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PROUST AT THE BALLET

PROUST AT THE BALLET: LITERATURE AND DANCE IN DIALOGUE

Abstract

This article examines French choreographer Roland Petit's ballet adaptation of *A la recherche du temps perdu* as an example of the little-researched interartistic relations between literature and dance. Drawing on translation theory and recent dance scholarship, it is argued that Petit's 'lecture dancée' offers a bold critical reading of the source text which challenges conservative public perceptions of Proust through its foregrounding of the darker side of human passions in the text and its focus on homosexuality as a major theme. By lifting it out of its traditional medium, the ballet brings to the fore aspects of the novel that tend to be overlooked by criticism: Proust's interest in the body in motion, the gestural and choreographic qualities of his writing, the marked theatricality of some of the *Recherche*'s most prominent scenes. Not bound by the strictures of faithfulness, Petit signs a performance which extracts Proustian 'essences' in the interstices between text and performance.

Although they constitute the staple diet of opera repertoires all over the world, ballet adaptations of literary texts rarely are the subject of criticism.¹ What exactly happens when literature, a verbal medium par excellence, is translated into the non-verbal medium of dance? How can the multi-layered world of fiction be recreated through movement, choreography, music and gesture? How is print, destined for individual,

private reading, transmuted into the collective viewing experience of performance?

French choreographer Roland Petit, one of the most distinguished figures of twentieth-century ballet and a reputed master in the genre of adaptation, gives a poignant example of how literary enunciation can take on a new form and life in the language of dance with his *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur*, a neo-classical ballet inspired by *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The ballet was premiered by the Ballets de Marseille, a young, progressive company founded by Petit, at the Opera de Monte-Carlo in 1974. It entered the repertoire of the Opéra National de Paris in 2007 and has since become one of its most popular classics. Ten years before the first screen adaptations of the *Recherche*,² then, the choreographer defied the wide-spread cliché of Proust's inadaptability and launched a challenge far greater than translating one of the masterpieces of modernism into the audio-visual medium of film: to think a Proust without words, a Proust all in motion read and reinvented through the poetics of dance.

This article proposes to analyse the aesthetic and narrative principles that govern Petit's adaptation and to engage with the wider theoretical questions that are raised by dance adaptations of literature: the specificity of expression of the two media and the possibility of equivalences between them, the hybridisation between different art forms, and the need for a critical language to express the literature-dance interface. Based on the concept of intermittence, it will be argued, Petit's ballet effects a complex oscillation between source text and adaptation that converges with Proust's own theory of translation as essentially a new form of creation. Perhaps paradoxically, by lifting the novel out of its original medium, words, the ballet acutely throws into relief aspects of the *Recherche* that transcend the purely verbal – the attention to gestures and body language, the kinesthetic vision, the role of the body as a channel

for emotions and memory – whilst at the same time giving form to Proust's aspiration to a total work of art where different artistic forms mutually enrich one another. With *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur*, Petit offers not only a remarkable translation of Proust into the language of dance, but a stimulating critical reading which helps to make manifest aspects of the novel that tend to remain latent.

Petit's choice of *À la recherche du temps perdu* as the source text for one of his works is little surprising in a choreographer who is doubtless the most literary of his generation and who, like his contemporary and fellow neo-classicist John Neumeier, has made adaptation, or more generally, narrative ballet, the centre of his creative work. A student of Serge Lifar, the former *Ballets russes* dancer whose choreographies modernized French classical dance between the Wars and who was instrumental in shaping a neo-classical dance language, Petit, throughout his work as a dancer and a choreographer, has let himself be inspired by literary works of many different cultures and periods. In a highly diversified career which has taken him from the opera to the music hall and even the cinema and, geographically, from France to Hollywood and back to Europe, he has drawn on the classics of world literature (Milton, Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, Victor Hugo, Zola, to name only a few) without neglecting authors often reputed as hermetic (Lautréamont, Blake) nor the avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century (Cocteau, Anouilh, Maiakovsky). A fervent believer in the synthesis between different art forms and in the hybridisation of genres – Petit's choreographies of the 1940s revived the dynamism of Diaghilev's *Ballets russes* which first promoted a resolutely interartistic approach to the ballet –, he has collaborated with some of the most prominent visual artists (Picasso, Niki de Saint-Phalle, David Hockney), photographers (Brassaï) and fashion designers (Yves Saint-Laurent) of the twentieth century, who have created the innovative set designs

and costumes for his ballets. The music for his works, likewise, whilst primarily drawn from the classical repertoire, also extends into the modern period with special commissions from composers such as Dutilleux, Messiaen and Xenakis. Formed in the lineage of the *Ballets russes*, Petit is known for ballets that pay equal attention to all the different elements of the performance from choreography to lighting, music, sets and costumes.

