

The Three Graces and Disgraces of *Jeux*

In the spring of 1912 Vaslav Nijinsky achieved notoriety as a choreographer that equalled the fame he had won over five triumphant years as a dancer. His creation of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, set to an already existing Debussy score, caused a scandal in Paris that escalated from theatrical incident to national political debate. (1) The attraction between faun and nymph was a legacy from ancient Greece, but Nijinsky's ballet went beyond the bounds of convention; dancing as the beast he made a fetish of the Nymph's scarf to reach apparent orgasm in front of the audience. What happens on a vase in a museum is one thing—what is shown in the flesh on stage is another. Argument raged in the French press after *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Encouraged by Diaghilev, the sculptor Auguste Rodin brought the weight of his great reputation to Nijinsky's defence in a letter to *Le Matin*. Its rival *Le Figaro* immediately republished Rodin's letter as grounds for further attack, leading to a threatened police ban on *Faune* and a huge box office success. (2) Diaghilev was quick to garner these energies for Nijinsky's next project, commissioning a new score from Debussy for another ballet to test sexual taboos. *Jeux* was thus launched in the early summer of 1912.

The laconic choreography of *Faune*—all sculptural poses and internalized tensions—had surprised Paris, which lionized Nijinsky as a virtuoso. What had shocked the audience most about his first choreography, however, was not the reductive style but the transgressive approach to stage action. The disgraces of *Jeux* would take ballet a great deal further in that direction, introducing to dance theatre the subjects of homosexuality and a mixed gender *ménage à trois*. Surprisingly, the exposure of such material in *Jeux* seemed to cause less protest than the extreme angles of Nijinsky's style. When the English saw the ballet a month or so after the French, they, too, were startled by the choreography. One London critic claimed the dancers were “suffering from ‘tennis wrist’ all over” and another said he “longed to be able to unbuckle the limbs of the dancers and set them free from the rigid ties by which they were bound.” (3) Instead of complaints about Nijinsky's suggestive entanglements with the two ballerinas in *Jeux*, the choreographer was accused of endangering their limbs with his contortions. So within a year of *Faune* the situation had reversed, and the disgrace of his new ballet was less the sexual mores of the movement than the movement itself.

Jeux used, and according to some, abused classical steps, but the arch-classicist André Levinson recognized that its “geometric schematization” was a renovation of ballet principles. (4) Perhaps because *Jeux* seemed closer to ballet as it was then known, the distortions of Nijinsky's style appeared all the more radical. *Jeux* is arguably the most modern of the choreographer's works, at once the most personal and most abstract. Nijinska declared it the beginning of neoclassicism in ballet and the source of her own experiments in this mode. (5) If partnership is the fundamental end and means of classical dance, a universal good that overcomes all kinds of vicissitudes, then the love triangle is a deadly threat—one of ballets tried and true plots. (6) Not least among the remarkable achievements of *Jeux* is how Nijinsky totally transformed this *cliché*.

Games of love through the metaphor of sport was a novel conception that Nijinsky proposed, but who was to play the games had to be negotiated with Diaghilev. Some five years after the premiere Nijinsky wrote in his *Diary* that Diaghilev wanted *Jeux* to be about a young man with two male lovers. But this relationship was judged to be a taboo too far and the absence of female dancers a test too great for ballet-goers. Regarding the male trio, Nijinsky avows in the *Diary* that he “camouflaged these personalities on purpose,” suggesting the change to two women and a man was his decision. (7) Nijinsky himself had originally imagined a large cast, a host of youths moving in and out of configurations: “There should be no *corps de ballet*, no ensembles, no variations, no *pas de deux*, only boys and girls in flannels, and rhythmic movements” while “a group at a certain stage was to depict a fountain.” (8) Ultimately, the ballet was danced just by Nijinsky and two ballerinas, redefining what could be shown in public among a dancing threesome. In *Jeux* Nijinsky used the duet not as a set piece but as a psychological lever to prompt reactions from the unpartnered third person. Each member of the trio in turn is the odd person out. But in the end, by changes in awareness constructed through movement, the three become one. Nijinsky transformed the potentially banal idea of a three-way affair into an understated thriller about emotional mutuality. This sophisticated idea prompted his new dance vocabulary, a synthesis of visual influences which the present essay explores.

Defined by Disgrace

Disgrace quickly became the defining characteristic of Nijinsky’s work, a label that loomed ever larger from *Faune* and *Jeux* to *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Diaghilev as a publicist made the name of Nijinsky synonymous with scandal. What was good for Ballets Russes publicity, however, was not necessarily good for the young choreographer’s sense of himself. The guilt and despair of the *Diary* provide some measure of the eventual cost. When Diaghilev brought his company to Paris in 1909, the myth of the modern artist already embraced the role of rule breaker. Nijinsky’s natural inclination as a choreographer was to revamp the art form at which he so excelled, and, in terms of dance tradition, he played the iconoclast with ease. His works show that he regarded the body as the fundamental subject of dance. Also he realized that eroticism needed a more modern approach than he had encountered in the standard repertoire. Even the ballets by Mikhail Fokine, with their stellar roles for Nijinsky, conflated the erotic with the exotic.

