

# Gods and Bodies

By ANNE HOLLANDER

The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky:  
Unexpurgated Edition  
translated by Kyril FitzLyon  
edited by Joan Acocella

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 312 pp., \$30)

Nureyev: His Life  
by Diane Solway

(William Morrow, 625 pp., \$27.50)

**K**YRIL FITZLYON'S English translation of Nijinsky's diary from the original handwritten Russian texts is a landmark in the history of modern art. The resultant book, which includes Joan Acocella's rich introduction and the translator's own preface and annotations, in fact shows to what a great degree Modern Art itself is History, meaning over. The objective detachment at work, the currency of the interpretations and the aesthetic syntheses offered, and the emotional attitudes expressed by the two people who produced this book place it firmly in an era beyond the reach of Modernism's original force, flavor, and aims, free from passionate entanglements with the sense of form, or the devotion to art as a continuum that generates its own path. As if he were a Renaissance painter or an Enlightenment writer, Nijinsky's art and life are now ready for detached inspection and analysis, with special emphasis on the society in which he lived and on his sexual and emotional history.

Analysis is impossible for the art of unrecorded performers. Everything depends on words. There are no films of Nijinsky dancing, and there are no living eye-witnesses. Since his modern era is so recent, this fact seems a much greater calamity than our lack of direct visual record for, say, Marie Taglioni, whose nineteenth-century dancing is as unknown to us as Salome's. The tenuousness of a dancer's artistic immortality is appalling. Knowledge of Nijinsky's performances must come from the many written descriptions and few photographs of him in actual

ANNE HOLLANDER'S new book, *Feeding the Eye*, will be published in the fall by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

motion, plus the drawings and the posed studio shots. His choreography, too, eludes exact retrieval, except for *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which was transmitted and survives. *Jeux*, *Sacre du printemps*, and *Tyl Eulenspiegel* can be only lamely reconstructed, though again there are some pictures and the many things that people said and wrote.

What we have is this book. Nijinsky wrote all of it during the six and a half weeks between his last public performance and his first hospitalization, which was imminent as he finished writing on the last day, waiting to be taken to see a specialist in Zurich. That was in the spring of 1919, when he was twenty-nine. The book was intended as an urgent communication to the world. Nijinsky writes that he means to publish it as soon as he gets to Zurich, so that people will rightly understand him and profit from his knowledge of how the world ought to be.

Now published in its entirety for the first time, this dense compendium of pronouncements, complaints, memories, reports (of dealings with God as well as of quotidian events and physical details), thoughts, poems, letters, explanations, sermons, hopes (for love and understanding) and fears (of madness and global disaster) has become the only solid legacy of Nijinsky, the great modern genius of the dance. The French translation of 1933, also made from the original manuscript, omitted almost all of the Fourth Notebook, which consists of sixteen unsent letters in French, Russian, and Polish, of which ten are poems, the first fourteen addressed to living persons, the last two to Mankind and to Jesus. This group of letters was written all at once, during a break from the composition of the book itself. The last in its entirety goes like this:

Au Gèsue

Je suis gèsue  
Je suis gèsue  
Je suis gesue  
Je suis gesue  
Je suis un sue  
Je suis un sue  
Je suis je suis je suis je suis  
Suis je suis je suis je suis  
Je suis suis je suis suis je  
Je ne veux pas sent je suis  
Je me suis je suis je suis

The one addressed to mankind is similar, only it is nineteen pages long.

**J**OAN ACOCELLA'S long biographical and interpretive introduction is a boon to the reader of this difficult book. She sketches the world of art contemporary with Nijinsky's short career, along with the drastic historical events in progress that affected and helped to compromise both that world and Nijinsky's art, and the ways his madness may be seen as part of them all, inflected by the mythology of the mad artist. She sets Nijinsky's writings in the context of his recent conversion to Tolstoyanism, which helps to account for the dominant spiritual theme of the diary, its constant emphasis on what God wants, along with its intermittent insistence on how bad it is to eat meat, to value money, to yield to lust. We also learn of Vaslav's unstable older brother Stassik, institutionalized in his teens, his fate a perpetual source of dread. Acocella offers detailed analytical information about Nijinsky's mental condition, not only describing it in the light of present knowledge, but describing also the efforts made to deal with it personally and professionally at the time.

