

CITIZEN OF EUROPE: NIJINSKY IN QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN *TILL L'ESPIÈGLE* BY TÉO SPYCHALSKI

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Abstract:

Till l'Espiegle, a theatrical production based on the *Journal* of the Russian dancer of Polish origin, Vaslav Nijinsky, is a Francophone play, performed for the first time in 1982 by a Quebec actor, Gabriel Arcand, within Groupe de la Veillée in Théâtre Prospero in Montreal. The montage of excerpts from the *Journal* was prepared by Téo Spsychalski in order to establish a bridge "entre celui qui n'est plus là et le public qui écoute" (Levesque, 1982). The directors managed to create a performance for a single actor, in which Gabriel Arcand recalled the tragic path of the famous dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky. Born to Polish parents, brought up in Russia, the European artist, Vaslav Nijinsky always sought his human, national and sexual identity. In our article, we propose to analyze this quest for identity in Téo Spsychalski's drama production.

Keywords: *identity, Nijinsky, Spsychalski, Théâtre Prospero.*

INTRODUCTION

The quest for identity is rooted in the depths of human nature. Every individual is torn between his various identities and affiliations while he is constantly pursuing the path in search for his inner self. Every human being has his own commitments in various areas of life. These commitments define, position and situate him, and often determine his choices. Even if community roots¹ nowadays have less of a hold over the individual and he progressively gets rid of heavy social burden imposed by centuries of tradition, it is not certain that he feels freer and, what is more important perhaps, happier now than in an orthodox society. Moreover, it is, paradoxically, this liberation, or uprooting, which causes, directly or indirectly, many of identity issues.

Without delving into the details of Nijinsky's biography, we would like to recall only the facts related directly to the subject of our topic, that

is, the quest for identity². Vaslav Nijinsky was born to Polish parents – Tomasz Niżyński and Eleonora Bereda – on 12 March 1890, in Kiev, in the Ukraine territory. He was brought up in Russia, in Saint Petersburg, where his mother moved after the divorce; at home Vaslav spoke Polish, outside of home Russian was omnipresent, so he did not manage to master either of the languages. That is why he chose to express himself through dance, a universal means of communication, accompanying people throughout human history. Exceptionally talented, at the age of ten, Nijinsky entered the school of dance at the Imperial Theatre in Saint Petersburg where his artistic genius could fully blossom. Nonetheless, too young and too good to be accepted by the specific milieu of the Imperial Theatre, unable to communicate freely, regarded as "stranger", Nijinsky was left at the margin of the artists' troupe, alone in a hostile group of well-known dancers recognized not only in Russia but all over Europe and in the world. Lacking the moral support from his mother, who could barely make ends meet, the young artist fell into the arms of a rich impresario, homosexual, Serge Diaghilev, his future master and lover. This acquaintance enabled Nijinsky to accelerate his artistic career, but, at the same time, made him unhappy because he loved women as well. During a tour in South America, in 1913, he fell in love with Romola de Pulszky who became his wife and with whom he had two daughters. The break with Diaghilev did not stop the artistic career of the famous dancer, but undoubtedly accelerated the development of his mental illness, schizophrenia. These mental troubles prompted the artist to write a journal in

which he put all his reflexions concerning his feelings and his perception of the world.

Nijinsky's writings contained very personal confessions. The author wanted to entitle them *Sentiment* and publish "en beaucoup de milliers d'exemplaires"³ in order to encourage the humankind to reflect on the fate of the Earth and the role of human beings on the planet and to convert people to Christianity and to bring them closer to God. These were the avowals of a sick man, who was certainly a lunatic, mentally unbalanced, even fanatic but, at the same time, an artistic genius whose stage performances always inspired and fascinated his successors. It was the same in case of Montreal artists, Gabriel Arcand and Téo Spsychalski, who managed to create together an original drama based on Nijinsky's text in which the actor recalled the tragic path of the famous dancer.