Nijinsky took the opposite tack—bluntness, simplicity and familiarity of reference instead of far-flung fantasy. The body becomes the locus of experience. Nijinsky’s choreography features the body in extreme states—passion, ecstasy, fear—states when the body can go out of control. What makes his dances so compelling is the highly controlled way he presents these states, a kind of kinaesthetic brinkmanship. *Sex per se* was made the selling point of his work through marketing and manipulation of the press. Overnight, with the premiere of *Faune*, Nijinsky became known as a breaker of rules about sexual morality, an anarchistic force that threatened codes of decency in body

language. But the tactic backfired, partly because sensationalism did not equip promoters or the public to value Nijinsky's profound innovations. By the end of the season in which *Jeux* and *Le Sacre* changed the course of dance history, theatre managers were refusing to book the young choreographer's work. Scandal could not be trusted to sustain box office profit. (9)

So, as the *Jeux* saga began in the summer of 1912, despite the acclaim Nijinsky had earned for some twenty dancing roles with the Ballets Russes, he was identified with his singular choreographic effort. Dubbed in print as the "Debussyian dancer," he was now linked in the public mind not only with France's master composer but also its master sculptor, whose statues modernized erotic subjects through formal abstraction of explicit movement. Diaghilev chose this moment for Rodin to sculpt Nijinsky. For him to do so just as the twenty-three year old star began his new Debussy ballet was surely meant to maximize the celebrity of *Faune*. But this sculptural adventure, so vital to the genesis of *Jeux*, remains historically ambiguous.

Not even the chronology is clear. Romola Nijinsky, whom the dancer married in the complex aftermath of *Jeux* and *Le Sacre*, claimed later in her biography that the sittings with Rodin had happened at the end of July 1912. (10) Jacques-Emile Blanche, the writer and artist who translated Nijinsky's *Jeux* scenario into French for Debussy that summer, concurs on chronology with Romola. (11) But their time frame is impossible as Nijinsky was in London all of July. Nevertheless, during the high summer he did call on Blanche at his home in Meudon, near Rodin's studio. So the visits to Blanche and Rodin probably date from early August when Diaghilev and Nijinsky were definitely in Paris to discuss *Jeux* with Debussy, stopping en route to Deauville where the Ballets Russes had a short season before their holiday. Bronislava Nijinska wrote in her memoirs that her brother expected "to be in Paris in September to hear Claude Debussy's music for his new ballet, *Jeux*, and while in Paris he would also be posing for Rodin." (12) But she explains that instead Nijinsky went directly from his holiday in Venice with Diaghilev to meet her in Monte Carlo for rehearsals of *Jeux*. Nijinsky probably began the sessions with Rodin immediately after *Faune*, in early June 1912, before the Ballets Russes left France, and then resumed work with him in early August on the way to Deauville. In telling the tale Romola Nijinsky makes much of the heat wave that plagued Paris at the time of the Rodin incident, which lends support to the August dating.

As the story goes, Diaghilev arrived undetected during a sitting to find the sculptor and dancer asleep after lunch, reclining in close proximity; his jealousy inflamed, the impresario departed unnoticed, coming to his own conclusions and resolving to halt the project, which he promptly did. Nijinska dismisses the nap caught *in flagrante* in pragmatic terms; she maintains that Vaslav was so overworked and overwrought in the year of *Jeux* and *Le Sacre* that he fell asleep whenever he was out of Diaghilev's sight. Rodin, of course, never realized a sculpture of Nijinsky: only plaster casts survive plus a well-known bronze study generally assumed to be the dancer. (13) So the moral of the story, as it persists, is that jealousy robbed posterity of a Rodin masterpiece—a marble nude of Nijinsky in motion.

This kind of three-way pull of emotions was typical of the choreographer's personal and professional life during the preparation of *Jeux*. What actually occurred between Rodin and Nijinsky remains an unsolved mystery. Diaghilev's possessive attitude invited gossip about any sort of liaison with his young lover and *protégé*. Testimony in Nijinsky's own voice confirms the fact of the sittings but ignores the jealousy scenario. He simply says in the *Diary* that Rodin "wanted to make a drawing of me because he wanted to make a marble statue," then, revealing his own doubt and denial at the time of writing, concludes:

He looked at my naked body and found it was wrongly proportioned, and therefore he crossed out his sketches. I realized that he did not like me and I left. (14)

Nijinsky may have confused Rodin's response with another sculptor's disenchantment. Aristide Maillol, who considered Nijinsky "the embodiment of Eros," abandoned plans to use him as the heroic figure for a Nietzsche Memorial in 1911, saying that the dancer would make a more appropriate model for Rodin. (15)