There are also many details about the practical and internal difficulties faced by an independent ballet company, especially in times of war and revolution. Acocella's account includes hair-raising stories of Nijinsky's failures as a leader and an administrator—at first of his own small, short-lived troupe (formed after his marriage and his subsequent rupture with the Diaghilev enterprise), of which the two-month London engagement had to be canceled after two weeks. Later, after he had rejoined the Ballets Russes in 1916 for a season in New York, a second season was followed by a disastrous four-month, fifty-two-city tour, during which Nijinsky was put in charge of the company and tried to run it on Tolstoyan principles, outraging everybody and losing a fortune into the bargain.

Acocella is a dance critic, but she has also co-written a textbook on abnormal psychology. She emphasizes this diary's

importance as the only record of an artist's descent into insanity as it was occurring, made by the artist himself. Crudely put, this document shows how Nijinsky felt as the emotional dispositions that had created a dancer and a choreographer were being transmuted into psychosis. For her essay, Acocella has studied not only works on varieties of mental illness, but specifically those on Nijinsky's malady, notably Peter Ostwald's *Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness*, which appeared in 1991 and focuses on the evidence of his schizophrenia.

For this new edition of the diary, in order to guard the integrity of Nijinsky's writings during his breakdown, it was clearly necessary to preserve every last bit of incoherence and discontinuity in Nijinsky's text, every obsessive repetition, every vagrant association, and all the odd twitches of syntax or diction—each one well annotated—together with every personal account of defecation and masturbation, to say nothing of ingestion, and every uninhibited reference to public figures and family members. Also important, it seems, was preserving the traditional contempt for the first editor and publisher of this diary, the dancer's wife Romola. Her edition of 1936, in English translation, was heavily rewritten, rearranged, and truncated so as to omit most of the sex and the defecation and the most uncomplimentary references to herself, along with the most boring and incomprehensible grotesqueries of the text.

Acocella is careful to acknowledge her respect for Romola's "editorial achievement," and calls her version "comforting" because of the rewrites. Still, her interpretations of Romola's editorial decisions sound needlessly condescending, as in "Romola probably found this primitive." Unhappy Romola! I cannot believe that she was ever the villain. Mainly she was the daughter of a dreadful mother, Emilia Márkus, the Most Famous Hungarian Actress of Her Day (help!). Nijinsky's diary is full of loathing for this lady and

her steady falsity, and full of love for his wife, even though he does call Romola "an un-twinkling star." He also writes that "I like my wife's nose because it has feeling." He keenly feels her withdrawals of immediate sympathy and the presence of her constant anxiety. He often says that "my wife does not feel me," but he never seems to feel that she does not love him.

Romola had no sense of this text as an important medical document, and she knew it would be all that was left of Nijinsky in the unaccountable future. How to



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Vaslav Nijinsky in "Tyl Eulenspiegel," 1916

conjure the great dancer through the scribbles of a madman with religious mania? It is very noticeable that there is almost nothing concrete in these pages about dancing or performing, nothing about training, preparing, or choreographing, nothing about other dancers and their work. Romola's efforts to make Nijinsky's diary reveal him as a great artist and a great man as well as an undeniable lunatic, and to preserve him from the very scrutiny now brought to bear on the totality of this horrific document, are somehow moving. She wrote her own book about

her husband in 1934 to supplement and to complement this mad screed before she published it. She was not highly intelligent, or talented as dancer or writer, or in much rapport with the actual phenomenon of genius; and she was acutely of her time. But they did love each other, and she did her best as that hapless personage, *The Artist's Wife*.