The Francophone theatre play, *Till l'Espiegle*, was staged for the first time in 1982 within Groupe de la Veillée in Théâtre Prospero in Montreal. Téo Spsychalski, in the montage of excerpts of the *Journal*, prepared with the aim of establishing a bridge "entre celui qui n'est plus là et le public qui écoute"⁴, faithfully reproduced Nijinsky's text⁵. There is no doubt that notes of a schizophrenic cannot constitute a homogenous text: there are numerous repetitions, incoherencies in the exposition of different thoughts, inconsistencies or even contradictions; however, when reading the text with more attention one can find very deep reflexions, the testimony of a great suffering – both physical and psychological – of a genius of dance. When inviting the public to his performance, Gabriel Arcand explains: "Moi j'ai désiré m'approcher des paroles et des pensées du danseur Nijinski, parce qu'elles avaient un sens pour moi, aujourd'hui. Et avec vous, ici, maintenant, je voudrais essayer de m'en approcher; et en même temps, d'être une sorte d'intermédiaire entre vous et lui, pour nous permettre de le reconnaître ensemble"⁶.

FAMILY IDENTITY

The first element of identity uncertainty is the family destabilization. Without doubt, this factor played a major role in Nijinsky's quest. It is

worth mentioning that, in life, one does not speak much about the things which hurt most. Perhaps that is the reason why there are not many remarks on the dancer's childhood on the pages of his journal. It is the same in the theatre performance, in which the directors evoke only one traumatic episode connected with the artist's father: "Je n'étais encore qu'un enfant lorsque mon père, pour m'apprendre à nager, me jeta à l'eau. Comme je me débattais et que j'allais couler, j'ai fermé ma bouche pour garder le peu d'air qu'il me restait dans mes poumons. Comment je suis parvenu à marcher au fond de l'eau et comment je me suis retrouvé dans la lumière, je l'ignore. [...] une force surgit en moi qui me fit faire un saut jusqu'à une corde à laquelle j'ai pu m'agripper. Et ce fut mon salut!" (p. 11). Having in mind that Tomasz Nijinsky left his wife, Eleonora, with three little children and without any resources, this image seems to be really significant. His father abandoned little Vaslav in real life the same way that he threw him into deep water and the child needed a point of support which he could not find with his mother. The latter, barely making the ends meet, ceded to Vaslav the family responsibilities; she expected from him a financial support without worrying where the money would come from. It should be emphasized as well, that the early childhood of Vaslav was marked by a constant instability: moving home several times (born in Kiev, on the Ukrainian territory, baptized in Warsaw and, finally, settled down in Saint Petersburg, in Russia); the dramatic accident of his elder brother, Stanislas, who was afterwards stricken with mental illness and, since then, the family broke apart forever; his parents' quarrels and, finally, their divorce in 1897, when Vaslav was only eight years old. All these events did not contribute to a psychological balance of the young artist. The only thing which always accompanied him was dance: "My parents thought that teaching me to dance was as natural as teaching me to walk and speak, and even my mother - who, of course, remembers when my first tooth appeared - is unable to say when I had my first dance lesson", he confesses in an interview⁷. That is, precisely, through dance that he will try to self-identify.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

