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NARRATIVE COMPONENT IN BALLET ART: A Problem Statement

Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of studying ballet art from the position of narratology. Classical dance is studied in the framework of a wide and narrow approach to the understanding of narrativity. The problem of low ballet narrativity is touched upon as evidenced by its close connection with the myth. Besides, the historical dependence of ballet on verbal basis is considered. It is noted that after the reforms of J.-G. Noverre, classical dance as a kind of performance became independent and developed certain means of narrating a story, one of which is a pantomime. The ways of conveying a point of view in a ballet performance are also touched upon: from lighting and costumes to music. Eventfulness created with the help of music montage is analyzed.

Key words: ballet; narrative; intermediality; point of view; event; myth.

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Нарративный компонент в искусстве балета: к постановке проблемы

Аннотация. Статья посвящена проблеме изучения классического балета с позиции нарратологии. Классический танец исследуется в рамках широкого и узкого подхода к пониманию нарративности. Затрагивается проблема слабой нарративизации балета, о которой свидетельствует его тесная связь с мифом. Кроме того, рассматривается историческая зависимость балета от вербальной основы. Отмечается, что после реформ Ж.-Ж. Новерра классический танец как вид зрелища обрел самостоятельность и выработал средства для рассказывания истории, одним из которых является пантомима. Также затрагиваются способы передачи точки зрения в балетном спектакле: от освещения и костюмов до музыки. Анализируется событийность, создаваемая средствами музыкального монтажа.

Ключевые слова: балет; нарратив; интермедийность; точка зрения; событие; миф.

There are two main approaches to the definition of narrativity in modern humanitarian sciences. In the framework of the first approach a text is defined as narrative depending not on the presence of a mediating instance but on the character of the world described, which is supposed to contain a certain change of the situation. Thus, according to the conception of W. Schmid, narratives include not only the texts narrating a story by means of a narrator, but also the texts which do not have any mediating instance: the so-called “mimetic narrative texts” – film, ballet, pantomime¹. In the framework of the second approach to the definition of narrativity the presence of the mediating instance – narrator – becomes the main marker. The point of view category² comes to the foreground because eventfulness is determined, first of all, from the position of intentionality³. According to this more strict understanding of narrativity, cinema, opera, music, ballet cannot be referred to the category of narrative texts.

Let us try to determine to what extent the analytical mechanism of narratology



can be applied to such a kind of art as classical ballet. It should be noted that from the point of view of narratology borderline phenomena more than once turned out to be in the centre of researchers' attention⁴. For example, the narrative potential of film and dramatic discourse arouses considerable interest. As regards ballet, there have been no attempts in the Russian science to study it from narratological position. Western scientists seem to be more active in this respect⁵.

Before considering the problem of narrative component in ballet, let us turn to history. Ballet was born in Italy in the 16th century, but its formation dates back to the 17th century, the epoch of Louis XIV. Initially, classical ballet based on the noble dance performed the function of court entertainment. Not professional dancers but representatives of aristocracy and, first of all, the monarch himself took part in such performances. S.L. Foster, the author of the monograph "Choreography & Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire"⁶, devoted to "historical poetics" of classical ballet and in particular its gradual narrativization, maintains that initially ballet was a kind of physical training which allowed to develop a good posture and graceful noble gestures. It included knowledge on the appropriateness of a certain gesture and gave skills of social interaction. In the late 17th – early 18th centuries, when ballet still continued to develop as a non-verbal discourse, there was a special musical-theatrical genre: opera-ballet (like "Les Indes galantes" by J.-P. Rameau). According to Foster, one could see two kinds of ballet performances on the stage of the Opéra: opera-ballet and ballet proper. Both kinds of performance were more based on verbal discourse (sung lyrics) than on action played with the help of pantomime. Opera-ballet was a performance which consisted of several acts (from three to five) and dance intervals. It ended with a long dance *divertissement*. In such performances dancers most often formed the entourage of a principle singing character or inhabited the stage "landscape": they played fawns, satyrs, nymphs in a mythological forest. As the researcher points out, dances symbolized the moments of triumph or crisis and represented the solution of a certain dramatic conflict expressed in arias and recitatives. As a rule, ballet proper was shorter than opera-ballet and followed it concluding the evening event. It consisted of several short acts united by a common theme – for example, the Venetian carnival. The festival was conducted by singers who presented every group of dancers. On the whole, at this stage ballet was extremely poorly narrativized: story action became coherent with the help of verbal discourse.