Vaslav Nijinsky was born in 1889 (along with Adolf Hitler, Charlie Chaplin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein) to a couple of itinerant Polish dancers who played summer theaters and circuses on both sides of the Russian-Polish border, and who taught him to dance and to perform when he was little. When his father eventually decamped, his mother moved the family to St. Petersburg and set about getting Vaslav into the Imperial Theater School, which he entered at the age of nine. Though a poor scholar, he was clearly a dancer of genius. His mother must have known it all along.

His rise was swift. He entered the ballet company at an advanced rank, and he was famous in St. Petersburg by the age of eighteen. Through Diaghilev, he was world-famous only two years later: "*le dieu de la danse*." Acocella suggests that this early glory could have been quite destabilizing to someone prone to mental imbalance, and that Nijinsky's later written repetitions that he is God may have their source in this precocious triumph. Maybe; but you would think that

his superlative dancing would anyway feel like divinity to him. "I am God within the body," he wrote. This had nothing to do with public acclaim or with Tolstoy.

Serge Diaghilev had crowned several prodigious cultural projects in the first decade of the twentieth century with his creation of the Ballets Russes. He had brought the Impressionists to St. Petersburg. He had brought Feodor Chaliapin to Paris. Then, in 1909, he gathered the best Russian dancers, choreographers, composers, and designers together into a new company and set them to work, spiring

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them away from traditional service to the Czar and into the fecund air of Paris, from which their combined talents might dazzle the West with a fierce, kinetic modernity. Nijinsky was the centerpiece of the ensemble, with his amazing elevation and his unguarded, erotic stage presence; and at the time he was Diaghilev's lover as well.

Acocella describes Nijinsky's sexual liaison with Diaghilev as the last of the youthful dancer's several homosexual connections, which were customary, to improve his status or his career. She finds the diary confirming that Nijinsky's private sexual excitements and fantasies were all about women, and that he would often seek out prostitutes rather than find a homosexual milieu to frequent. She points out that the androgynous flavor of his most famous roles was created by Fokine, the choreographer of *Spectre de la rose* and *Schéhérazade*, whereas Nijinsky's choreography for himself in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* was purely masculine.

His marriage to Romola in 1913, during the company's South American tour without Diaghilev, was a stunning blow to the latter, who perhaps could not imagine the possibility, but the diary does make it seem perfectly natural to Nijinsky. Romola was a dancer, though not a very good one, and her presence with the troupe on this tour, Acocella says, was essentially as a groupie in pursuit of Nijinsky. She was very pretty and very eager, and the susceptible Nijinsky certainly wanted to marry her, even though she may initially have been set on by Mother, or perhaps by the need to escape Mother. The betrayed Diaghilev instantly fired him when he heard of the marriage. Nijinsky thereafter had to spend two years of the war interned at his mother-in-law's house in Budapest, miserable in her forced company, out of work and not dancing. God within the body had no scope. The beliefs and the feelings expressed in the diary must have begun to crystallize then; what he tried to work on was a system of dance notation.

The diary is wonderful as well as horrific. It is not a real diary, but a mixture of confession, memoir, and tract. Nijinsky's straight narration about the things that

## Harvest

Loved one, it has been my privilege  
to calculate your sightings, near and far,  
to trail in the wide wake of your effluence  
and watch you flare  
in anger and arousal everywhere.

And on the windy afternoon of which I speak  
burrs on my socks that stick and prick  
unshakeable as memories were clinging  
for I was running interference with  
the Lilliputian pickers raiding the dwarf trees  
while the ruddy sun, your other lover, was with you,  
hurtling toward the clarifying west.  
And you were there, too, laughing with the rest,  
head tilted at that angle where you catch  
that other, higher frequency you hear.

And strewn across the low fields by the sea,  
boulders that had bounced on landing  
burned as if to mock us two,  
alone or paired across the melted stubble,  
some enormous, some mere rubble,  
steaming coals, alive as anything  
—except the careening nugget who thinks he owns you,  
whose influence was evidently flowing  
from face to face across the crowd  
arrayed in purple turtle fur and Lycra.

Then I was with him, and he let me see  
our small careers: the gash and gleam,  
the eddy, the crash-and-burn, the writhing quiet,  
and it was very clear:  
loving isn't oneness, but aloneness.  
The other stands out sharp up there;  
each wears a sweater her own color,  
no two the same.