A difficult family situation unquestionably facilitates identity problems and leads to a pursuit of the self which, in most cases, is life-long. In Spychalski's play, we can see a genial individual who does not know who he really is. Admired by some, despised by others, abandoned by his father, ill-loved (?) by his mother, the protagonist Nijinsky can hardly bear the heavy burden of his artistic genius: "Je ne suis pas un enfant prodige, mais un homme doué de sensibilité" (p. 4). He believes that he understands and, above all, feels more than people who surround him and who see only the surface of things. Thus, the dancer must "disguise his feelings" so that he would not reveal his full brainpower. He evokes also reading Dostoyevsky and feeling compassion for the Prince Myshkin who, in his opinion, was a good man: "Il m'arrive à moi-même d'être pris pour un idiot et je fais semblant de l'être parce que j'aime cette disposition d'esprit" (p. 6). Being unable to recognize his personal identity, he thinks of himself as everybody and nobody at the same time: "Je suis un moujik. Un ouvrier. Un travailleur d'usine. Un domestique. Un patron. Un aristocrate. Le Tsar. Je suis tout, je serai toujours et partout; [...] Je ne suis ni un comédien, ni un acteur" (p. 6). In the text, there is no information concerning the physical appearance of the protagonist, his name is not mentioned either. This specific presentation of the hero may suggest a reference to *Everyman*. Nijinsky would become, therefore, every man, every one of us, the voice of the whole humankind, an abstract representative of us all, an *everyman* without name and without clear-cut face.

However, such hero with the universal features of character feels the need to be loved, accepted and admired by another being. His emotional identity would find, in this way, a confirmation necessary for the everyday well-being. Suffering from mental problems, Nijinsky trusts nobody. Everything becomes dubious, everybody becomes suspicious. But he declares that he loves people: "Je suis un homme qui déborde d'amour et qui s'entête à vouloir faire

pour son prochain tout ce qui lui est nécessaire!" (p. 2).

This attitude will be better understood after we analyze another aspect of his identity problems, that is, his relation with God. In fact, the protagonist identifies himself with God several times in the text. He addresses directly to Him and often explains his behaviour by the divine word. At the very beginning of the spectacle, the hero wants to get closer to God through love towards fellowmen: "[...] en aimant le monde entier, j'arriverai à ressembler à Dieu" (p. 1). From the third page, he claims to be able to communicate directly with divinity: "Moi, je n'ajoute foi qu'à ce dont Dieu m'informe!" (p. 3); "Dieu me fit marcher sur le bord d'un précipice [...]" (p. 8). On the following pages, he grows more and more courageous and he uses more direct forms: "Que feras-tu Dieu, et si je meure? Je suis ta cruche, et si je me brise? [...] Après moi, tu n'auras de demeure [...] Que feras-tu Dieu?" (p. 9), reaching, finally, a total identification: "Je suis Dieu dans un corps. [...] Je suis l'esprit dans la chair et la chair dans l'esprit [...]" (p. 12). His ideas of identifying himself with God seem fanatic, crazy, imaginary, irrational, but, at the same time, carefully thought out and very deep, because towards the end of the performance, Nijinsky observes: "J'entends Dieu me crier assez!" (p. 12); "Je ne suis pas une bête, pas Dieu non plus, mais simplement un homme qui voulant être Dieu essaie de s'amender. [...] Morceau de Dieu, mon parti est le parti de Dieu" (p. 14). In view of his exceptional dance, unique in his times, and his identification with God, Nijinsky is often called "God of the dance".

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Each person grows in a community, a nation, a cultural, linguistic, historic, religious tradition. The young Nijinsky did not have a chance to experience the stability of collective belonging in his childhood. Hence, he considers himself a citizen of Europe, or even, a citizen of the whole world: "Je ne suis pas russe, ni polonais, ni un cosmopolite ni un étranger: je suis un homme" (p. 1); "A pis, je suis l'Égyptien, l'Indien peau-rouge, le Nègre, le Chinois, le Japonais, l'Étranger,

l'Inconnu. Je suis l'oiseau de mer et celui qui survole la terre ferme. Je suis l'arbre de Tolstoi avec ses racines" (p. 12). These two fragments of his grand monologue demonstrate that Nijinsky is really desperate in his search for identity.

