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Human Sacrifice as Explained through Three Performances
of The Rite of Spring

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Vaslav Nijinsky, born March 12th 1889, was considered to be the greatest male dancer of his time, and some would argue, the best the world has ever known (Au 84). Nijinsky, originating from Russia, became internationally well known due to his work in the Ballets Russes, where his gravity defying leaps were showcased to the people of Paris and London (Au 73). Besides being a famed performer, Nijinsky is also remembered for his few, but wildly famous ballets that he performed and choreographed himself. Out of the four ballets he created, the two most iconic are *L'après-midi d'un Faune (The Afternoon of a Faun)* (Nijinsky 1912) and *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)* (Nijinsky 1913): both of which were wildly controversial. *L'après-midi d'un Faune* was considered scandalous due to its overtly sexual nature, but this paled in comparison to the riots that the performance of *Le Sacre du Printemps* created (Dance Perspectives Foundation 354). Audiences in 1913 were enormously confused by the thematic exploration of pagan rites and the jarring quality of the movements and music, as nothing like *Le Sacre du Printemps* had been seen or heard before.

The reaction against the ballet was fierce, it was forcibly forgotten, and became something of an urban legend that contemporary choreographers would seek to re-create, hoping to inspire the same sort of riotous emotion from their audience (Chua 59). It was not until 1987 that the Joffrey ballet, under the guidance, research, and reconstruction capabilities of Millicent Hodson, recreated the forgotten ballet as it was performed in 1913. Since then, numerous choreographers have interpreted *The Rite of Spring* and the meaning behind the quintessential theme of the ballet: human sacrifice. Through Joffrey Ballet's "faithful" re-creation, Pina Bausch's modern dance re-creation, and the SITI Company with Bill T. Jones' "abstract" re-creation of *The Rite of Spring*, the idea of sacrifice or the question of what merits sacrifice is treated differently

depending on the context of the time. From pagan motifs to a feminist agenda, it's clear that though the theme of sacrifice runs parallel in each ballet, how this theme is treated is vastly different. Through comparison and analysis of these three performances, this paper will outline how time and contemporary culture can effect the portrayal of sacrifice is performed in *The Rite of Spring*.

The idea of human sacrifice is typically thought of as the ritualistic killing of another person to appease a greater being or deity: a practice that is arcane with no place in modern society. However, human sacrifice as a concept is ancient. The earliest recorded occurrences of the act took place before the first century of the Common Era (CE). In particular, the Moche societies were famous for their use of human sacrifice, and its cultural significance in their art. Dr. Steve Bourget, Director of Scientific Research at the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva has presented many such artifacts from the Moche in his book "Sex, Death, and Sacrifice in Moche Religion and Visual Culture." Bourget has also pointed out the link between sex, women, and children in ritualistic sacrifice by stating "by bringing children into the world, women bring at the same time death itself," in that by bringing new life into the world, it necessitates that there is also more death. There are also references to certain animals like the owl, the snake, or the fox that are linked with the rites of human sacrifice in their nocturnal and predatory manner, which leads to grotesque images of snakes biting the glans of a penis to symbolize a man at the end of a rope or noose, and images of owls with erect penises bursting from their heads within Moche art. While these ideas without any interpretation seem out of place in a modern context, if one is able to overlook the manifestation of these ideas into violent images, one can see that the idea of sacrifice could apply to a modern society in that there is still the same link between death and the female form. Perhaps the only difference between then and now is that sacrifice in a modern context is no longer

considered as violent, but is still linked to womanhood, children, and sex, even if there is an absence of ritualistic murder or violence.¹

These two ideas of the role of women within sacrifice and animal iconography relate the most to Nijinsky's creation of *The Rite of Spring* not only because the sacrifice is a young woman, but also because throughout the famous sacrificial dance, there are references to the night, figures clothed in animal pelts that menacingly circling the sacrifice, and way in which the young woman dies, by dancing to death through jumping and elevating off the floor. As a reproduction, the Joffrey Ballet's interpretation of Nijinsky's original *The Rite of Spring* has the most in common with the pagan ideals of the Moche and shows human sacrifice in the context that most people understand the act to be (Smith 149).

Since the people shown in *The Rite of Spring* are an imaginary group and pray to an unnamed pagan God, there are many striking similarities between fiction and history in their worship of their gods. For instance, Jarilo, the Slavic god of spring and fertility, is the closest to the description of the god in *The Rite of Spring* because of his mythological background. Ironically, in the myth of Jarilo, after committing adultery, his children come to kill him as retribution. It is described as a ritualistic killing, after which his wife, the God of Death, uses the remains of Jarilo's body to build a new house (Slavic Oral Tradition). In this myth, one sees the metaphor of Jarilo's suffering as necessary to create the new foundations for his family to live on, which can be paralleled by the young woman who dies so that spring will return to her clan. In this example, it is important to note that consent is not necessary for this kind of sacrifice, since ultimately it is seen as a religious requirement. A young woman is chosen to be a sacrifice to a

¹. See Steve Bourget, pages 95–99.

