

The Diaries of Waslaw Nijinsky and the Absence of the Work

Peter Alois Orte

In Maurice Blanchot's *l'Espace littéraire*¹ literature is approached less as a subject of study than as a matter of pure passionate experience. The text begins with an essay entitled *La solitude essentielle*, which in turn opens with an unsettling thought: "Il semble que nous apprenions quelque chose sur l'art, quand nous éprouvons ce que veut désigner le mot solitude" (Blanchot 1955, 11).² Solitude, whether it designates the unhappiness of isolation, a discipline of ascesis, a refuge from the crowd, or the condition for creative work is something we as gregarious creatures tend to avoid in everyday life, both in fact and perhaps more strangely, even in thought. Yet these relatively familiar forms of solitude receive little comment from Blanchot, for whom, precisely as relatively familiar, they conceal an un-avowable experience that might put our experience of ourselves into question. For Blanchot this is the same as the experience of writing or literature, for the essential solitude belongs to the work, *l'oeuvre* whose essence is to be *l'absence de l'oeuvre*, or *désoeuvrement*, a solitude that ignores, sets aside, and nullifies the one who would have the authority to speak or dispose of it.

In *The Space of Literature*, where it is a matter of learning something about art by experiencing what the word solitude is meant to designate, a strange intensification of solitude takes place. There one is solicited, not by familiar, personal experiences of isolation, which form a necessary counter-part to our everyday public life and to our story, but by a dread designated only by a word. Blanchot's essential solitude slips away from the familiar sense being alone has in our everyday language and in the image we have of ourselves. As a sign of the erasure of the one who would have authority to appropriate or dispose of it, the essential solitude haunts the writer as the dreadful intensity of a pure trace. Put in yet another way, Blanchot intimates the writer's experience of solitude as the

¹ The title could be rendered as *The Space of Literature*, or *Literary Space*, but the difficulty of translation would be to show how for Blanchot there is no space for the experience that literature involves.

² It seems that we learn something about art when we experience what the word solitude wants to designate (Blanchot, my translation)



undergoing of a radical effacement. The so-called subject of experience as well as the power of language itself as a tool or means of communication and representation are affected here by an unemployable limit. Solitude without solitude, solitude without subject, essential solitude — these formulae trace the experience of writing in the space of literature where Blanchot's language turns one away from the avowable nature of experience and meaning to indicate a region of pure intensity. He alludes to nothing else when he remarks how a work of literature is neither finished nor unfinished; it simply is. Following this thought, a writer's conformity would be measured by attempts to give or impose stasis, presence or completion on the measureless, even violent opening that conditions the movement of writing.³ When in the attempt the writer fails to make anything final or actual out of his or her life's-work, he or she will be left with the impression only of a strange un-working.⁴ And maybe with the impression that in this un-working lurks the secret of all desire. Without attempting to summarize an experience that can only be undergone, and not in a summary fashion, the vicinity of Blanchot's "essential solitude" might be indicated by remarking that, while the writer attempts to respond to the measureless experience of the "open violence" of the work, an obscure gift in which the depths open up and beckon toward the possibility that all can be said, even that which is foreign to the power of words, he or she never seizes anything more than a fragment, a book, "a mute heap of words, the most insignificant thing in the world."⁵

While undergoing this experience, in order to keep up relations with themselves and the world, Blanchot continues, writers sometimes have recourse to what they call "a journal," a memorial, or monument to daily life. The irony of this gesture is the extent to which it shows those contingent, mundane relations, too, are bound to the oblivious detour or destiny of writing, to Mallarmé's insane game, Blanchot's obscure disaster. The "diary" of the dancer Waslaw Nijinsky, composed near the outset of his experience of madness in St. Moritz-dorf, Switzerland during the armistice period of the first world war, seem to share in the experience of Blanchot's essential solitude: a journal in which one reads the essential solitude of the work and the absence of the work, close also to what we read in texts such as Blanchot's *La folie du jour*. This essay will read Nijinsky's "diaries"⁶ in relation to Blanchot's essential solitude in order to have an experience with a purely affective text, i.e. an experience with language that exceeds the power of understanding to dispose with it according to generally established values.⁷ In order to do this, I will look at the history of

³ Here, I refer to an aphoristic note in "Muteness II" of Próspero Saíz's *Bird of Nothing*.

⁴ "L'écrivain ne serait-il pas mort dès que l'oeuvre existe comme il en a parfois le sentiment dans l'impression d'un désœuvrement des plus étranges?" (Blanchot 1955, 13).

⁵ "un amas muet des mots stériles, ce qu'il y a de plus insignifiant au monde" (Blanchot 1955, 13).

⁶ As in the title of this essay and in distinction from the title given to Nijinsky's text both in the original and in the unexpurgated edition, "Diaries" is here used in the plural to refer to the "Text" as the relationship between the manuscripts, and the history of their publication.