The young choreographer gained international success with two literary works: *Le Jeune homme et la mort* (1946), a one-act ballet scripted and co-staged by Jean Cocteau, and *Carmen* (1949), adapted from Prosper Mérimée's novella of 1845 (the source text was first adapted into an opera in 1875 by Georges Bizet, whose music Petit uses in a self-conscious citation in his ballet version). The eroticized dance language of *Carmen*, arguably the choreographer's best known ballet and a major work of twentieth-century dance, shocked and entranced contemporary audiences in equal measure and propelled Roland Petit (who also danced the male part of Don José) and his dance partner and later wife Zizi Jeanmaire to instant stardom in the world of post-war ballet. Petit was to remain faithful to his passion for literature even at a time – the 1950s and beyond – when, in the wake of the modern dance revolution spearheaded by Merce Cunningham, narrative ballet was increasingly discredited in favour of more abstract performances.³ Literature not only offered him 'les plus belles histoires de ballets dont on puisse rêver',⁴ it allowed him, in the interstices of the literary work, to develop a dance language of great expressivity and dramatic intensity where movement, gesture and facial expression partake in the same desire to reveal and represent feelings through kinesis. In counterpoint to modern, objectivist dance, which challenges the very idea of expression through movement, focusing instead on dance as an autonomous event,

Petit, not unlike the writer of fiction, uses the expressivity of the body to narrate the manifold tales of the human condition.⁵ A natural storyteller with a penchant for drama and theatricality, he has dedicated a substantial part of his career as a dancer and a choreographer to reinventing literary works in the idiom of choreography and *mise en scène*, with a special emphasis on the afflictions and ecstasies of the loving and desiring subject.

A fervent reader of Proust, whom he cites among his favourite authors alongside Marguerite Yourcenar and Michel Tournier, Petit adapted the seven-volume novel with the help of Françoise Sagan and the author Edmonde Charles-Roux, who is also responsible for several of his other ballet scripts adapted from literature, including *Nana* (1976) and *Le Guépard* (1995). From the outset, the choreographer decided against any principles of faithfulness to the source text, for he not only deemed a mimetic approach impossible for a work of such monumental length and complexity as the *Recherche*, but, more importantly, he considered faithfulness in an adaptation detrimental to creativity and artistic creation. Asked about his attitude to adapting Proust in an interview with Isabelle Aitinard, he declares quite simply: ‘Adapter, cela ne veut pas dire copier fidèlement... d’abord c’est impossible, et puis où serait la création?’⁶ Rather than offering a full-scale choreographic translation of the source text, his aim was to illustrate only a few selected aspects of the narrative. Dance moments, he explains, were to emerge from certain nodal points in the text, where the characters experience states of great emotional intensity, but also, inversely, from what remains most fugitive in the source text – a faint impression, a scent or a colour:

Mon propos n'a pas été de donner une version chorégraphique d'un ouvrage tel qu'*À la recherche du temps perdu* mais d'illustrer quelques aspects seulement du récit proustien.

Il me semblait que des 'moments' de danse pouvaient naître si, comme on pose le doigt sur un fil, on arrêta le déroulement du récit à l'instant où les personnages se trouvent au plus intense de ce qui les liait ou les opposait, ou, tout au contraire, à l'instant où se présente ce que ses pages offraient de plus impalpable, de plus fugitif, à peine une couleur, un parfum passager, des impressions en demi-teintes.⁷

Truthful to this idea of dance originating in selected moments of the source text, the two hour ballet distils what Petit calls a typically Proustian 'essence'.⁸ It brings into sharp focus some of the novel's most prominent concerns, yet also aims to communicate to a public not necessarily familiar with the text atmospheres and tonalities that are distinctive to Proust's novelistic universe. Rather than seeking proximity to the source text by means of direct equivalences or illustration, the choreography relies on correspondences in vision and style, an approach, which, as we will see, converges with Proust's own poetics which is based on principles of analogy.

The ballet's title *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur*, whilst underlining the deliberately fragmentary aspect of Petit's variations on the Proustian source text, also reflects a wider aesthetic based on rupture and revelation in tune with the concepts of intermittence and involuntary memory which Proust develops in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In the first instance, the title alludes to the eponymous section in *Sodome et Gomorrhe II* where the Narrator, unbuttoning his boots in his hotel room at Balbec,

is invaded by a sudden memory of his grandmother who died the previous year and, thanks to this embodied experience, for the first time, fully apprehends her death and his loss.⁹ The deep distress he experiences in this moment of intimacy is triggered, as are several other involuntary memories in the *Recherche*, by a movement of the body which, as a repository of memories and experiential inscriptions, can store and unleash moments of the past. Yet, *Les Intermittences du cœur* also evokes the overall title which Proust had planned for his novel in 1913, which, at that time, still consisted of two symmetrical parts entitled *Le Temps perdu* and *Le Temps retrouvé*. The ballet's title, then, alludes to the relationship between fragment (the adaptation) and whole (the source text) whilst equally laying emphasis on the body's capacity to uncover and express emotional states – a virtuality that is fundamental to the signifying practices of ballet and modern expressionist dance which both use the body as a vehicle for expressing internal feelings.¹⁰ It foregrounds the vacillations between joy and extreme distress to which the narrator is subjected in the novel, especially in the amorous relationships of his adult life.¹¹

Based on the poetics of intermittence, that is, on a concept that is quintessentially modern in its emphasis on the discontinuous and fragmented nature of human experience, Petit creates a ballet that uses the body's dramatic and theatrical potential to express the ontological condition of the modernist subject, who whilst being devoid of full self-knowledge and self-possession, is faced with the emotional shocks and myriad impressions afforded by the world of modernity. Transposing the bi-dimensional space of literature to the three-dimensional space of the ballet, the choreographer ventures to find what his mentor Serge Lifar has called 'équivalences émotionnelles' between the non-verbal language of dance and the verbal language of literature as regards their expression of emotion, affect and desire.¹²

Petit's and Proust's affinity with the theatre is foregrounded in the ballet's division into two acts, entitled 'Quelques images des paradis proustiens' and 'Quelques images de l'enfer proustien', a mirror-like diptych structured around the protagonist's intermittent experience of joy and suffering. The choreographer evocatively describes his work as '[u]n ballet en noir et blanc, qui nous plonge dans l'univers de Proust marqué par la malice opposée d'abord à l'amour, puis à la désagrégation et à la mort'.¹³ Thirteen tableaux loosely inspired by passages from the text – in the programme for the ballet, each is explicitly linked to a quote from the *Recherche* or from Proust's correspondence – propose a reading of Proust in motion and, in their accumulation, evoke some of the novel's most salient themes: the futility of society life and the vanity of human existence, the multiple delusions of the lover and the disquiet of jealousy, the gradual decomposition of relationships and the individual's self-destructive quest for pleasure.