God that will hopefully bring back spring; hence the title, but there are still many more complexities to this singular representation of a violent act.

Historically, the kind of human sacrifice depicted in this performance, is entirely dependent on what other humans deemed as necessary, since, according to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*², it is not common practice to sacrifice a human to appease Jarilo, or any of the other pagan Gods besides Perun, the highest God in the Slavic pantheon (Chronieler). Though *The Rite of Spring* is hardly a completely accurate representation of a society that existed in the first century CE, the narrative of the original Rite of Spring was very adept in capturing the emotions of being chosen to do a task that is both for the greater good, and fatal for the participant. As the young women all dance in a circle, Nijinsky wants to make clear to all that it is by either divine intervention or misfortune that a single, scared face is chosen out of a crowd of people that look exactly the same. Unlike other reproductions of this scene, the original is the only one that depicts the sacrifice as an act by, and for, the divine. Ultimately besides all the ritualistic motifs and garb, there is a very humanistic characteristic to the idea of sacrifice: the idea of giving up one human's life so that the lives of other humans may live on (Smith 199). It is perhaps this human characteristic of sacrifice that has allowed *The Rite of Spring* to be reborn many times after its resurrection. By using human sacrifice as a tool, Nijinsky was able to show the imperfections of human nature in the ideals of life and by asking the question: "Who is permitted to live?" There was no reason other than fate that one woman was sacrificed over another, it was simply the choice of the people that decided that a sacrifice was necessary at all.

². This text is responsible for the foundation of the modern understanding of the early history of the eastern Slavs.

In 1975, 63 years after the creation of the original production of *The Rite of Spring*, German born choreographer Pina Bausch recreated the infamous sacrifice with a feminist twist (Tashiro). In Bausch's production, there is less historical context in terms of a time period or a narrative since all women and men are dressed in simple clothing that is unremarkable, and there isn't much material in the set for the stage, which ironically, is one of the more iconic features of this performance. Instead of the large painted backgrounds and props (by Pablo Picasso, no less) that one finds in Nijinsky's version; there is a seemingly endless darkness behind the dancers and dirt under their feet rather than a stage (Bausch). During the time of its release, Bausch's retelling of *The Rite of Spring* was considered controversial for many reasons, which included having the floor covered in peat, an extremely fertile type of dirt. Another reason this performance is considered to be one of the best productions of *The Rite of Spring* is because the story is being told from the perspective of the victim, creating a connection between the sacrificial act and the person being sacrificed so that the audience can identify more easily with the story than in Nijinsky's production (Tashiro). The woman being sacrificed in this production is being sacrificed to what is essentially the patriarchy, which is where Bausch's feminist agenda is expressed. Women dressed in white, dancing dreamily on soil until men in black come to interrupt; Bausch paints a picture that is equal parts primal as it is modern in its intention. There is a strong tension between the animalistic qualities of fear and desire, even if the context itself is modern. The same message of sacrifice being a decision made for the people from the original production of *The Rite of Spring* is still prevalent, as well as the idea of divine intervention, which is a point of interest considering Bausch never saw the re-creation of the original piece before creating her own.

In the choosing ceremony that takes place before the sacrificial dance, there is an uncomfortable feeling of not only fear, but also that no potential candidate is strong enough to be

the woman in the red dress (i.e., the sacrifice). Instead of the sacrifice being chosen at random through, a somewhat dubious ritualistic process, Bausch has the women themselves decide who is to be the sacrifice for the men. For many minutes woman after woman can't bring themselves to even touch the red dress, let alone have one of the men touch them, a metaphor for the heavy burden that the chosen one must carry. Once a woman is brave enough to take up the task, the narrative takes a highly sexual turn as the women and men create the images of mid-coital thrashing and a man fully undresses the chosen woman before putting her in the sheer red dress. As she runs down stage, breasts fully exposed, the man who dressed her, like a predator, never lets his gaze leave her (Bausch).