In the aftermath of being defined by disgrace, Nijinsky experienced a collapse in self-worth. The marriage and resulting expulsion from the Ballets Russes in late 1913 led to his being shunned by many former colleagues. The alternatives that gave him hope—the promise by Baron de Gunsbourg to form a company around him, offers from theatres to feature him as a soloist, his own London season in 1914—all came to nought. When World War I broke out, he was caught in a private battle zone with Romola's relatives in Hungary where, as a Russian and thus an enemy alien, he was put under house arrest under their roof. His brief deliverance came in 1916 when the Metropolitan Opera in New York insisted Nijinsky head the Ballets Russes tour of North America. Despite considerable success, the strain began to show, as Diaghilev had given him no assistance for directing the company, which he did in addition to dancing and choreographing. Yet Nijinsky persevered until, in 1917, a reconciliation with Diaghilev almost happened. But Romola undermined it and took her husband away to live in St. Moritz. There his isolation from the theatre turned into withdrawal from the world, and, in the days just before her family institutionalized him, he wrote the *Diary*. (16)

Drawings of Nijinsky by Rodin have never surfaced, although one journalist mentioned seeing some Rodin sketches in Nijinsky's dressing room at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1913. Setting the scene for an interview after the *Jeux* premiere, he wrote, "None of the innumerable photographs of the dancer are to be seen—only a few designs by Bakst and some sketches of Rodin." (17) Whether Nijinsky was the subject of these works, however, is unclear. Nevertheless, the impact of the sculptor on the choreographer was taken for granted by critics at the time. Rodin's forthright sensuality, his ability to arrest movement, his formal simplifications and brusque surfaces were all qualities that Nijinsky was introducing into dance.

Visual Influences on *Jeux*

Writers at the time of *Jeux* and ever since have sought to specify the visual influences on this ballet. Reviewing the premiere of the ballet, Emile Vuillermoz complained that Nijinsky “preoccupied himself above all with showing us his pictorial erudition by twisting the fragile limbs of Karsavina and Ludmilla Schollar in the name of Matisse, Metzinger, and Picasso.” (18) Nijinska in her memoirs recalled that the first thing Nijinsky had done, when she arrived for the Monte Carlo rehearsals of *Jeux* in September 1912, was to show her his art books: “Vaslav was completely captivated by contemporary French art—Modigliani, Matisse, Cézanne, and particularly Rodin and Gauguin.” (19) Comparing the choreography of *Jeux* with the sculpture of Maillol, Blanche believed that the best way to describe Nijinsky’s work was in terms of statuary. (20) In the struggle to characterize the new style, critics often categorized *Jeux* as Cubist, due to its geometrical design. (21) “Everything is at an angle,” a London critic railed, “the only thing with a curve in it is the lost ball,” from which he concludes the ballet “is conceived in the vein of the Cubists.” (22)

Nijinsky’s dance was linked, sometimes in a single review, with both archaic and contemporary art, especially with the Post-Impressionists, who were currently popular due to the exhibition efforts of Roger Fry and other Bloomsbury writers, even though, like Nijinsky, these artists were not appreciated by most critics:

The feeling of massive strain and force which the square abrupt figures of Assyrian and archaic Hellenic sculpture convey to us is a feeling which may be doubtfully relevant to the flirtations in *Jeux*. . . . Thus the effort to get beyond the mere gracefulness of the traditional ballet has led M. Nijinski to “Post-Impressionism” and the sacrifice of beauty to expressiveness. (23)

The Parisian press remarked on Gauguin’s importance not only to choreographic groups and gestures in *Jeux* but also to its Post-Impressionist décor. In his biography of Nijinsky, Richard Buckle comments on a Gauguinesque grouping preserved in one of the pastels by Valentine Gross:

The composition in which the slightly bending Karsavina addresses Schollar, who sits, knees tucked under her, one hand in her lap, the other at her breast, the head sadly inclined, while Nijinsky watches them both, is, of all these groups, the most reminiscent of Gauguin. (24)

Buckle notes Etruscan and Roman references in other *Jeux* postures and a famous classical reference in the pose the choreographer apparently called the fountain: “The group in which the three dancers stand in a row with Nijinsky in the middle is a version of the Three Graces.” (25)

During the disastrous dress rehearsal of *Jeux*, when the Ballets Russes coterie disparaged Nijinsky’s creation, it was this grouping which was singled out to defend the whole. As Blanche remembered, “Diaghilev arose and said that the ‘fountain’ (without doubt one of the linear arrangements of the three dancers) was a masterpiece of choreography and that we had not understood anything about it.” (26) The fountain concept is the signature image of *Jeux*, with the three figures sculpturally intertwined in a

variety of ways to build the climax of the ballet. (27) At least by the 19th century the Three Graces had become an iconic subject for fountains, but the link for Nijinsky may derive from his father whose most notable choreographic achievement was the first staging of Pushkin's poem, *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, under the title *The Victim of Jealousy*—a theme closely related to *Jeux*. (28) The Pushkin ballet was a rather traumatic experience for the young Bronislava and Vaslav. Aged just six and seven years old, they were inclined to take theatrical fiction as fact. So when they saw their mother, who was dancing the lead role, daggered onstage as the result of a love triangle, they were terrified and prayed outloud. Despite complex feelings about Foma Nijinsky, who soon became an absent father, they admired him as an artist. Choreographically, he was acclaimed for big ensembles, and perhaps the early idea for a large group fountain configuration was meant by Nijinsky as a tribute to his father who died in the period when *Jeux* and *Le Sacre* were created.