In the course of time professional dancers took the place of aristocrats. The middle of the 18th century was marked by large-scale reforms initiated by J.-G. Noverre. The French choreographer defended the necessity to transform a vapid ballet performance into a complete performance with a story action and characters. In his theoretical paper "Lettres sur la danse"⁷ Noverre denoted the tasks of pantomime: it is supposed to narrate a story with the help of gestures. He demanded in particular that actors should take off their masks: vivid facial expression was to enhance the story effect. Besides, Noverre introduced the notion of ballet d'action or action ballet which narrated a story and in this it differed radically from the court dance.



The conception of action dance put forward by Noverre (its rapprochement with story development) and transformation of ballet performances into a complete comprehensive performance determined the classical ballet development up to the end of the 19th century. In the English-speaking ballet studies there is a special term – “story ballet”. The beginning of the 20th century was marked by the return on the stage of a “plotless ballet” (i.e. ballets with no story line). The impetus in this direction was given by “Ballets russes” of S. Diaghilev, in particular by the productions of M. Fokine, for example, “Chopiniana”. It should be noted that the same plotlessness is characteristic of neo-classical performances of G. Balanchine created later. Besides the revival of plotless ballets, there was another curious tendency in the classical dance of the 20th century: rapprochement of ballet with drama theatre and the emergence of dramatic ballet. Such performances can be exemplified by the works of a British choreographer K. MacMillan (“Mayerling”) and his Soviet counterpart L. Lavrovsky (“Romeo and Juliet”). The phenomenon of dramatic ballet deserves a separate consideration which is unfortunately not the aim of the given article.

Our short digression in the history of classical dance shows that ballet studies have formed a conception of gradation or various extent of ballet narratization. On the whole, the ability of a dance to narrate a story or not to narrate it at all remaining “plotless” should not be challenged. However, to what extent is it justified to apply the methods of narratological analysis to a ballet performance?

Like cinema, classical ballet is an intermedial discourse. Syncretism of the means of classical ballet art communication deserves special mention: they are such means as symphonic music, dance, pantomime, stage sets, lighting, literary basic text and individual role interpretation. A number of researchers (including S. L. Foster mentioned above) believe that the language of communicating story events is a pantomime – a system of gestures in which plasticity of human body is the main means of creating an image. Pantomime that dates back to ancient times came to classical ballet from street theatre festivals (performances of rope-walkers and jugglers, various fair entertainments) funding ballet as a kind of theatre arts along with the court dance. M. L. Ryan believes that pantomime helps to show the development of relations and interaction between people because, in the opinion of the researcher, inner life can be translated into plastic language, though the narrative potential of gestures performed on the stage is limited as compared to the cinema, for example – due to the coincidence of the narrated time with the time of the narration itself (in the cinema the ellipsis is made with the help of montage)⁸. However, a real master needs only one gesture to give an appropriate tinge to the personality of a character. For example, that was the case of the choreographic version of “Giselle” by Y. Grigorovich where the gamekeeper presents a “practical” gift instead of a “romantic” one (game instead of a flower). This act should be referred to index signs, but it seems to us that the term “discursive gesture”⁹ introduced by one of the authors of the given article is more exact in defining the function of such an action.

Besides the pantomime a stage performance consists of character dances and classical numbers proper. Character dance also dates back to street theatre: it is determined by the presence of everyday common gestures. This kind of



dance flourished in the 19th century when romantic ballet dominated. As a rule, a character dance helps to recreate the everyday world as opposed to the unreal universe of sylphs, naiads and dryads. As for the classical dance, it is of a more abstract character and it tells spectators about its noble origin – the world of court dance and social interaction of high society. However, iconic gestures can be discovered here as well. Yet, the most famous ones should be referred to the “high” sphere, i.e. the sphere which is considered to be connected with aristocratic character. *Pas de cheval* (“step of the horse”), *pas de chat* (“step of the cat”) – these movements refer to noble and predatory animals.