Though in no ways constrained by the diegesis of the source text whose daring leaps between past and present would defy any attempts at a chronological rendering anyway, the succession of tableaux loosely follows the unfolding of the Proustian narrative from adolescence to mature life, and, in historical terms, from *Belle Époque* to Great War. The progression from adolescence to adulthood is subtly underscored in the choice of music: César Franck, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, and Gabriel Fauré, that is, musicians who were particularly admired by the young Proust, accompany the first part; the second, in addition, is orchestrated by Beethoven and Wagner, two composers preferred by Proust in his mature age. Throughout the work, different aesthetic languages, ranging from the symmetrical, harmonious compositions of traditional classical ballet to the angular, spasmodic movements of modern dance and from the anti-naturalist hand gestures of Japanese puppet theatre to the stylized 'dance

theatre' made famous by Pina Bausch, co-exist with one another in a polyphonic performance that echoes the discursive and stylistic diversities of the Proustian novel and highlights the generic hybridism of contemporary classical ballet.¹⁴ In the eclectic manner that is emblematic of his neo-classical style, Petit boldly juxtaposes tableaux with historicising sets and costumes with more contemporary scenes devoid of any illustrative décor and danced in the barest, flesh-coloured bodysuits. Narrative tableaux stand next to more abstract pieces, alluding perhaps to the move from the concrete (the domain of *fabula*) to the abstract (the essayistic and generalising drive inherent in the novel) and from the particular to the universal that characterizes Proust's writing, but also self-reflexively drawing attention to the cohabitation between referential and non-referential modes of representation in narrative ballet.¹⁵ As is characteristic for Petit, scenes with a theatrical potential are privileged and *pas de deux* which enhance characterisation and create a mood are at the centre of the choreography.

Proust ou les intermittences du cœur opens on a salon scene. In an elegant fin de siècle décor, dancers dressed in tailcoats and evening robes politely converse whilst a young singer gives a recital accompanied by the piano and a female soloist (Stéphanie Romberg interpreting Mme Verdurin) gracefully swirls around the group.¹⁶ The atmosphere is one of languorous stagnation. The dancers barely move, their rigid postures and stylised gestures alluding to the tedium and artificiality of society life. In a corner, motionless like an owl, sits a puppet-like, mustachioed Narrator, a grotesque caricature of Marcel Proust and a ponderous representation of the face- and body-less conscience that animates the *Recherche*. Dance editor Patricia Boccadoro, though highly complimentary about the rest of the ballet, declares this first tableau a 'little boring and almost static', and critics and readers of Proust will

doubtless share her frustration with what seems like an unduly clichéd and reductive (especially in its conflation between author and Narrator) first glimpse of the Proustian universe.¹⁷ Yet both the title, “‘Faire clan’ ou l’image du snobisme offensif selon Proust’, and the accompanying music, Saint-Saëns’s overture of *Le Carnaval des animaux* whose animalistic theme is subversively applied to society life, seem to hint at an ironic stance at work in this opening: with this fastidiously stale first tableau, Petit not only conveys Proust’s critique of the vanity and superficiality of *mondanité* – a crucial theme that spans his entire œuvre from *Les Plaisirs et les jours* to *À la recherche du temps perdu* –, he postulates a perception of Proust that the rest of the ballet will persistently revise in its multi-textured and multi-voiced dance language. For, in Petit’s ‘heaven and hell’ diptych, there cohabit two Prousts, the more conventional Proust of the *Belle Époque*, evoked in lavish group scenes – *tableaux vivants* reminiscent of the paintings of Manet and Monet tastefully recreated by set designer Bernard Michel and costume designer Luisa Spinelli –, and the modernist Proust of the Great War, rendered through at times opulently decadent, at others barrenly decor-less tableaux which combine the codified grammar of classical ballet with the more experimental syntax of modern dance.

The impressionist Proust celebrated by early critics and still heavily enshrined in public received ideas when the ballet premiered in 1974, who is evoked in act 1 quickly gives way to a far more disturbing author fascinated with the nature of evil and the transgression of moral laws in act 2. After the amorous torments of the Narrator and Albertine, and in parallel to them, of Swann and Odette, the two couples who dominate the first part, Petit focuses on the self-destructive passions of Baron de Charlus, and, in his orbit, the dyad Morel and Saint-Loup. In five tableaux, which take spectators from the *maison de femmes* at Maineville to Jupien’s male brothel and the

