *Orpheus* (1948) is another work that still has the old narrative ethos, despite a strong dose of modernist abstraction in the set and costumes by Isamu Noguchi. It shows that Balanchine had high regard for Martha Graham and was emulating her dramaturgy in the company's foundational year.

12 See Mark Franko, *The Fascist Turn in the Dance of Serge Lifar: French Interwar Ballet and the German Occupation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

13 Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," 40.

14 Ibid.

15 "Serge Lifar . . . pretends it was he who made the choreography, not only for his own part but for the others as well. This is not true . . ." Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," 40.

16 T. S. Eliot, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," in *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 47.

17 T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 14.

18 Kirstein, "The Diaghilev Period," 125.

19 Ibid.

20 Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 140-141.

21 "The presence of the past has now become authoritarian, though Eliot conceals its iron hand by sentimentalizing its paternalism." Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality. T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 37.

22 Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-marionette," in *The Mask* (1908), 3-15.

23 For a fuller discussion of these two texts in relation to Denis Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* and Oskar Schlemmer's *Kunstfigur*, see Mark Franko, "Epilogue: Repeatability, Reconstruction and Beyond," in *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 131-151.

24 Craig, "The Actor and the Über-marionette," 7.

25 Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theater in *German Romantic Criticism*," edited by Leslie Wilson (New York: Continuum, 1972), 244. The essay was first published in 1810.

26 Kirstein, "Balanchine Musagète," 39.

27 I am grateful to my colleague and friend art historian Catherine Soussloff for sharing with me her knowledge of Rouault.