Besides, the language of classical dance – the so-called ABC of ballet – is strictly codified. There are five foot positions, three arm positions and basic pas which serve as a foundation for numerous combinations¹⁰. A pas may be preceded by preparation – a preparatory movement for the performance of battements, pirouettes and jumps determined by the laws of bio-kinetics. The pas in themselves do not possess any semantics. In our opinion, such independent dancing parts as *entrée*, *adagio*, variations and coda serve as original lexemes. Taken consecutively, they constitute a rigid structure of *pas de deux* – a peculiar syntagma. Sometimes it may include variations of soloists: this dancing-musical form is called *grand pas* (for example, the final acts of the ballets “*Don Quixote*” and “*Paquita*”). Among canonic dance forms there are also *pas de trois*, *pas de quatre* or *pas de six*, which consist of dances of three, four or six soloists respectively. It should be noted that in the long term it may be worth trying to single out the laws of performance syntax: to consider the alternation of corps de ballet formations, variations and *pas de deux*.

However, the question remains open with respect to the nature of ballet expression. As a rule, a classical dance – variations of the main characters, their duets or big ensemble formations – is based on the presentation of the emotional and spiritual state of characters or the presentation of the general mood which is supposed to descend on the spectator: for example, triumphant – as in the ballet “*The Flames of Paris*”, allowing the audience to unite inwardly with the revolutionary crowd. Or, just the opposite, meditative – as in the white act of “*Giselle*”, describing the world of the Wilis: brides who die before their wedding day. Thus, it should be admitted that ballet is able to “infect” the audience emotionally, to immerse it into a certain emotional state. In this situation it will be fair to speak about an increase in the receptive activity of the spectator who is entitled to qualify the eventfulness of what is happening on the stage. It allows us to assert that classical dance in a pure form, without any impurities in the form of pantomime or character dance tends to performative (lyrical) eventfulness. Ballet performativity should not surprise us: generic connection of the dance with syncretic morphological structures has become a subject of research¹¹. A similar connection can be traced in classical ballet. Besides, it can reveal itself at any level: from the plot to corps de ballet formations. At one time, one of the authors of the article considered the ballet “*Giselle*”: special attention was given to the legend which served as a basis for both the libretto by T. Gautier and its literary basis (H. Heine)¹². We have touched upon the possible mythological component of the ballet. In doing so we were assisted not only by macabre



themes of the romantic story, but also by corps de ballet formations of Perrot-Coralli-Petipa¹³, part of which we managed to reduce to meander (through the chess border of dipylon vases) as a symbol of an endless chain of deaths and revivals. In this sense the famous scene from the second act is significant: the scene where the Wilis are moving towards each other mutually piercing vis-à-vis rows. This direct indication of translational symmetry (translational motion) together with plane symmetry (reflection) could not but refer us to the meander at the level of mathematical abstractions. It was not difficult to do it because reflection in a plane can be reduced to turns. After the replacement of symmetry operations we singled out a meander from this dynamic construction, each element of the meander being determined by a point group along the axis of the second order, while in general it only lends itself to translation. When we sorted out the problem of symmetry elements and remembered what meander meant in mythology, the Wilis stopped playing the determining role, their place was taken by maenads universal for the European culture.

“Giselle” was not the only ballet where a “mythopoetical” approach could be applied. The role of the spindle in the arrangement of time in the ballet “The Sleeping Beauty” is significant. We have analyzed the mythological roots of this “sacred subject”¹⁴ by considering it not only as Ananke’s attribute, but also as a deflowering symbol in the mythology of dying and resurrecting gods – it is in this way that the spindle was used in “The Sleeping Beauty” in the Mikhailovsky Theatre by N. Duato, it is in this way that the spindle was described by J.-C. Maillot in his “La Belle” (Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo). “Swan Lake”, too, in spite of its “literary character” turned out to be surprisingly close to the myths about cosmogonic twins¹⁵, which was however fully revealed only in the choreographic version of Y. Grigorovich. The choreographer supplements the female couple – Odette/Odile (originally, these parts were danced by different ballerinas, but with time they came to be performed by one and the same ballerina) with a male couple – Prince Siegfried and the Evil Genius (initially – Rothbart). Thus, from a real character (an owl whose wing is torn off in the end) Rothbart turns into Prince Siegfried’s alter ego.