Which is why just then, while you were all out  
looking for the right one to bring home,  
some emblem of fulfillment to get us to winter,  
I kept to my bag of apples by the haycart,  
though the day was far too full to carry a message,  
no field disturbance, no slightest reason to doubt you,  
and the need in me burned as it does in pure imitation,  
still I stood there alone in the pumpkins without you.

Jonathan Galassi

happened to him is limpid and self-possessed, and his observations are clear-sighted about other people's honesty, fear, or vanity: "I have noticed that people are not interested in new pictures, because they think that they do not understand art. They buy old pictures in order to show that they have 'love for art.' I realized that people like art but are afraid to say to themselves 'I understand art.' People are very timid because critics frighten them ... critics think that the public is stupid." Later on he says: "I think that many peo-

ple smoke because they think they look impressive that way. I have noticed that people who smoke have a proud bearing."

But the fey note unfailingly recurs, and the flatness of tone is mad and maddening. Writing in 1919, as the Paris Peace Conference was taking place, he remarked upon magazine photographs of the convening statesmen: "Lloyd George's smile reminds one of Diaghilev's smiles. I know Diaghilev's smiles. All Diaghilev's smiles are artificial. My little girl has learned to smile like Diaghilev. I have taught her because I want her to give Diaghilev a smile when he visits me." "I have a sensitive smile because I feel God. Wilson's smile is sensitive because he feels God. However, Lloyd George's smile is silly because he does not feel God." Later: "I know that Frenchmen feel God, but they do not understand him yet, and therefore they make mistakes."

He achieves rhetorical feats: "The English do not like dancing because they have a lot of money in their stomachs." And this: "I have healthy guts because I do not eat much money." Or: "My hair is moving, for I feel it. I ate a lot and therefore feel death." Later he writes: "I know what an eye is. An eye is a theater. The brain is the audience. I am the eye in the brain. I like looking in the mirror and seeing one eye in my forehead. I often draw one eye.... I like an eye with hair on the head. I am God's eye, and not a warlike eye."

Nijinsky, the artist of the body, is always denouncing the intellect in favor of reason (meaning intuition or sensibility) and feeling (meaning instinctive sympathy). He writes: "I do not like Shakespeare's

Hamlet, because he thinks. I am an unthinking philosopher." Later: "I am reason, and not intelligence. I am God, for I am Reason. I am the philosophy of reason. I am the true, not invented, philosophy." He is not afraid of physical death, but of the deadly element in life. He frequently says that criticism is death, or that thinking is death, or that machines are death, or that all the various conventional hypocrisies that he calls "tricks" and "habits" are death. Later: "I am not afraid of anything. I am afraid of the death of

reason. I want the death of intellect ... intellect is stupidity, and reason is God."

He strikes a prophetic note: "I would like factories to be destroyed, because they spread dirt on the earth. ... I want people to realize that they must give up all rubbish, because there is not much time left to live. I feel the suffocation of the earth. ... I feel that the earth is suffocating, and therefore I ask everyone to abandon factories and obey me. I know what is needed for the salvation of the earth." He has an urgent desire to help improve not just the world, but each person, including his wife and her mother: "My wife came and kissed me and I felt glad, but God did not want me to show my joy, because he wants to change her." On Emilia: "My wife's mother is a hypocrite ... she is a wicked woman. ... She will be furious when she reads these lines, but I will be delighted because I will have taught her a good lesson." Later: "I am God in man. All people will be gods if they do what I tell them. I am a man with faults, because I want people to correct their faults. I do not like people who have faults they have not corrected. I am a man who has tried to improve himself." And near the end: "I will write a lot because I want to explain to people what life is and what death is."

Nijinsky's main text is divided into two parts, the first called "On Life" and the second "On Death," but otherwise there are very few paragraph breaks or divisions of theme. The restless short sentences, and the repetitiveness and the inconsequence in the material, make reading it very difficult for more than a few minutes at a time. The temptation is to skim for gems and juicy parts; and sympathy for Romola does keep creeping in. In the end we must be grateful for the present dauntless effort to bring Nijinsky's entire outpouring into the present vexed world, just as he wished. We can never see him, but perhaps we can at length profit from listening to him.