black-out tunnels of the Paris metro where, under the cover of darkness, Jupien's clients indulge in illicit caresses, Petit inflects, in an ardently sensual and at times brutally realistic choreography, the manifold facets of Proustian pleasure. His dance language, at its most beautiful precisely when it is unburdened by narrative content – the almost abstract tableau XI, 'Rencontre fortuite dans l'inconnu', performed by one female and three male dancers, is one of the most expressive moments in his choreography of passion – whilst capable of great delicacy, does not shy away from the grotesque and even the caricatured, especially in the characterisation of Charlus, which as in the source text, relies heavily on excess. The baron, who, as Volker Roloff has argued, is a figure of theatricality par excellence, crystallizes as the center of a sado-masochistic spectacle which mirrors Proust's own extensive recourse to theatrical metaphor and staging in his representation of homosexuality.¹⁸ The *mise en scène* evokes the metaphorical move from *paradis* to *enfer* through changes of colour symbolism, lighting and setting: the cool whites and blues that index the leisure culture of the *Belle Époque* in the first part give way to the sensual reds and blacks of temptation and desire, and the vast extensions of open nature and the sea are replaced by the enclosed spaces of salons, houses of pleasure and the claustrophobic world of urban transport. In tune, the pictorial references on which Petit draws throughout the ballet shift from *tableaux vivants* à la Renoir, Manet and Monet to the stark portraits of Parisian night and low life by post-impressionist painter Toulouse Lautrec: the prostitutes' loosely tied chignons, auburn hair and alluring velvet corsets in 'Monsieur de Charlus face à l'insaisissable' (a tableau which sees Morel let himself be seduced by the women of Maineville before offering his idol-like nudity to another man), are a direct *clin d'œil* to the bohemian world of Clichy and Montmartre captured in Lautrec's canvases.

With his bold, overtly sexualized choreography Petit gradually subverts the cliché of a Proust nostalgically enshrined in the world of nineteenth-century leisure and carefree upper-class existence which is sketched out in the first part. *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur* confronts spectators with a much darker, less easily commodifiable Proust, an author who spurns the strictures of literary decorum that still dominated French literature in the first decades of the twentieth century and ventures into territories hitherto unexplored in ‘high literature’: the sado-masochistic substrata of human passions, the self-destructive nature of desire and jealousy, the theatricality of evil.¹⁹ Long before Proust criticism discovered the ‘queer’ and heterotopic Proust celebrated today,²⁰ Petit dared to stage the novel’s disturbing underbelly of soldiers on leave performing as male gigolos and of upper class men gratifying transgressive to outright abject sexual phantasies. Contrary to the heterosexual conventions that still dominated classical ballet in the 1970s, one of the most arresting *pas de deux*, tableau XII entitled ‘Morel et Saint-Loup ou le combat des anges’, is danced by same-sex partners and devoted to the homosexual attraction between men. This highly sensual and unconventional *pas de deux*, a neo-classical bravura piece imbued with the elegant aesthetics of Greek sculpture, sees the ‘angel of whiteness’ Saint-Loup (interpreted by Mathieu Ganio), a war hero and symbol of masculine beauty, succumb to the manipulative charms of the ‘black angel’ Morel (interpreted by Stéphane Bullion). Unlike in the Maineville and the brothel scenes, Petit renounces any illustrative setting or narrative here, letting the two interlocked, sculptural bodies tell their own story of a destructive passion. The sparse modernist décor, consisting in essence of a mesh of cords, discreetly symbolizes Saint-Loup’s entrapment in the relationship with Morel. Placing sexuality and desire, and, above all, homosexual desire, at the centre of his performance, Petit signs a ‘ballet classique d’exception’²¹ which not only succeeds in

rendering the sexual fluidity and transgression of Proust's characters, but which defies the rigid gender ideologies of classical ballet. Just how controversial his reading of Proust, directly in the lineage of Beckett and Bataille,²² was when the ballet premiered in 1974 can be gathered from its predominantly hostile reception: manifestly shocked by the eroticized choreography and the centrality of the homosexual theme, audiences booed the ballet during the first performances at the Opéra de Monte-Carlo and at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. It was only in the late 1970s when *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur* went on tour in the more liberal New York that it became an instant international success, drawing crowds on Broadway and at the Metropolitan Opera.

The opposition between heaven and hell, especially mapped onto heterosexual love on the one hand and homosexual love on the other, around which the ballet revolves, might of course appear dangerously Manichean and strongly ideologically laden itself, but Petit makes sure to destabilize any reductive, binary readings through a system of mirroring effects between the two acts. In the ballet, as in the adapted text, the destinies and affective lives of individual characters echo one another and similarities between them are signalled by recurrent motifs in the choreographic language and the *mise en scene* (a translation into dance of Proust's leitmotif technique which was itself inspired by Wagner). The same stylized gestures of adulation (hand held to the heart, nervous, increasingly agitated whirling around the object of love), for instance, punctuate both the *pas de deux* between Swann and Odette in tableau IV (“‘Faire catleya’ ou les métaphores de la passion”) and Charlus and Morel in tableau VIII (‘Monsieur de Charlus face à l’insaisissable’), two tableaux which occupy symmetrical places in the diptych. Similarly, the sequence of steps and the arm movements (the young woman seeks to escape her lover in a series of quick