On the whole, it is possible to speak about an extremely strong connection between classical ballet and myth and about the formation of a special eventfulness correlated with the myth and demanding a considerable activity from the recipient: such eventfulness immerses him in the eternally topical present. By the way, it is facilitated by the absence of the time distance between the level of the narrated world and the level of the narrating: as it was mentioned above, everything takes place on the stage here and now in the presence of the audience.

The low narrativity of classical ballet may be confirmed by its attachment to the verbal basis. As a rule, the creators of a classical ballet follow a certain plan: first, they write a libretto, i.e. a scenario which is often based on a certain literary work. For example, one can mention “Der Sandmann” by E.T.A. Hoffmann (ballet “Coppélia”) or “Cipollino” by G. Rodari (ballet “Cipollino”). Then, on the basis of the scenario the composer writes music which enriches the libretto with musical images. In its turn, the musical dramaturgy becomes the basis for



the creation of choreography. At the same time, the choreographer can set the chronometry and metrorhythm of separate scenes: for example, we can mention the cooperation between Petipa and Tchaikovsky in creating the ballet “The Sleeping Beauty”¹⁶. Another evidence of low ballet narrativity is a libretto for spectators, which is enclosed in the programme. As a rule, it is shorter than the libretto written by the scriptwriter and includes only the main events of the story.

Let us make preliminary conclusions. In the framework of the broad approach to the understanding of narrativity ballet may be considered to be an audio-visual narrative expression only with certain reservations. A ballet performance demonstrates a rather weak degree of narrativization: the story tracing is ensured by the pantomime – a system of gestures capable of translating the verbal discourse (libretto) into the plastic one.

In the framework of the narrow approach we are inevitably faced with the point of view problem because the right to qualify eventfulness belongs to a certain consciousness. For example, as N. Poselyagin noted, in case of cinema narrative expression it is possible to speak about the existence of two point of view systems – that of a cameraman and a diegetic one. A cameraman’s point of view is a position from which the image in the frame is taken (depending on the angle of film shooting). A diegetic point of view is a viewpoint devised by the scriptwriter and director and depending, first of all, on the montage¹⁷. Is it possible to single out a similar point of view system in a ballet performance?

The whole stage is before the eyes of the audience. In fact, it is the spectator who chooses what will appear in the focus of his attention: someone from the soloists or corps de ballet formations. Thus, the creators of a ballet performance are restricted in their abilities to direct the attention of the audience to a certain component of the scenic action (at least, as compared to the authors of a film). At the same time, the role of light design should be noted: projector rays pick out a certain soloist and focus the attention of the audience on him. The costumes are used in a similar way (the costumes of soloists are more bright-coloured and richly decorated or white, on the contrary) though it is up to a concrete spectator to give a final qualification of the eventfulness. W. Schmid notes that in film “the mind born origin – and therefore the subjectivity and possible unreliability – of the views can be indicated by certain techniques as black-and-white picture, defamiliarizing shade or strange blow up”¹⁸. In ballet we are often faced with different means of expressing a point of view. For example, a number of landmark ballets, such as “La Bayadère” and “Giselle”, include the so-called “white act”: it immerses the audience in the inner world of the character, conveys his thoughts, feelings and dreams. Thus, the character’s subjective point of view unfolds before the audience. It becomes obvious not only thanks to a special colour design: a change in the state of consciousness (for example, in “La Bayadère”) is marked by means of pantomime – according to the role, the dancer pretends to be smoking a hookah and then by means of gestures he shows that he is falling asleep. The white act in “Giselle”, which according to the Western tradition is often performed as a dream of Count Albrecht (and not as an encounter with ghosts), also “makes headway” with the



help of pantomime: the hero comes to Giselle's grave and after laying flowers there he sinks into sleep. During this act Count Albrecht can lie down on the grave a few more times, as if reminding that all those things that happen around are nothing more than his dreams.