**W**HAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO Nijinsky if Diaghilev had not created the Ballets Russes and taken it to Paris in 1909? That's easy. He would have stayed in St. Petersburg and danced (unless madness overtook him) in the same ballets that Rudolf Nureyev appeared in fifty years later at the start of his career, performing in the same company, trained in the same school in the same techniques, having lived the same student life in the same city. The difference between Imperial Russia at the turn of the century and the Soviet Union in 1960 was astoundingly small, with respect to the character of that experience. Balanchine had it, too, in the 1920s.

In her biography, Diane Solway makes

Nureyev's version sound very much like what Nijinsky's fellow-student Tamara Karsavina describes in her memoirs. Whatever the Russian regime or epoch, however, these gifted Russian ballet dancers (and some notable others) required swift transfer to the West to fulfill their talent, after their pricelessly exacting apprenticeship at home. Solway points out that Nureyev's own autobiography begins with his defection, not with his childhood and training.

One basic difference between Nijinsky and Nureyev, who was immediately likened to him when he appeared in the West, was that Nureyev's origins were Tatar, not Russian or Polish. He was Muslim and nomadic, descended from Genghis Khan's Mongol hordes, not Christian, not Slavic, and not at all rooted in the Russian earth. He liked to fancy himself as romantically Asiatic—soft and cruel, brutal and tender—but he was also essentially godless, the opposite of Nijinsky, who felt inhabited by God. Nureyev's father had been an observant Muslim, even had early priestly ambitions, and his mother wrote only in Arabic throughout her life. But both parents later joined the Party, spoke Russian, lost the religion, and embraced the Revolution.

His father became a career army officer and was fighting the Japanese in 1938, the year of Rudolf's birth. He was absent from home during the boy's early childhood, while home shifted around until the family settled in Ufa, capital of the Republic of Bashkir, far from Moscow and even farther from St. Petersburg, now renamed Leningrad. There was no conception of a dancing career for Rudik, who was the only boy born after three older sisters. His parents hoped he would distinguish himself in the Party, as a reward for their loyalty to it.


**O**NE FACT sharply separated Nureyev not just from Nijinsky but from all the notable dancers schooled in St. Petersburg whose careers flowered in the West. Nureyev did not start there until he was seventeen, almost prohibitively late. All his life he couldn't lose the sense that he would never catch up. Something had to compensate for effortless technique, which could be achieved only through years of intensive training from childhood. What he had was temperament, fanaticism, and erotic appeal, besides being a born dancer and a born star.

Nureyev began learning folk-dancing in kindergarten and instantly excelled at it, just as he did at music. He was good enough to perform in concerts and competitions and to win a prize at the age of ten, although his parents were thinking of

it all as a childhood pastime. His own passion to be nothing but a dancer apparently came to life when he was first exposed to the ballet at the age of seven. And Ufa, far from being a cultural desert, then harbored a number of "undesirable" artistic and intellectual exiles from ex-St. Petersburg and Moscow. There had been an opera house there since 1938 and a ballet company since 1941. Some of the dancers had been trained in Leningrad, or had even danced in the fabled company, now called the Kirov.

With Father not yet home to disapprove, Mother took the children to a ballet performance there in 1945: gold, red velvet, lights, music, glittering creatures. Little Rudik was never the same again, even while continuing his stellar folk-dance appearances. The Ufa ballerina Anna Udelstova saw him perform during his prize-winning tenth year and immediately recommended classical ballet training, starting with herself, but aiming for eventual study in Leningrad. And so, in the teeth of parental disapproval, he began studying ballet with local teachers in the ballet studio attached to the company, which he joined on the stage as a paid extra after he turned fifteen.