Feeling strong need for identification with the nature, he thinks he is responsible for the future of the Earth: "Il y a des planètes sur lesquelles les gens vivent en amour et en paix. Je sais que Mars est inhabité. Et mon devoir est de sauver la terre entière, de l'empêcher d'étouffer!" (p. 5). As a hypersensitive being, the dancer feels solidarity with all parts of the world, with the entire universe: "Moi, j'aime la Russie, j'aime la France; l'Angleterre, l'Amérique, la Suisse, l'Italie, l'Espagne et le Japon. J'aime l'Australie, la Chine, l'Afrique et le Transval" (p. 1). This avowal of the protagonist, pronounced at the very beginning of the spectacle, right after the introduction of the actor who plays the role of Nijinsky, is really significant and meaningful. Dance is not a national art, but rather a universal means of communication which can be understood everywhere and by everybody. So, the protagonist emphasizes the importance of movement in his life: "[...] j'aime danser, bouger, remuer. Je suis un homme de mouvement pour qui l'immobilité est une contrainte⁸" (p. 2). The illness, affecting the dancer more and more, pushed him to shut himself away in his own world, inaccessible to others – an additional obstacle in his quest for identity.

At this stage of our considerations, it is important to mention the form of a circle, the issue of major importance for Nijinsky. During his illness, the dancer made a lot of drawings and we can see circles and ellipses in all his works; the common figures in both his drawings and dance movements⁹. The presence of a circular structure throughout *Till l'Espiegle* leads us to the observation that all the elements of theatrical microcosm are impregnated with this perfect geometrical form¹⁰. Thanks to his daughter, Kyra, we also know that a circle was the favourite figure of the artist who sought perfection and harmony in the whole world¹¹. The circle, symbolizing a closed, complete world or a group difficult to access, is omnipresent and has accompanied the man since the beginning of life

– from the egg, the embryo, to the planets of our universe. Moreover, in the divine world, several phenomena occur cyclically: the rhythm of day and night, the seasons of the year and the successive transformations of life and death. Therefore, the circle is endless like the periodicity and harmony of the world. Furthermore, in all cultures and religions of the world a sacral value is attributed to the symbol of the circle. It concerns, in particular, the space: the divine, sacred place, being limited by a circle, becomes inaccessible to others who are considered undeserving to enter there and meet God¹². Hence, those who are in a sacred place are protected against the evil powers and can feel safe.

This is precisely the case of the protagonist of *Till l'Espiegle*. Nijinsky always occupies the central position: on the one hand, as a genial artist, admired and loved by the public, he is the most important figure at the centre of the stage and, on the other hand, as schizophrenic, isolated from his entourage, closed in his own world, he feels lonely, withdrawn but still in the centre of his own circle. The dichotomy of these two worlds is important in his quest for identity which is undoubtedly disturbed by the incompatibility of these two opposite, even contradictory universes.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

There are professions which still have a strong identity element, even if nowadays they are in decline. Dance, and ballet in particular, have always been regarded as female professions. Costumes, make-up, dance movements, all of this predisposes to the feminization. Without claiming to be exhaustive – as the subject undoubtedly deserves an in-depth analysis – our study would not be complete, if we did not broach the subject of Nijinsky's sexual identity. The spectacle only vaguely refers to this identity aspect of the protagonist but we will make use of his *Journal*¹³, which is a richer source of information.

Among the reflexions scattered throughout the pages of his journal, Nijinsky evokes his

intimate life with Sergei Diaghilev: “Me voici marié depuis plus de cinq ans; avec Diaghilev j’ai également vécu durant cinq ans”¹⁴. Once again, we can notice a wide discrepancy between his life in a homosexual couple and the marriage with his wife: “Romuska? Ma bien-aimé! Romuska! A ma chère bien-aimée Romuska [...] que je t’aime et que je veux ton bonheur!” (p. 10), he says in the play; “Je n’aime pas Diaghilev et pourtant je vivais avec lui. Mais je l’ai haï du premier jour que je l’ai connu. Il s’était imposé à moi en profitant de ma pauvreté et de ce que soixante-cinq roubles par mois ne pussent me suffire à nous empêcher, ma mère et moi, de crever de faim”¹⁵, we can read in his journal. He left his lover because he considered their relationship to be wrong¹⁶ and he wanted to liberate himself from the power of his impresario.