Rodin did not specifically treat the theme of the Three Graces, but his abstract entanglement of bodies no doubt influenced Nijinsky after *Faune*. Nijinsky's first ballet had startled by its lack of physical contact, accentuating all the more the magnetic tie between the animal and the woman. Their duet had just one linking, a knee and elbow lock, probably derived from a contemporary tango step; it is done so slowly it looks flat, like the other bas-relief effects in that ballet. (29) *Jeux* is an altogether different story, with embraces and kisses from the outset. And yet there is reticence in these demonstrations of passion, partly achieved through blunt grips and angular holds and partly through strategic timing. Nijinsky uses distance to amplify desire. Contact is achieved only after a few false starts: the Young Man approaches the First Girl several times before she gives in to his advances, a conceit hardly new in ballet but abstracted by the terseness of the *Jeux* gestures. A similar encounter occurs between the Young Man and the Second Girl, although she is less coy, and her modern independence is expressed in syncopated teasing and spiky movements, even when she capitulates. Then the coupling of the two women begins with a rejected embrace that slowly leads to amorous contact, but this time the man quickly interrupts them. Even the tripling involves gradual steps toward intimacy, as the three dancers make a tighter and tighter triangle, finally wrapping themselves into the fountain configuration. Like Rodin, Nijinsky entangles figures through contortion of the limbs, but how different are their results. Lovemaking in *Jeux* is a geometrical phenomenon in which the erotic does not depend upon sensual curves in the bodies or the movement. Nijinsky's version of the Three Graces is unique, and it is fascinating to compare what he did with celebrated examples, ancient and modern, of this grouping.

Nijinsky's Three Graces

Until the trio of *Jeux*, with Nijinsky placed between two ballerinas, the presentation of the Three Graces is exclusively female. They are usually caught in the suspended animation of a round dance. The Graces are "typically grouped so that the two outer figures face the spectator, the one in the middle facing away," writes James

Hall, noting that “this was their antique form, known and copied in the Renaissance.” (30) Nijinsky reinterpreted the formula. In the signature fountain pose, he faces front as the central figure while the two women dancers, standing in side view, face him. The best known Renaissance example of the Three Graces is the lissome trio in Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera*, where the women are attached but not entwined. [Illustration 1] The dance of Botticelli’s Graces is meant to stimulate the impulses of love, which is part of their function as “handmaidens of Venus,” but also to encourage “the notion of beauty as a gateway to the divine.” (31) E. H. Gombrich has documented the complex ways in which the Three Graces were thus allegorized by Italian Neoplatonists in the epoch of the Medicis. (32)

Yet even in antiquity, at least as early as Seneca, according to Hall, the three “smiling maidens, nude or transparently clothed” represented “the threefold aspect of generosity, the giving, receiving and returning of gifts, or benefits.” (33) Betty Radice has observed that in medieval Christian illustrations the three female figures, whose rectitude hardly suggests dance, “are naturally clothed and teach the moral that a benefit conferred is twice repaid.” (34) [Illustration 2] “But from the fifteenth century onwards,” Radice continues, the Graces were “the medium through which pagan beauty could be shown, and were symbolically associated with...pleasure, chastity and beauty.”(35) She demonstrates the rationalizing function of allegory when she adds that “their nakedness was to indicate that they were free from deceit.” (36) Hall analyzes the allegorical logic of the Renaissance Graces thus: “Florentine humanist philosophers of the 15th century saw them as three phases of love: *beauty* arousing *desire* leading to *fulfilment*. (37)

In the late eighteenth century erotic entanglement of the figures becomes an issue. Antonio Canova, whose work was much admired by Lord Byron, made two neoclassical masterpieces on this subject. One was commissioned by Napoleon’s Josephine and ended up at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Diaghilev and Bakst no doubt knew this sculpture and perhaps introduced Nijinsky to it. The other was commissioned by an English duke and installed in the purpose built Temple of the Graces at Woburn Abbey, enhancing the ritual dance of the three figures. (38) Surviving sketches reveal something of how Canova confronted the issue of eroticism. “Canova’s initial pencil sketches oscillate between showing the three figures clothed and naked,” Bruce Boucher explains, but the sculptor “ultimately opted for the nude form, albeit strategically veiled by a wisp of drapery.” (39) Greek and Roman precedents, like the Three Graces at the entrance to the Acropolis in Athens, are more fully draped, as were the Roman figures that served as Botticelli’s model. (40) However, the famous first century fresco in Pompeii presents the trio of dancing maidens nude, with no drapery, although they are chastely separated from each other. So even though the maidens are linked by arms on each other’s shoulders their contact is minimal. Raphael’s Three Graces, like the Pompeii maidens, are nude and distantly spaced; yet these early 16th century figures, connected to each other by one hand, hold a golden apple in the other, a metaphor of temptation with both classical and biblical resonance.