Nureyev got out of Ufa and into the Kirov School by getting the attention of its scouts who scoured the Republics for talent, which meant entering and winning ballet competitions where scouts would be present, even as far away as Moscow; and getting his mentors and teachers to recommend him in Leningrad itself; and

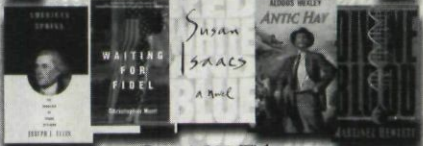


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getting himself known for energy and persistence, confidence and resolve, and supremely magnetic stage presence. Beauty, talent, and skill were not the qualities that were attributed to Nureyev by his early supporters. He was also known for ignoring rules, skipping correct procedures, and having no sense of belonging to any sort of collective. During the two and a half years in which he danced with the Kirov Company, he was always changing the steps of his solo, altering the costume that he was given, or arguing his way out of decisions that had gone against him. He always got away with it. He thrust his tunnel-visionary way to the top of the ballet world with will, nerve, and unanswerable star quality, more or less like Genghis Khan.

**S**OLWAY'S THICK LIFE OF Nureyev is very tiring. The cumulative effect is total exhaustion, since this dancer was a burning rocket, and the book records every detail of his combustion, his trajectory, and his final extinction. The physical character of the material helps, too. Once Nureyev's career restarted in the West—after his dramatic defection at twenty-three from the Kirov Company during its Paris tour in the summer of 1961—his story is essentially the life of a working dancer, which consists of class, practice, rehearsal, and performance, over and over and over again. This was magnified by a factor of ten in the case of Nureyev, a driven man who came to lead this taxing life all over the world, eventually flying from continent to continent, from ballet company to ballet company, increasingly unable to breathe without a theater to star in every night.

It is no wonder that Balanchine backed away from inviting Nureyev to join his own balanced and interactive company. He had no use for a one-man show, he needed team players; and also he found Nureyev's Leningrad style to be fifty years out of date. Balanchine nevertheless had respect for Nureyev's ability to be consumed by a role, to be transformed into a young nobleman drunk with love, or a prince crushed with grief, or a chieftain mad with power; and eventually he did hire him for a character part in a ballet of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* that was never produced. When Peter Martins was still a fifteen-year-old apprentice at the Royal Danish Ballet, he called Nureyev a "dirty dancer," meaning, he said, "not clean, sort of messy." With all his incandescence, Rudik could never get past the look of overdoing it. He was always the provincial out to show them.

Nureyev's passion for dancing became mingled with his passion for Erik Bruhn, the elegant Danish *danseur noble* who

represented the refined perfection that Nureyev felt he could never attain. The reticent Bruhn was himself essentially unattainable, though the two had a long and devoted, if stormy, relationship. Nureyev felt that he could forever learn from him, and was forever pursuing and seeking while Bruhn retreated. In other respects, apart from a few early intimacies with women, Nureyev came to enjoy a vigorous and promiscuous gay sex life in the West, though no evidence exists about his adolescence. Homosexuality was illegal in the Soviet Union; things happened that left no trace. Nureyev contracted AIDS and died of it in 1993, after surviving fourteen years and only stopping his ceaseless performing when he could barely speak or stand. When he couldn't dance anymore he became a conductor, trusting his lifelong love and knowledge of music to keep him on the stage, under the lights, receiving applause.

**T**HE REST OF NUREYEV'S STORY is about the breathless doings of a superstar, one of the first superstars to appear in the '60s, right along with the Beatles. Solway further helps to wear out the reader with her six hundred pages of relentless journalese, full of wrenched and hasty transitions from practical and professional details (with numbers and sums of money) to celebrity events (with complete lists and descriptions) to exorbitant expenditures to character sketches to potted contemporary history to small dramatic scenes between Rudolf and others. Added to this is our sympathetic weariness at the sense of how much labor went into this biography: Solway has interviewed hundreds of people whose lives intersected with Nureyev's, however fleetingly or indirectly, in several countries, and she has unearthed hitherto untapped original sources. Tracking this flaming projectile has been manifestly hard work. Her resulting account has more historical and sociological interest than artistic interest; and in a way so did Nureyev himself. With a follow-spot on his vibrant figure, the book is a swift tour of global culture from 1961 to 1993, with a special view of the Soviet Union from 1938 to its dissolution.