In the above-mentioned "Swan Lake" choreographed by Y. Grigorovich the conflict is completely transferred to the inner world of the hero. The appearance on the stage of black and white groups of swans can be interpreted as the struggle of light and dark ideas in Prince Siegfried's soul objectified with the help of the dance. The inner world of heroes can also be described by means of music. For example, we can mention the famous "swan" theme in "Swan Lake" by P. Tchaikovsky which is played during Odette's dance. If this tune is played in her absence, it symbolizes the reminiscences of the prince, for example.

Is it possible to speak about an exegetic event and a point of view with respect to a ballet performance? According to N. Poselyagin's conception which seems to be convincing to us, in filmic narrative such eventfulness is created by means of montage. Let us run the risk of assuming that in ballet the alternation of musical numbers can be the analogue of montage. It is not for nothing that ballet performances are referred to the category of the musical theatre: it is music, as we have already mentioned, that is the basis of creating a synthetic action (verbal libretto does not go together with a ballet performance). It should be noted that before the appearance of classical ballets of the 19th century the musical basis of dancing action consisted, as a rule, of popular hits – musical themes and songs well known to the public. Thus, music was given specific index functions. During the period of classical ballet astounding growth and flourishing music to ballet performances was often far from being a complete all-embracing piece of art. New fragments, often written by other composers, were incorporated into the musical texture ("Giselle"). Or it could be the other way round: "superfluous" fragments were removed from a certain composition. Thus, in modern productions of "The Sleeping Beauty" by P. Tchaikovsky there is usually no entr'acte (interlude) for the violin, and "Swan Lake" has been "canonized" to a still lesser extent (suffice it to compare the compilation of V. Burmeister with the more or less well-known "formal" version of the ballet). Symphonism in ballet appeared much later – in the middle of the 20th century, though "The Nutcracker" by P. Tchaikovsky and "Raymonda" by A. Glazunov are considered to be the first really "serious" (i.e. approaching the ideals of academic music) ballets.

An example of eventfulness formation on the basis of exegesis with the help of musical montage is the ballet "The Nutcracker" by P. Tchaikovsky. This ballet is made up of separate numbers practically not connected with each other musically. Nevertheless, their alternation creates the effect of an increase in meaning – similar to the montage effect in a film. Thus, the second act of the ballet "The Nutcracker" begins with a divertissement: a specific dance presentation of characters. The number of each of them is unique in terms of music, it does not repeat or develop the previous one. It is followed by "Waltz of the Flowers", which has a special mood – full of spring spirit and joyful. Then comes pas de deux of the main characters, Marie (Clara) and Nutcracker



Prince, where one can hear pathetic, even tragic notes. In this way the author of the music unveils before us the story of growing up and parting with hopes, leaving a peculiar children's paradise. The ballet ends with "Final Waltz and Apotheosis", once again getting together the *divertissement* characters: as if it could enable the heroine to cast the last glance at her child dream. The fact that it is the music that becomes a specific mediator of events is proved by the fact that, as a rule, it is the composer who is considered to be the author of a ballet (in spite of the fact that a ballet performance, as we have already mentioned, is a synthetic action). Here we can mention, for example, the ballet "Swan Lake" by P. Tchaikovsky or the ballet "Don Quixote" by L. Minkus. In case the music is not created specially for the ballet, but compiled from already written pieces of music, a choreographer is often considered to be the author of the ballet: the ballets of G. Balanchine or K. MacMillan can serve as examples here. Thus, as a rule, a composer is an abstract author in ballet and eventfulness at the exegetic level is created by means of musical montage. And the whole audience is likely to be an abstract "addressee". It should be noted that, judging by the layout of auditoriums in many theatres of the world (with an invariable royal box or tsar's box), historically the monarch was considered to be an ideal spectator of a ballet performance.

Undoubtedly, everything that has been mentioned above is just the first approach to the problem. However, in spite of the fact that ballet is characterized by a low degree of narrativization, we believe that an attempt to discover narrative elements is productive and opens new prospects for further research.

Translated by I. Zhukovskaya.

NOTES

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