Canova brings the three women closer. In one terracotta model for his sculpture he followed the “antique prototypes by having one of the Graces turning away from the

spectator to embrace her sisters.” (41) In another model he anticipated the direct approach of modern artists to the subject, abandoning the ancient formula “in favour of a more open and flowing concept in which all three Graces are seen, in varying degrees, both frontally and in profile.” (42) [Illustration 3] With Canova the three female figures go beyond touch to a real embrace, which one of his contemporaries interestingly saw as “the visible manifestation of an abstract quality.” (43) Boucher’s essay on Canova interprets this quality as motion:

The three figures convey a sense of perpetual merging, a fusion into one concept of grace. Each of the Graces stands in a variation on classical contrapposto: the shifting of their hips and the interlocking of their arms imparts a feeling of movement to the whole work. As a sculptor, Canova was preoccupied with motion. (44)

Boucher considers Canova “an early proponent of kinetic sculpture,” pointing out that the Three Graces at Woburn Abbey “could also be revolved on its pedestal, so that the sculptor’s unrivalled gift for carving human flesh could be viewed under changing conditions of daylight or by candlelight.” (45)

The meaning of the Three Graces changes with Canova’s posture. After the acclaim of his sculpture, the Graces enter popular iconography as an erotic image and are sometimes identified with lesbian attraction. (46) [Illustration 4] Edward Burne-Jones in the 19th century pursues such suggestions with his Three Graces, linking their arms and bodies in the manner of Canova. [Illustration 5] Burne-Jones, a Pre-Raphaelite whose principle influence was Botticelli, reinstates the classical grouping of the *Primavera* with the central woman turned away from the viewer, but the proximity of the figures makes them merge. Isadora Duncan, who claimed Botticelli as one her great inspirations, updated the standard Graces by novel interlacing of the arms. (47) Visual artists in the 20th century take further liberties, sometimes by reversing expectations. Georges Barbier, in his typical Art Nouveau graphic style, entwines the three women with his sinuous background. (48) August Macke, the German Expressionist, presents three naked girls, all facing front and holding hands, their forthright *naïveté* evoking an inverted eroticism. (49) Gauguin undermines all the conventions by dressing his women head to foot in black and placing them austere in an autumn landscape with the ruins of a Temple of Venus in the background. [Illustration 6] Picasso’s *Sculptor and Statue of Three Female Dancers* shifts the focus from his nude Graces and their dance to the sculptor, who does not watch them but looks at the viewer, a self-reflexive image making the artist himself the main subject of the work. (50) [Illustration 7]

Nijinsky uses the three-way configuration as a statement of emotional truth: after the resolution of the rivalries in the trio, they are finally one. For the first time, it seems, the Grace in the center is male, and as the era’s own “god of the dance” Nijinsky was an apt substitution. But his centrality does not denote superiority. At this point in *Jeux*, the dancers are equal, a very modern relationship. They embrace in a way that gives them mutual claim to each other. The women cross the arm nearest the man over his chest in order to place the hand, palm inward, on the side of his face. They link their other hand with each other at the level of his waist. The man, meanwhile, hooks one wrist around

the neck of each woman. As they press against each other, the hand positions allow them to pull the group closer. There are many renderings of the basic fountain pose, but one drawing records a variation, with Nijinsky extending his arms out from the women's necks. (51) An appreciative critic of *Jeux* in 1913 identified Nijinsky's choreographic approach as an "intensification of related forms of movement," and this variation of the fountain is a case in point. (52) In the *Jeux* reconstruction of 1996, the "intensification of related forms" became a *modus operandi* for developing Nijinsky's missing gestures. (53) The fountain, or Three Graces, became the basis for such variations as changing level, with the trio kneeling and rising in a single interlocked unit, and squeezing into a tighter embrace before they recline as a *ménage à trois* on the ground. The related forms of the fountain pose are thus intensified, and the merging of the Graces initiated by Canova reaches its early 20th century culmination. Such are the intricacies of form in Nijinsky's love triangle.

Bloomsbury Body Language and Forebodings of War

Nijinsky's starting point for the choreography of *Jeux* was ordinary gesture, part of his conscious effort to present "the man of 1913" onstage. (54) The formalizing of these gestures, as so often noted by critics, was clearly influenced by the visual art of his time. And the psychological projection of this quotidian movement is quite specific, not simply Post-Impressionist, or Cubist, or whatever label critics used in the effort to define Nijinsky's style in this modernist ballet. *Jeux* is characterized by contorted hand and head positions, carefully distorted classical steps and angular postures that are sometimes languorous, sometimes almost lascivious. However shocking these initiatives in terms of movement or meaning, they nonetheless convey restraint. The atmosphere needed to synthesize the many elements of *Jeux* Nijinsky seems to have found in Bloomsbury, the environs where he developed the scenario and where he observed libertines whose bodies spoke with English reserve. The leafy streets around the British Museum were the preserve of a disparate band of artists and intellectuals in the late Edwardian period just before World War I. There socialism and feminism had been articles of faith for a decade, and pacifism was beginning to burgeon with the premonition of hostilities throughout Europe.