For the balletomane, Nureyev's chief contribution to the art was his galvanizing effect on Margot Fonteyn, which resulted in their truly magnificent and long-lasting partnership. Not only that, the entire Royal Ballet felt Nureyev's electrifying influence, which he exerted later on other ballet companies in Paris, Vienna, and elsewhere, always with excellent results. Fonteyn at forty-three was considering retirement when she first danced with twenty-four-year-old Nure-

yevev, who applied some severe Leningrad rigor to her practice with him and imparted some of his own ferocious drive to this much-revered English lady. Together they reinvented the traditional pas de deux: in their updated version, instead of a dignified man enhancing a brilliant woman, a star couple struck sparks from one another. (Not everyone was seduced. The critic John Martin moaned, "She has gone . . . to the grand ball with a gigolo.")

**A**T NUREYEV'S DEBUT IN PARIS, soon after his defection in 1961, Nijinsky's sister Bronislava was in the audience. Nijinsky had died in 1950, after thirty years of incarceration; but Bronia, herself a dancer and a choreographer, had doubtless never ceased to miss his unique dancing since 1919. Marveling at Nureyev performing the Bluebird pas de deux from *The Sleeping Beauty* in Paris—just as Nijinsky had done at his Paris debut in 1909—she exclaimed, "He is the reincarnation of my brother." Here was the same wild, bird-like, unearthly beauty; the same wondrous elevation; the same display of an unbroken St. Petersburg artistic tradition.

At his London debut later that year, in an original Ashton ballet to a Scriabin score, as Nureyev rushed downstage bare-chested in a swirling red cloak, Diana Cooper (another survivor of Paris, 1909) whispered to Cecil Beaton: "He is better than Nijinsky!" There was the same thrilling intensity, the savage purity, the look of dancing for himself. And the great Karsavina, now living in London, who had been Nijinsky's partner in the early Diaghilev seasons as well as his fellow-student, announced to ballet students in 1962 that "the legend of Nijinsky lives again in Nureyev."

One can only assume that these lovers of the real thing had long been vainly waiting for its second coming. They saw what they longed to see. Some of it was there; but the world had changed. The training was similar, but the state of mind and soul was a different thing. Nijinsky had arrived in Paris under Diaghilev's wing as part of an avant-garde breakthrough in the modern classical dance, an advance that claimed attention and expected appreciation only from artistically sophisticated audiences. He was encouraged to choreograph in avant-garde modes, even at the risk of outraging that public rather than engaging it. Nijinsky's artistic personality could never have prospered under superstar circumstances, as it was able to do by the reach of Diaghilev's forward-looking artistic aims. Nureyev, coming of age within a limiting and static Soviet vision of a classic high art, came to the West and turned the bal-

let into a prodigious sensation for everybody, full of sex and glamour, not only on many stages but also on television.

Nureyev operated from the beginning at a less adventurous level than Nijinsky, always remaining within the classical mode, sensationalizing it rather than reforming its basic themes and qualities. He made his name by changing the male ballet-dancer from a strong and gentlemanly performer with aristocratic appeal into an exciting renegade with a feral moodiness and a pliant sensuality. Ed-

ward Villella had gone the other way, appearing wholesome, athletic, and cheerful on Balanchine's stage, where Peter Martins was being the gentleman; but the strongest postmodern trend was toward gender confusion and baroque rule-breaking, at both of which Rudik was a winner. Balletomanes finally came to prefer Baryshnikov's controlled simplicity and openness—and this, perhaps, was more like what Nijinsky was aiming at, back in the ancient modern times at the start of the century. ■

time. There are fictional autobiographies of "wicked" women, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, lives of a pirate and a soldier of fortune, *Captain Singleton* and *Colonel Jack*, and fake historical memoirs, *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Memoirs of a Cavalier*. They mimicked authenticity so successfully that the last two were treated as genuine historical documents for half a century after Defoe's death.