pointes, only to be recaptured by her partner who holds her tightly by the waist) in tableau VII (“La regarder dormir” ou la réalité ennemie’), an arresting *pas de deux* on the Narrator’s jealous obsession with his captive Albertine, echo those of tableau IV, thus creating a choreographic link between the amorous torments of Swann and those of the Narrator. In turn, the motif of Albertine rolling from the body of her jealous lover in ‘La regarder dormir’ is repeated in a variation in the brothel scene where Charlus is brutally rolled around the stage by his torturers. The same choreographic composition, finally, links tableaux IV, V and VIII where the lover (in turn Swann, the Narrator and Charlus) observes with increasing disquiet the sexual advances the object of his love makes to another person (Odette flirting suggestively with three young men, Albertine languorously dancing with Andrée, Morel offering himself to another man). As in the source text, this system of repetitions, echoes and variations on a common motif draws attention to similarities in the condition of the lover independently of his or her sexual orientation, age or social class. Concerned with essences, that is, with the general behind the particular and with the deeper laws behind surface realities, Petit’s choreography x-rays the gestures, gazes and postures of the lover with a view to creating a wider topography of passion through the language of dance. With these ‘fragments of the lover’s gestures’, not dissimilar to Roland Barthes’s *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* dating equally from the 1970s or to the experiments of European independent cinema of the 1980s, for instance Chantal Akerman’s *Toute une nuit* (1982), which likewise proposes a grammar of love in movement, Petit forges a highly expressive and supple dance language which seeks to capture affect and emotion through the moving and gesturing body.²³ He signs a ballet of great dramatic and emotive intensity which fulfils his own declared wider purpose of ‘faire danser les sentiments.’²⁴

The ballet's kinesthetic rendering of *À la recherche du temps perdu* throws into sharp relief the careful attention paid to the body in motion in the adapted text and the precision and graphic detail with which the author describes the gestures, movements and body language of his characters. Whilst Proust criticism has insisted on the extraordinary linguistic creativity at work in the *Recherche* – that is, the *mise en scene* of language as a mirror of interiority, the sustained attention to the social and professional aspects of language and the dissection of accents, verbal idiosyncrasies and affectations – his equally detailed attentiveness to gesture and bodily movement is perhaps less well documented.²⁵ Proust not only shows an acute interest in the social, cultural and performative aspects of language, he is equally concerned with the expressive function of the body as an instrument of identity construction and a transmitter of subjectivities. The *Recherche* contains a vast 'dictionary of gestures',²⁶ which the Narrator progressively learns to decipher on his semiotic journey from naivety to initiation. Revealingly, in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, Proust draws an analogy between his *dramatis personae* and a ballet troop when he likens the individualising footsteps of several members of the Guermantes family to a dance choreography:

Aussi particularisés que le geste mécanique de Saint-Loup étaient les entrechats compliqués et rapides (jugés ridicules par M. de Chalus) du marquis de Fierbois, les pas graves et mesurés du prince de Guermantes. Mais il est impossible de décrire ici la richesse de cette chorégraphie des Guermantes à cause de l'étendue même du corps de ballet. (*RTP*, II, 738)

Metaphors and similes invoking ballet and dance are frequent in the *Recherche* as are scenes which show a distinct concern for choreography and a

detailed attention to the body in motion. The episode in *Le Côté de Guermantes* where Saint-Loup, jealous of the dancer to whom Rachel has made advances, slaps a journalist, is a case in point (II, 475-479). Both the dancer's and Saint-Loup's hand movements are described as elements in a semiotics of dance. Whilst the professional dancer's gestures are part of a wider choreography, those of Saint-Loup are assimilated into the world of music and the ballet through the metaphor of the conductor: his hand is said to lash out 'sans plus de transition que, sur un simple geste d'archet, dans une symphonie ou un ballet' (II, 478). Other noteworthy scenes that draw on dance and choreography are the encounter between Jupien and Charlus in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I*, famously metaphorized by Proust as the bumblebee dancing around the orchid waiting to be fertilized, and staged like a nineteenth-century vaudeville (III, 6-9). Or, more literally, the much commented 'dance contre seins' between Andrée and Albertine at the Balbec casino, which for the first time arouses the Narrator's doubts as to Albertine's sexual preferences (III, 91). One must of course also mention the strikingly choreographed scene at Doncières where Saint-Loup almost weightlessly climbs over the wall seats of a restaurant to bring the chilly Narrator the Prince de Foix's coat. The insistence on the grace and suppleness of his movements, the attributes 'significatif et limpide' (II, 707) to describe his body, and the diners' entranced applause as he accomplishes his balancing act, make the young man's performance appear like a particularly virtuoso dance solo (II, 704-708).

More than mere illustrations of Proust's talent for and delight in choreography and *mise en scène*, scenes like the ones just cited hint at a close semantic connection between dance and sexuality, especially homosexuality, in the novel. Indeed, dance in the text is often linked to illicit sexual adventures as Charlus rightly suspects when his lover Morel pretexts algebra or dance lessons to justify his nightly escapades:

C'était peut-être une coucherie avec une femme, ou, si Morel cherchait à gagner de l'argent par des moyens louches et s'était affilié à la police secrète, une expédition avec des agents de la sûreté, et qui sait ? pis encore, l'attente d'un gigolo dont on pourra avoir besoin dans une maison de prostitution. '[...] Alors pourquoi ne l'étudies-tu pas plutôt chez moi où tu es tellement plus confortablement?]' aurait pu répondre M. de Charlus, mais il s'en gardait bien, sachant qu'aussitôt, gardant seulement le même caractère nécessaire de réserver les heures du soir, le cours d'algèbre imaginé se fût changé immédiatement en une obligatoire leçon de danse ou de dessin. (III, 668-669)

Petit exploits and expands on this choreographic dimension of the Proustian novel in his ballet, insisting in particular on the nexus around dance, sensuality and sexuality that emerges in the source text. Yet, rather than contenting himself with adapting scenes from the *Recherche* that are eminently choreographic – the 'dance du bourdon' would have been an obvious case in point – , he extends and, to a certain extent, transcends the adapted text by forging his own choreographic language of passion, a language that is imminently recognisable as 'Petit' signature style and inscribes itself in the choreographer's long bibliography of works centered in desire and amorous suffering, yet also resonates with Proust's semiotics of love.