The liaisons of Lady Ottoline Morrell and her Bloomsbury circle were analogous to the plot of Nijinsky's ballet. The wife of Philip Morrell, a distinguished member of Parliament, Ottoline was the mistress of philosopher Bertrand Russell. At her salons in Bedford Square Nijinsky met the painters Duncan Grant and Vanessa Stephen, as well as Vanessa's sister Virginia, a novelist soon to be known by her married name Woolf, and the writer Lytton Strachey, among others. (55) In a letter to Strachey Ottoline reported Nijinsky's fascination with the painter Duncan Grant, whom he watched playing tennis one afternoon in Bedford Square. "I saw Nijinsky looking him all over," she confided (56). In the company of these British bohemians, Nijinsky was, by all accounts, socially awkward. But he used his celebrity status and the language barrier as protective cover

while he studied his surroundings. Bronislava Nijinska once said that silence was always her brother's best defence. (57) It was also a device he seemed to use quite consciously. Mute and mysterious, he was meanwhile acutely observant. Sometimes his remarks horrified Diaghilev, as, for example, when he told Ottoline—noted for her long neck—that she reminded him of a giraffe. (58) The Russian dancer and Bloomsbury hostess communicated in their own fashion, more or less in French, and he often went unaccompanied to have tea with her. Strachey eavesdropped on one of their philosophical chats and overheard her asking Vaslav if he had read Plato. Even though Ottoline did most of the talking, Nijinsky was relaxed in her presence and absorbed much from her. (59) Over the years Lady Ottoline proved to be a true friend, welcoming him when he was shunned by Diaghilev's coterie and later organizing support when he was put into mental institutions. (60)

The Bloomsbury attitude toward multiple relationships seems to have clarified for Nijinsky how to maximize the subject of *Jeux* as a trio. He perceived the redefinition of disgrace in Ottoline's world and used it as the motive force for his ballet. There is something distinctly English about *Jeux*. Photographs and drawings of the artists and writers that frequented Ottoline's salon in Bedford Square make striking comparison with the visual documents of *Jeux*. (61) Both reveal bodies poised for intellectual banter and the sport of human relationships, figures recoiling from emotional conflict but irrevocably drawn to it, young people side-stepping passion then throwing caution to the wind. Above all, the denizens of Bloomsbury and *Jeux* share the ethics of friendship, where jealousy is overcome by mutual concern and a connection that outlives rivalry. To really experience *Jeux* it helps to imagine Nijinsky, alert, intrigued and in the full possession of his artistic powers, taking the measure of this brave new world.

Politics was as much the lifeblood of Bloomsbury as art. The interactions that Nijinsky witnessed probably exposed him to waves of foreboding in Ottoline's circle. Rumblings about the possibility of a European war created anxiety and made the pleasure garden of that time and place seem increasingly fragile. Debussy understood the arc of feeling in Nijinsky's scenario from dalliance at the outset to a denouement laced with fear. At the time of the premiere, summarizing the elements given to him for the score, he wrote: "there was a park, a tennis court, and the chance meeting of two girls with a young man in pursuit of a lost ball," to which he then adds "a mysterious nocturnal landscape with that slightly evil *je ne sais quoi* that accompanies twilight." (62) Time in *Jeux* moves quickly from a golden sunset into the darkening shades of night.

From the outset Nijinsky anticipated a catastrophic ending for the ballet. At first he conceived the crash of an airplane onstage, but this futuristic event was ultimately replaced by just the crash of a tennis ball, a metaphor for some aerial nemesis. (63) The composer followed suit and originally included a *szforzando* crash just before the end of the music, which was to accent Nijinsky's catastrophe. (64) Late in the process the crash was eliminated in favor of a more ambiguous close, as the three tennis players run away from an unspecified threat.

Within a year or so of *Jeux*, Bloomsbury became a hub of anti-war activity. Ottoline was among the most vocal protestors, and Philip Morrell even more so,

jeopardizing his political career by parliamentary speeches against the war. (65) Bertrand Russell took a strong stand in his writings for *The Nation*. (66) And Lytton Strachey, who became a conscientious objector, called for a Stop the War party in England. (67) But the sense of foreboding had anticipated the war by almost two years. It was during the summer of 1912, as Nijinsky prepared *Jeux*, that press speculation about impending hostilities began. At that time, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote in the *Fortnightly Review* about “Great Britain and the Next War,” making predictions that became facts in 1914. (68) Nijinsky breathed the pre-war atmosphere of Bloomsbury into his ballet, its extremes of frivolity and gravity, madcap adventure and intellectual rigor, promiscuity and passionate loyalty. The merging of unique individuals in a mutuality of their own creation, following relationship rules they themselves defined—such was the world, with all its fantasy and foreboding, that Nijinsky captured in *Jeux*.