Yet these "classics" were mostly invisible to Defoe's contemporaries. The genre of "the novel" did not exist; it was only with the publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740, nine years after Defoe's death, that this new literary species began to be recognized. When they first appeared, Defoe's tales of rogues and chancers were nothing to do with polite literature. This accounts for their anonymity: they may have sold well, but they scarcely deserved, with their ignoble excitements, to have a named author. Defoe-the-novelist only became an established character in the nineteenth century. His novels were popular, as we know from the number of editions that they went through, but no critic of his own time stoops to notice them, and no writer talks of imitating them. The original eighteenth-century editions of the novels are often very rare, precisely because of their vulgar popularity. They were produced to be consumed, not to find their way to the safe preserve of a gentleman's library.

# The Narrator

By JOHN MULLAN

## Daniel Defoe: The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures by Richard West

(Carroll and Graf, 427 pp., \$26)

WE KNOW Daniel Defoe in ways that his contemporaries did not. For us, he is a novelist. Yet his novels are only a small part of what he wrote. In libraries it is possible to find anthologies that draw from his huge output of polemical and journalistic writing, from his sallies into political controversy or economic prognostication, from his works of religious instruction, from his verse (of which he was especially proud). Most of this now engages only the academic researcher. It is the cluster of fictional autobiographies—"novels," as we now call them—written near the end of a long Grub Street career that have survived and become classics. On the rare occasions when Defoe put his name to anything that he had written, he invariably announced himself as "the Author of The True-Born Englishman," a satirical poem for which he was renowned in the early eighteenth century. Now it is above all as the author of *Robinson Crusoe* that he is famous.

For us he is not just a novelist, he is the originator of novels. *Robinson Crusoe*, which was published in 1719 when its author was almost sixty, has become a kind of myth (and one of the most fre-

quently republished and translated books in history). It won its special status partly because it seemed to invent both a modern hero and a modern genre. Its protagonist was "the individual," in all his particularity and ordinariness: the character whom we have come to expect from our novels. Its title page may have advertised *The Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (a promise jocosely echoed in the title of Richard West's new life of Defoe), but it demanded to be judged by a standard that would be claimed by all later eighteenth-century novelists: the standard of "probability." Crusoe tells his extraordinary story in the level tones of one who trusts to facts, dates, inventories; what he calls "particulars." It is only in these particulars, authentically recorded, that the workings of Providence might be discovered.

*Robinson Crusoe* is all about starting from scratch, its narrator telling us how he learned for himself, on his island, to manufacture clay pots and Christian theology. Crusoe the castaway has to be narratively as well as materially self-reliant. He looks back on his life and he has to make sense of it: the story of a resourceful adventurer, which is also the story of an individual delivered by God. And the rest of Defoe's novels, produced in a characteristic flurry of invention in the four years after *Robinson Crusoe*, all follow this pattern.

All of them are first-person accounts of lives of adventure, opportunism, resilience, and, finally, penitence. None had Defoe's name attached to them in his life-

IN HIS OWN LIFETIME, Defoe was famous, or notorious, for other reasons. He appears in *The Dunciad*, Alexander Pope's brilliantly spiteful gallery of contemporary scribblers, as "restless Daniel," in doubtful honor of his prolificacy. Even though Pope's poem was composed in the years during which Defoe's novels were being published, he describes him as a writer of "Verses, as well as of Politicks"; Defoe's fiction, which one would have thought ripe for Pope's educated disdain, is not mentioned.

Defoe was well enough known in his own day, but it was for what he did before he turned to those novels. Most infamously, he had been a satirist, and had been put in the pillory for his mockery of High Church Tories in *The Shortest Way with Dissenters* (1702). He had been a political propagandist, working for different parties and ministers, shifting allegiance with the changing political winds. He had been a successful versifier, rapidly turning topical controversies into rough, sardonic rhyme. He was the most resourceful, energetic, adaptable hack in British literary history.

It is this other life of authorship that biographies of Defoe must explore. It was a life in which two influences predomi-

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