A brief analysis of tableau VII, "“La regarder dormir” ou la réalité ennemie", will provide insight into the diversified syntax of human affect offered in *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur*. Occupying a crucial position within the ballet's asymmetrical structure of thirteen tableaux, this tableau acts as a hinge point between

the heaven and hell parts of the diptych. It transposes into motion the Narrator's jealous obsession with Albertine, whom he holds as a captive in the parental flat. In the programme for the ballet, the following passage from *La Prisonnière* is cited as a springboard from which the choreography was born:

Et je me rendais compte qu'Albertine n'était pas même pour moi [...] la merveilleuse captive dont j'avais cru enrichir ma demeure [...]; m'invitant, sous une forme pressante, cruelle et sans issue, à la recherche du passé, elle était plutôt comme une grande déesse du Temps. (III, 888)

Set to César Franck's *Psyché* and Camille Saint-Saëns's *Symphonie n° 3 avec orgue*, the tableau begins with the Narrator (interpreted by Hervé Moreau) turning around the seemingly sleeping Albertine (who is draped under a long, white curtain) in slow, almost gymnastic movements and pirouettes. A black curtain ominously traverses the stage shrouding the resting young woman as in a death cloud. Lifted to her feet by her lover, Albertine (interpreted by Eleonora Abbagnato) and the Narrator begin a *pas de deux* which expressively translates into dance the young man's obsession with and morbid control over the object of his love. In a performance laden with references to the Pygmalion myth, Moreau bends, uplifts, and turns his partner like a lifeless puppet. Becoming more animated, the young woman, whose facial gestures and movements express a deep emotional and physical fatigue, repeatedly seeks to take flight, but is held back by her lover who, stretched out on the ground, clings onto her legs and, back in upright position, bars her way. A series of disharmonious lifts, during which the young woman struggles to break away from her partner, kinesthetically translate the tension in the couple and index Albertine's desire for freedom. In a particularly

arresting sequence the Narrator auscultates his lover's breath as if he wanted to extract secrets from the depth of her body and rolls her across the stage. The *pas de deux* ends on a coda during which the partners for the first time seem to be in unison, their movements perfectly harmonized. Yet a darker tone in the music and the male dancer's falling back into his gestures of control remind us that this brief moment of happiness is fragile and intermittent. Like a demiurge, Hervé Moreau summons back the fleeting Eleonora Abbagnato who returns to him in a quick succession of backwards point steps, grasps her by the neck and lays her to sleep. As his outstretched arm points to his creature and creation, the curtain falls, engulfing the immobile, death-like young woman. With its abrupt changes of mood and rhythm, its suggestive use of simple props (the black and white curtains) and lighting, its perfect correlation with the music and, above all, the expressiveness of the dancers' bodies and faces, this *pas de deux*, more viscerally perhaps than words, evokes the torment of a love that has turned obsessional and the destructiveness of a relationship based on possessiveness. The lover's anxious desire to know fully and to control his object of love must remain in vain for, as Petit cites in the programme, 'Hélas! Albertine était plusieurs personnes!'

The ballet ends on a grand finale, tableau XIII entitled "'Cette idée de la mort...' où le monde apparaît au narrateur comme derrière 'une porte funéraire'", inspired by the last two parts of *Le Temps retrouvé*, 'L'Adoration perpétuelle' and 'Le Bal de têtes'. The Duchesse de Guermantes (interpreted by Stéphanie Romberg), in elegant evening attire, self-importantly wanders in front of an oversized mirror. As in the opening tableau, with which this last salon scene forms a diptych, the Narrator sits motionless by the side of the stage. To the sombre tones of *Rienzi*, Wagner's 1842 opera on a failed bourgeois revolution, a group of dancers enter the stage with

mechanical, robotic movements and gestures. The musical theme – the opera ends on the burning of the Capitol where Rienzi and a few followers have made a last stand – enhanced by dramatic light and smoke effects, designates this scene as a *Götterdämmerung*, an apocalyptic last rite performed by the former ‘gods’ of Parisian society. With their mask-like white figures and their grimed black eyes and mouths, the dancers are ciphers of mortality, phantoms of a world that is no more. In this interpretation of Proust’s famous ‘Bal de têtes’, which, interestingly, is placed before ‘L’Adoration perpétuelle’, Petit fully exploits the marked theatricality of the source text whose extended metaphor around masking, inauthenticity and ageing becomes a springboard for this grotesque choreography of death. His rendering of the epiphany-like moments of *mémoire involontaire* from the ‘Adoration perpétuelle’, inversely, in a clever *mise en abîme*, feeds on the very fabric of the ballet, key scenes of which are re-enacted in quick succession: Odette and Swann appear for a brief *pas de deux*, the Narrator and Albertine iterate a few moves from “‘La regarder dormir’”, a tortured Charlus rolls over the stage, and Morel and Saint-Loup perform a short extract of their combat of the angels. In this ‘revue’ like passing of highlights from the ballet, Petit, playing once again on the relation between fragment and whole, that is, between the ballet and its constitutive parts and, by analogy, that of the source text and its adaptation, substitutes vignettes from the performance for the mental images that unravel before the Narrator’s inner eye in the novel. The Narrator’s inner recall is thus aligned with the situation of spectatorship experienced by the audience. The narrative circle of both the ballet and its source text closes in on itself in the last scene which sees the *corps de ballet* gather behind the Proust look-alike whose arms are slowly lifted by the Duchess until they stretch out to the audience in a gesture of offering: the Narrator has finally become the author of the work we have just enjoyed in transmuted

form; memory and experience have been moulded into fiction and dance respectively; contingency and death are overcome in the transcendence of creation.