Falling from Grace

Yet *Jeux* was not Nijinsky’s anti-war ballet. That was to come some five years later in his last performance, during the solo concert in St. Moritz in January 1918, which he called his *Marriage avec Dieu*. The climax of the concert was Nijinsky’s falling dance when he collapsed on the floor, over and over, commemorating the men of his generation who died in the trenches of World War I. The question of military service had overshadowed Nijinsky’s career with the Ballets Russes, preventing his return to St. Petersburg and the Mariinsky Theatre. Diaghilev had exploited the situation to ensure that his company would not lose its star. (69) When Nijinsky left Europe to lead the American tour of the Ballets Russes in 1916, he saw trains full of young soldiers going the opposite direction to the front. This image burned in his mind and generated in his later drawings many heads of soldiers, their gas masks abstracted into skeletal faces of death. (70) During the American tour Nijinsky had to meet with Russian ambassadorial staff about his military status before the company could perform in Washington D.C. His own problem became inseparable from the larger issue of war and emerged as a persistent theme in the *Diary*, which he wrote immediately after the St. Moritz concert. *Jeux* had evoked a sense of unspecified tragedy, one that would wreak havoc in individual lives, bringing a period of great creativity to its close. By the end of the decade, like Virginia Woolf and many of their contemporaries, Nijinsky had internalized the public crisis as part of his personal collapse. (71)

Presentiment of change was part of Diaghilev’s genius as an impresario, but he did not anticipate the enormity of the changes he would face in 1913. (72) Throughout the year of *Le Sacre* and *Jeux* personal tensions between him and Nijinsky had mounted. By the time the two masterpieces, motivated and promoted by Diaghilev, were seen on stage in London, the relationship between him and the choreographer had deteriorated. How this love affair at the heart of the Ballets Russes broke down was never really clear until Nijinska published her memoirs six decades later. (73) Throughout her youth at the Mariinsky and in Diaghilev’s troupe Bronislava had kept a journal of her impressions. In September 1923, when she emerged as principal choreographer of the Ballets Russes,

Dancing Times in London mentioned her writing about Nijinsky, who was then living part of the time with his wife and daughters outside Paris and part of the time in Swiss hospitals:

Nijinsky is not dead, nor has he become insane....[He] has changed very little, at least as regards his outward appearance. It is extremely unlikely that he will dance again, but he has been writing a book on Dance and Rhythm notation.... Nijinsky is not a man of one talent; he is a designer and has a large collection of drawings and pastels of ballet costumes, portraits, caricatures, etc. His latest drawings are characterized by profound melancholy and pessimism. Perhaps the mystery that still hangs over his dramatic disappearance from the stage when at the height of his career will be dispelled by the biography which Mlle. Nijinska is writing of her brother. (74)

Nijinska, of course, did not write the biography. It was Romola Nijinsky who in the 1930's told his story in her two books and published her version of his *Diary*. (75)

When Richard Buckle was preparing his definitive biography of Nijinsky in the late 1960's, he saw the manuscript of Bronislava's memoirs and recognized that they would, to some extent, dispel the mystery pondered by the *Dancing Times*. (76) In her *Early Memoirs*, which were finally published posthumously in the early 1980's, she shows how Diaghilev used her to mediate with Nijinsky during the break up. "And so it was, towards the end of our season in London in 1913, during the last days of July, that Sergei Pavlovitch asked me to come and see him at the Savoy Hotel," Nijinska writes, explaining that she became the buffer for her brother's hurt and anger. (77) She had to tell him that opera house managers did not trust his new style and demanded a return to ballets by Mikhail Fokine. So the revolution Diaghilev had inflamed he abandoned forthwith, and worse, he wanted Nijinsky out of the company, even as a dancer. Ironically, Diaghilev had created his own double-bind by ensuring that Nijinsky could not return to the imperial theatres due to evasion of service in the Tsar's army. Nijinsky's marriage to Romola on the South American tour in the autumn of 1913 thus served Diaghilev's purpose, giving him an excuse to fire his protégé from the Ballets Russes. The marriage, as it happened, did not undo the double-bind for Nijinsky, who ultimately lost both the Mariinsky and the Ballets Russes. Time proved Nijinska correct in her fear that Nijinsky's isolation from theatrical life would trigger his collapse. (78)

During Bronislava's mediating days at the Savoy in late July 1913, Diaghilev had revealed his resignation about the work he had nurtured through Nijinsky. "I had to tell Nijinsky that his ballet *Jeux* was a complete failure, and since it has not had any success it will not be performed anymore," Diaghilev told her, adding that "the same also applies to *Sacre*." The impresario exonerated himself, explaining to Nijinska that "All the friends of the Ballets Russes....say I am destroying my ballet company!" (79) Despite spirited resistance at the time, Nijinsky finally gave way to the failure Diaghilev decreed. His ambiguities about the subject of *Jeux* had already surfaced in the annotations he made on piano scores during the rehearsal period. (80) When the three players in *Jeux* finally become one, Nijinsky wrote in clear, bold script the word "Sin" over those measures of music. (81) In the *Diary*, several years later, Nijinsky dismisses *Jeux* as a failed ballet

“on the subject of lust,” focusing on his own confused guilt and sense of loss. (82) It is not easy for dance history to reconcile the disparity between what Nijinsky achieved in *Jeux* and how it was rejected in his lifetime, even by the choreographer himself. At the premiere he stood firmly behind his ballet, despite the struggle of the creative process and his own reservations about the subject. (83) As the situation around him deteriorated, Nijinsky lost hope and came to judge *Jeux* as a fall from grace.