The link between sex and sacrifice is well established, but one hardly ever thinks of human sacrifice and sex in the contemporary way Bausch so eloquently describes, as a woman performing with her body for the sake of the male gaze. In a sense, not much differs from Nijinsky and Bausch's portrayal of sacrifice besides its atheistic treatment, the time period, and its intended purpose. In both, we see a woman exhaust herself to death for a cause that is larger than herself for the sake of her people. Perhaps the most striking difference between Nijinsky's interpretation of sacrifice and Bausch's is that at the end of Nijinsky's production, the body of the girl is raised up by her people to signify either gratitude for the girl, or to signify her journey up to the gods, but at the end of Bausch's production, the woman lies lifeless on the earth while the others do nothing to recognize her efforts (Joffrey). This poses the question of if there is something barbaric about human nature if even a contemporary society could passively condone the supposedly appalling act of human sacrifice.

A human sacrifice for the male gaze is one way the archaic act still exists within the present day, but Bill T. Jones poses another way: human sacrifice in military service. Perhaps the

most unconventional approach to *The Rite of Spring*, Jones' production focuses very little on the narrative of the ballet and chooses instead to focus on the implications of the audience's reaction to the material, and the implications that *The Rite of Spring* had as a cultural movement. Jones' production chooses to acknowledge *The Rite of Spring* as both a past event and a current one by blurring the lines between singular moments and time as a linear flowing entity (Bogart in *Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company & SITI Company: A Rite*). By choosing to address the concept of time in this manner the audience is presented with the interesting duality of the act of sacrifice being both in the past and ongoing, as shown in the behavior of the character of the war veteran. This ex-soldier has already made a sacrifice by choosing to fight for his country, but the sacrifice of his mind at the horrors of war is continuous, which ultimately leads to the sacrifice of others in the massacre he instigates at the end of the show. In this performance, Jones highlights the cyclical nature of sacrifice that both Bausch and Nijinsky hinted at, but did not so explicitly point out. Nijinsky's use of human sacrifice hinted that in more years to come, other women could be sacrificed for spring to return, while Bausch's use of the idea implied that no matter how many sacrifices might be made, the thirst for more is always prevalent in those who benefit from the sacrifices of others. The connection between war and human sacrifice is one that is ongoing and ever-present, as seen when soldiers sacrifice their lives either by dying during battle or by being captured and subsequently "utilized." Though Jones takes the connection to the times of World War I, one is still able to see the connections to both the past and the present.

The idea of human sacrifice usually refers to a physical death; one where the body is either exhausted or punished until broken, but there is more to be said about the idea of sacrificing an individual's humanity. Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher, was famous for his ideas that the core of the human essence was based in the mind, and that the mind and the body are two

separate entities. Ultimately, it is the body that relies on the mind because the mind does not require a body to prove its existence (Descartes 19). Other thinkers such as Plato and Boethius have had similar ideas that the core of being human and existing comes from the ability to think, which makes the greatest form of human sacrifice, in the eyes of these philosophers, losing one's mind. Shellshock and post-traumatic stress disorders were all too common during the time of World War I, which demonstrates another level of sacrifice that one does not normally think about. One could even argue that losing one's mind and living as just a body waiting for death is worse than dying quickly with one's mind intact. Jones' portrayal of human sacrifice is perhaps more tragic because the audience isn't able to see the actual war that left the soldier's mind in pieces, but rather the consequences of the event, which leaves the audience left to imagine what kind of trauma could break a mind so thoroughly. Through Jones' rendition of human sacrifice, one is also able to make the connection between ritual and war by simply showing the relationship between the repetition of famous Stravinsky songs from *The Rite of Spring*, and the murdering of innocents as a result (Bogart in *Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Dance Company & SITI Company: A Rite*).

As is expected of a controversial topic, human sacrifice has many different interpretations both in terms of its deplorability, and the strange fascination and admiration that we attribute to those who are willing to pay the ultimate price for what they believe in. Classically barbaric, as showcased in the Joffrey Ballet's performance, *The Rite of Spring* has the capabilities to be taken at face value. The story of a young woman caught up in a culture that sees her death as a necessity, as interpreted by a contemporary western audience is understandably, a calculated show of barbarianism. Bausch's production shifted the focus to explore the importance of whom the sacrifice satisfies in return for the suffering of others. In Bausch's feminist view on *The Rite of Spring*, the audience is shown a more humanized, but no less barbaric, version of human sacrifice

where the women are the victims and the men play the gods. Although Bausch's portrayal of the sacrifice was more emotionally charged than in other performances, Bill T. Jones shows how the idea of human sacrifice can take shape in more abstract terms. Instead of the sacrifice being one of a life taken, it is instead the sacrifice of a man's humanity. Through these three interpretations of the meaning of human sacrifice, one is able to see not only how broad the scope of what can be sacrificed is, but also how it is possible for an act of human sacrifice to exist in society today. Each different representation emphasized different aspects of the same act, but when these three points of view are placed together, one can see that the idea of human sacrifice is not just for barbarians or archaic rituals, rather, it is a complex and nuanced act of selflessness for either an individual or social cause.

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