How then, in conclusion, can one conceptualize the transmutation from literature into dance and from words into motion that is operated in Petit's ballet? Contemporary dance scholarship, drawing extensively on structuralist and post-structuralist criticism, systematically enquires into the relation between dance and other signifying systems, most importantly language. In her ground-breaking work *Reading Dancing*, Susan Leigh Foster approaches dancing as a system of signs: a 'language' with its own style, vocabulary and syntax, , and a 'text' whose codes, conventions and signifying practices can be analysed in the same ways a literary critic would analyse a work of fiction.²⁷ Her approach is representative for a wider tendency in dance studies to use semiology and literary criticism to decode dance practices and create a theory of dance analysis.²⁸ If we accept that dance is a language, then translation as the practice of passing from one language into another (or, to use a term by Genette, as a form of transtextuality²⁹), can be invoked to reflect further on what is at stake when a verbal medium is adapted into a non verbal one. In his seminal book on translation, *L'Epreuve de l'étranger*, Antoine Berman, drawing attention to the regenerative, enhancing quality of translation, describes the relationship between original and translation in terms of reconfiguration and revelation: 'La traduction fait pivoter l'œuvre, révèle d'elle un autre *versant*'.³⁰ A translation, he argues, in 'toppling over' (*faire basculer*) the original, has the capacity to make visible aspects of the source text that may have been hidden in the original. This appraisal of the target text which goes beyond the more traditional assessment of translation (and, by extension, adaptation) as a system of losses and gains, offers an interesting perspective on the kinesthetic translation of the *Recherche* that is effected in *Proust ou les intermittences*

du cœur. One of the most intermedial of contemporary choreographers, as we have attempted to show, Petit brings to the fore aspects of the source text which are central to Proust's aesthetics, but which tend to be neglected or remain latent in Proust criticism: the author's acute attention to gesture and bodily movement as mirrors of interiority and subjectivity, his sophisticated choreographies of bodies in motion, his talent and penchant for *mise en scène*. Petit's highly diversified, but above all theatrical dance language, helps to appreciate better the stark theatricality of the Proustian novel, most evident in the staging of homosexual rituals of pleasure and profanation such as the Montjouvain episode in *Du Côté de chez Swann* (I, 157-163) and the brothel scene in *Le Temps retrouvé* (IV, 393-408).³¹ In dwelling on the novel's darker, more transgressive aspects, especially as regards the treatment of sexuality and desire, the ballet quite literally unsettled public perceptions of the source text when it was first performed in 1974.

It could be argued more generally that, in his transposition from the semiotics of the written text to the language of dance, Petit performs a translational process which resonates heavily with Proust's own notion of translation as, in essence, creation. The task of the artist, Proust famously declares in *Le Temps retrouvé*, is to translate the subjective and sentimental dimensions of human perception and experience. The process whereby lived experience can be transmuted into art, he stipulates, is one of metaphor, the joining together of two different objects with a view to extracting their common essence (RTP, IV, 468-469). Contrary to documentary realism, which can only describe the surface of things, the analogous process that is operated by metaphor (Proust speaks of the 'miracle d'une analogie' in the context of involuntary memory which, like metaphor, is based on coincidence and helps overcome the contingency of time³²) allows the artist to go beyond the simple

mimesis straight to the essence of things and of being. It is important to understand here, that essence for Proust, as explains Edward Bizub, is a phenomenon of in-between-ness: it is born in the interstices between two objects or ideas which reveal their communality through their relationship with one another.³³ Roland Petit's approach in *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur*, unburdened by restrictive principles of faithfulness, evinces a strong affinity with Proust's ideas on artistic transmutation. Scents, fugitive moments, colours – that most elusive part of the novel which, as we have seen, Petit himself designates as a certain Proustian 'essence' he sets out to extract – are recreated in a densely textured and highly theatrical dance performance that brings the choreographer's subjectivity into resonance with the text to be adapted. In a process of creative dialogue between the choreographer and his source, emotion is transmuted into motion. With *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur* ballet confirms its status as what Mallarmé, one of the earliest commentators on modern dance, highlighting the medium's inter-artistic nature, has called 'la forme théâtrale de poésie par excellence'.³⁴

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¹ There is however a noteworthy new trend of ballet adaptation studies in France and Italy. For recent works see *Pas de mots, de la littérature à la danse*, ed. by Laura Colombo and Stefano Genetti (Paris: Hermann, 2010) and Matthieu Vernet, 'Corps et intertexte: Preljocaj et la danse révélée', *Fabula, Atelier de théorie littéraire: Intertextualité* [accessed 5 January 2011].

² Volker Schlöndorff's *Un Amour de Swann* was released in 1984, followed by Raoul Ruiz's *Le Temps retrouvé* in 1999 and Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* in 2000. For a discussion of the various adaptations of Proust's novel and of the author's legacy in twentieth-century cinema see Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid, *Proust at the Movies* (London: Ashgate, 2005).

³ As explains Sylvie Jacq-Mioche, from the 1960s onwards, literary adaptations in France were mainly the work of foreign choreographers (MacMillan, Neumeier, Noureev), with the exception of Roland Petit who continued to produce adaptations in spite of the changing fashion in dance culture. See 'Présence de la littérature dans le répertoire de l'Opéra de Paris du XIX^e siècle à nos jours', in *Pas de mots*, ed. by Colombo and Genetti, pp. 51-61 (53-54).