The Genre of *Je Ne Sais Quoi*

Debussy’s rejection of Nijinsky’s ballet is a complex issue involving personal politics and the composer’s conservatism regarding dance. (84) For all his sarcasm about the Ballets Russes and Nijinsky’s creations—*Faune* as well as *Jeux*—the artist in Debussy was motivated by the challenge of Nijinsky’s scenario about the games people play. He quibbled about many details at the outset but the idea got hold of him, particularly the atmosphere, what he called the “slightly evil *je ne sais quoi* that accompanies twilight.” (85) Debussy was already ill when he was writing *Jeux*, and his demise in the aftermath paralleled the collapse of the Belle Epoque all around him. This irony did not escape him, as he lay dying from cancer to the sound of bombs bursting over Paris. (86) *Jeux* is now regarded as his most innovative work, a leap from impressionism to modernism. (87) Without doubt Nijinsky’s scenario tapped the composer’s intuitive sense of impending change, a challenge to his way of writing music, a threat finally to his generation’s way of life. To create a work of art in the twilight of a great era like *fin-de-siècle* France could have brought forth from the composer a score full of nostalgia. Not so with Debussy. He went right to Nijinsky’s point of a sinister reality shadowing the games of social life, the “*je ne sais quoi* that accompanies twilight.”

The final passage of the scenario, describing the last action of the trio, reads in English as follows: “A tennis ball falls at their feet—surprised and frightened, they escape, bounding into the depths of the nocturnal park.” But the scenario with which Debussy worked until late in the compositional process continued with a curious phrase: “away from the birds in the trees whose sleep this bewildered flight interrupts.” (88) Although the scenario is more evocative without this last phrase, it suggests another level of meaning—the response of nature to human events in the pleasure garden. The birds are awakened before their time, the order of nature is disturbed. Nijinsky’s meaning is emphasized: a sinister *je ne sais quoi* pervades the pre-dawn as it did the twilight. Debussy’s dismissal of Nijinsky’s efforts—from the first scenario draft to the final ballet onstage—is biographical fact. Yet the music he provided for the ballet realized the profound significance of the idea. The two collaborators communicated in spite of themselves.

It is useful to compare *Jeux* with other works in what could be called the *je ne sais quoi* genre. After World War II the Italian novelist Giorgio Bassini wrote *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, centered in the leafy park of a private home in Ferrara in the 1930’s. It became an oasis where young people met for flirtations and tennis matches

to escape the rising anti-semitism that was engulfing Fascist Italy and all of Europe. These tennis players, too, bounded into the depths of the nocturnal park, first in denial of the reality around them and then in fear of its proximity. The novel, published in 1962, became well known in the film version directed by Vittorio de Sica in 1970. (89) In 1983 Kenneth Macmillan created *Valley of Shadows* for the Royal Ballet, derived from *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Shortly before that project Macmillan had worked on the Herbert Ross film *Nijinsky*, for which he choreographed a version of *Jeux* based on photographs and drawings from 1913. Perhaps Macmillan sensed the relationship of Nijinsky's scenario to the Bassini story. When the Royal Ballet performed the reconstruction of *Jeux* in 2000, several critics and spectators mentioned the similarity in feeling of Nijinsky's *Jeux* to Macmillan's *Valley of Shadows*. Both ballets capture the twilight moments of a specific civilization. The recent version of *Jeux* by the Belgian postmodernist Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's, entitled *D'un soir un un jour*, consciously quoted the Nijinsky reconstruction and used for its finale some footage from the tennis game in *Blow-Up*, Michaelangelo Antonioni's dark film about swinging London from 1966. (90) His all-night revellers, dressed in black with commedia dell'arte white make-up, mime various serves and volleys with a non-existent ball. Their antics heighten the sense of unreality in the cold green of Hyde Park early in the morning, as photographic clues to a murder begin to yield results. De Keersmaeker's use of this footage is a *coup de theatre*. She combines images of widely disparate tennis games and pleasure gardens to end her 21st century *Jeux* with the same unsettling sense of *je ne sais quoi*.

For his year-end review of the arts in 1913, Jacques-Emile Blanche, who had witnessed the creation of *Jeux* and *Le Sacre*, mourned the closure of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, bankrupt from its daring experiments: "I finished writing these lines in the countryside where, with great sadness, I had to follow the death throes of the direction of this new theatre." (91) Blanche recognized that the disgraces of the first season, at least *Le Sacre* if not also *Jeux*, would finally be its glories. The doors of the theatre were closed, but the huge stone reliefs on its façade, designed by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle, still towered over the right bank of the Seine. Isadora Duncan and Vaslav Nijinsky were carved in an archaic Art Deco dance that linked the present and past of Western civilization: Isadora with Dionysian ecstasy, Nijinsky with Apollonian aplomb. With tragic irony, in the very spring of 1913 when the reliefs were unveiled, both artists experienced a massive crisis in their lives. Duncan was devastated by the drowning of her two children in the Seine and Nijinsky by the rejection of his work in the new theatre on its banks. The Bourdelle reliefs must have stood for contemporaries like an ancient frieze about the end of a heroic era—two creative giants brought down by fate. Or so it seemed. But what Blanche wrote would prove true in the course of time: history does value the two artists engraved on the front of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Their work redefined grace in the art of dance, not just for their time but for centuries to come.