CONCLUSION

At the end of our considerations, we would like to focus on the question concerning the causes of the artist’s identity problems: was it his frantic quest for identity which led him to schizophrenia or, on the contrary, it was the illness that provoked profound identity problems?

In light of the analyzes that we have just carried out, we claim that Nijinsky was predestined to suffer from mental disorder since he was a child. A number of circumstances contributed to it: the illness of his brother whom Vaslav tried to imitate, the fear of his mother who was afraid of suffering hunger every day, the homosexual relationship with Diaghilev whom he did not love, the profession he performed, etc. Throughout his entire life, the only constant point was dance, which turned to be the love of his life. Paradoxically, it is this passion that pushed the artist towards his illness, for Nijinsky’s schizophrenia revealed itself in the form of catatonia, in other words, the fear of becoming immobile and not being able to dance, and the identity problems were the result of the development of his illness.

References

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3. Nijinsky, Vaslav (1953), *Journal*, translated from English and prefaced by G. S. Solpray, Paris, Gallimard.
4. Krasowska, Wiera (1978), *Niżyński*, Warszawa, PIW.
5. Spsychalski, Téo (1982), *Till l’Espiegle*. Typescript, internal document of Théâtre Prospero of Montréal.
6. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zuhZN8Phw>
7. http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaslav_Nijinski

Endnotes

1. We use deliberately the word „community”, which has a double meaning: the one related to a social affiliation and the other one which makes reference to the European Community.
2. We rely on the website http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaslav_Nijinski, consulted on 12 February 2014 and on Krasowska, Wiera (1978), *Niżyński*, Warszawa, PIW.
3. Nijinsky, Vaslav (1995), *Cahiers*, translated from Russian by Christian Dumais-Lvowski and Galina Pogojeva, Québec, Ed. Babel, Co-edition Actes Sud-Leméac, p. 93.
4. Levesque, Robert (1982), “Gabriel Arcand: cette clarté de l’acteur”, *Le Devoir*, 28 May 1982.
5. It is important to note that Téo Spsychalski relied on the first translation of Nijinsky’s writings, that is *Journal de Nijinsky* (1953) translated from English and prefaced by G.S.Solpray, Paris, Gallimard, which is an abridged version. It was only in 1995 that the artist’s daughters authorized the publication of the whole text.
6. T. Spsychalski, *Till l’Espiegle*. Typescript, internal document of Théâtre Prospero of Montreal, 1982, p.1. In the following part of this study, all the citations – with the indication of the page put between parentheses – are from this typescript.
7. Krasowska, Wiera (1978), *Niżyński*, Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, p. 8.
8. It should be noted that Nijinsky’s illness took the form of catatonia, which is a kind of schizophrenia, manifested by the fear of becoming immobile and revealing itself both in psychological and motoric sphere. The ill person goes through periods of passivity and negativity alternating with sudden bursts of excitation.

9. Nijinsky tried to create his own movement based on a circle. He was also the first one who introduced in the ballet the double jump.
10. We study this subject in another article entitled: "Le dieu de la danse dans *Till l'Espiegle* de Téo Spsychalski", which is being printed in the ERTA review at the University of Gdańsk, 2014.
11. Cf. The interview of Margot Fonteyn with Kyra Nijinsky on the subject of her father, Vaslav Nijinsky, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7zuhZN8Phw>, consulted on 27 March 2014.
12. Eliade, Mircea (1965), *Le sacré et le profane*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 28.
13. Nijinsky, Vaslav (1953), *Journal*, translated from English, with a foreword by G. S. Solpray, Paris, Gallimard.
14. Ibidem, p. 77.
15. Ibidem, p. 69.
16. It should be noted that his wife, Romola de Pulszky, was also bisexual.