⁴ Petit cited by Gerard Mannoni in *L'Avant-Scène Ballet/Danse - Roland Petit* (1984), p. 43.

⁵ For an outline of dance history in the twentieth century and a detailed reading of the dance philosophy and representational codes of objectivist dance see Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 145-85.

⁶ I. Aitinard, 'Roland Petit se met en quatre', *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 24 November 1988.

⁷ Petit cited in *Les Intermittences du cœur, hommage à Proust* (Paris: Presses I.C.C., 1974), p. 9.

⁸ Petit cited in Aitinard, 'Roland Petit se met en quatre'.

⁹ *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1987-89), III, 152-60 (hereafter *RTP*).

¹⁰ In a recent work, dance scholar Christina Thurner has questioned the perception of dance as a universal language of feelings which speaks to audiences, showing that the myth of dance's immediacy is on the contrary a discursive construction which can be traced in texts on dance from 1700 to 1900 and which continues to exist in the present. See *Beredete Körper – bewegte Seelen. Zum Diskurs der doppelten Bewegung in Tanztexten* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).

¹¹ Cf. Charles-Roux, 'Variations sur des thèmes proustiens', p. 34: 'C'est pour souligner l'aspect volontairement fragmentaire de ces variations sur des thèmes proustiens qu'elles sont rassemblées sous le titre *Les Intermittences du cœur*. Il a l'avantage de mettre en évidence l'incessante oscillation qu'endurait le narrateur soumis à des états successifs de bonheur et de malheur extrêmes'.

¹² S. Lifar, *Le Livre de la danse* (Paris: Editions du Journal musical français, 1954), p. 47.

¹³ Cited in Claude Ollivier, 'Intermittences du cœur', *Radio Notre Dame*, 27 May 2009.

¹⁴ Like his contemporaries John Neumeier and Maurice Béjart, in his ballets, Petit draws on a wide range of dance languages ranging from modern dance to folklore and acrobatics.

¹⁵ Foster argues that most narrative ballets (she uses the term 'story ballets') combine the modes of imitation and reflection. She defines *imitation* as a representational mode which seeks to reproduce an entity in the world through movement; *reflection*, by contrast, 'makes exclusive reference to the performance of movement and only tangentially alludes to other events in the world'. See *Reading Dancing*, pp. 65-69 (66).

¹⁶ This article is based on a performance of *Proust ou les intermittences du cœur* at the Palais Garnier, recorded in March 2007 and available on DVD (Bel Air Classiques).

¹⁷ P. Boccadoro, 'Proust According to Roland Petit', *CultureKiosque*, 19 April 2007.

¹⁸ See V. Roloff, 'Theater und Theatralisierung des Romans in Prousts *À la recherche du temps perdu*', *Proustiana XII/XIII*, Marcel Proust Gesellschaft Köln, 1993, 4-12 (p. 8).

¹⁹ For a reading of the theatricality of evil in the published text see Hugo Azérad, *L'Univers constellé de Proust, Joyce et Faulkner: le concept de l'épiphanie dans l'esthétique du modernisme* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 299-326 and Pedro Kadivar, *Marcel Proust ou esthétique de l'entre-deux. Poétique de la représentation dans À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 289-295.

²⁰ For changes in the reception of Proust see my 'La Réception de Proust au Royaume-Uni', *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, 57 (2005), 313-327.

²¹ Christine Sanchez, 'Proust ou les intermittences du cœur par Roland Petit au Palais Garnier', *Artistik Rezo*, 29 May 2009.

²² Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York : Grove Press, 1931); Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), chapter 'Proust', pp. 141-157.

²³ For a theorisation of gesture and the moving body in different cultural practices see Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment : Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009) and *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁴ Petit cited by Delphine Goater, 'Proust ou les intermittences du cœur: À l'ombre des tourments', *ResMusica.com*, 1 June 2009.

²⁵ For Proust the linguist, see for instance Jean-Yves Tadié, *Proust et le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), chapter VI, 'Le Monde du langage'; Sylvie Pierron, *Ce beau français un peu individuel: Proust et la langue* (Saint-Denis: PUV, 2005); and, from a comparative perspective, Sarah Tribout-Joseph, *Proust and Joyce in Dialogue* (Oxford: Legenda, 2008).

²⁶ The Narrator refers to the 'petit dictionnaire de civilité' with which he (mis)interprets Gilberte's obscene gesture at Tansonville (*RTP*, I, 139-140).

²⁷ Foster, *Reading Dancing*.

²⁸ For the question of dance's relationship to language and for textual conceptualisations of dance see also two collective volumes which address current methodological debates in dance studies and map out some of its most fruitful areas of enquiry: Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, eds., *Bodies of the Text. Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) and Gay Morris, ed., *Moving Words. Rewriting Dance* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁹ G. Genette, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

³⁰ A. Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger: culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 20.

³¹ For a reading of theatrical representation in these scenes see Kadivar, *Marcel Proust ou esthétique de l'entre-deux*, pp. 287-295.

³² *RTP*, IV, 450.

³³ E. Bizub, *La Venise intérieure: Proust et la poétique de la traduction* (Boudry-Neuchatel: de la Baconnière, 1991), p. 113.

³⁴ ‘Considérations sur l’art du ballet et la Loë Fuller’, in Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Pléiade’, 2003), II, pp. 312-314 (313).