⁷ By "a purely affective text" I mean less an entirely new concept than an aspect of a concept that remains largely unexperienced, i.e. the affective dimension of "Text" as Roland Barthes defined it in his essay "*De l'oeuvre au texte*." Barthes' essay is pertinent to this discussion because, in my view, in the concept of "Text" he develops his interpretation of Blanchot's "absence of the work." Text for Barthes is defined by 6 characteristics in contrast to the traditional concept of the work: 1) it is experienced only in the process of production; it is not an object. 2) It is constituted by a certain experience of limits, i.e. limits of genre. 3) Text is plural, defined by fragmentation and combination rather than totality. 4) It is allied with the signifier rather than the signified. 5) It asks for collaboration rather than consumption. 6) In its own way it participates in joy

the diaries' publication and discuss their status as a work — a work of literature or art — with reference to both the Mallarméan notion of “the Book” — everything in the world exists to end up in a book — and to Tolstói's definition of art as the transmission of feeling;⁸ I will problematize the diaries' status as autobiography by looking at how the expression of “feeling” there is affected by what in Nijinsky's case are an inextricable pair — the event of madness and becoming a writer; finally, I attempt a reading of the notebook's “affective text” by analyzing the “de-facement” involved in Nijinsky's signature, making comparisons with Blanchot's absence of the work.

The “Diaries” of Waslaw Nijinsky

As is well known, when Waslaw Nijinsky — the famous dancer and choreographer of the *Ballets Russes* who is largely credited with ushering ballet into modernism with his ballets *l'Après-midi d'un faun*, *Jeux*, and *Sacré du Printemps* — began to write on January 19, 1919, during the armistice of the First World War, and well after his career with the *Ballets Russes* was over, what he commenced took the form of a diary. As the work breaks off on March 4, 1919 — the day Nijinsky departed for Zurich, where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and taken to Burghölzli University Psychiatric Hospital, the diary announces itself as the diary of a madman. When the manuscripts were first published by his wife in 1936, two years after her own biography *Nijinsky* was published in 1934 and when the story of Nijinsky was already associated with his sad fate, they were indeed given the ambiguous title *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*. A book of extraordinary beauty and anguish, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* became “a classic of confessional literature,” the only document of its kind — “the only sustained, on-the-spot (not retrospective) written account, by a major artist, of the experience of entering psychosis” (Acocella 1995, vii). Nijinsky's pathology rises to the level of tragic pathos in the diaries, and because of who Nijinsky was — “the greatest artist of his day,” as Henry Miller wrote, and one of the few dancers ever to have been hailed as

(jouissance) and social utopia. By adjoining the words “purely affective” to “text” I do not so much add yet another feature to this list as attempt to indicate what I see as the direction (the experience of limits, jouissance) in which this list or this literature goes: as it goes *from work to text*. The bodies of work that inspire Barthes' concept (i.e. de Sade, Mallarmé, Blanchot), are not conventionally sympathetic. They are often considered to be repetitious, impersonal, at times “affectless.” If these writers nevertheless inspire great fascination and nameless feelings, this is because in their work language is affected by an experience of limits. To be clear, in their books these writers do not recount or represent experiences; it is not a question of representation. Rather, their language *is* an experience, a going beyond a boundary, and is immediately affected by the limits of the language of representation. The degree of intensity with which these writers, including Nijinsky, undertake this experience marks the degree to which they could be said to engage in the writing of “a purely affective text”: i.e. to undergo an experience with language as it exceeds our ability to relate to it through the powers of knowledge or representation, exceeds our ability to dispose with it according to established values.

⁸Rejecting traditional aesthetic criteria based on the notion of beauty as well as the exclusive social formation that art, in his view, takes on after the Renaissance in Europe, in “Что такое искусство?” Tolstói defines art as the “transmission of feelings experienced by the author,” preferring the art of those religious visionaries who transmit feelings of universal brotherhood. The beginning of art, he says, takes place not when I yawn, and in response my neighbor yawns, too, but when in a story I attempt to revive the feelings of an experience that I have had at some time for another. Tolstói's idiosyncratic definition, needless to say, has been criticized and obviously leaves much to be desired: what is the nature of this experience, after all, and why isn't more attention paid to the “medium” to the “techniques” or “devices” used to revive it? I do not mean to endorse the definition here, but only take it as a point of departure for the comparison between Tolstói and Nijinsky.

“probably a genius” — his story, which many have attempted to tell, and his person, which many have attempted to diagnose, took on the aura of myth and legend.

In her preface to the second edition of the diaries, published in 1971, Nijinsky’s wife Romola in part re-authorized that myth. In the process she also mythologized her own role in the story as the diaries’ editor. In her preface, Romola presents the book as a “human document,” “a lucid expression of extreme mental agony,” and recounts not only the circumstances of the book’s genesis but also how, once the notebooks were rediscovered, she came to understand her duty as the caretaker of Nijinsky’s legacy: the need to fulfill her husband’s expressed desire to publish the diaries during his lifetime.⁹

This Diary is Nijinsky’s message to mankind. His expressed desire to have it published during his lifetime was fulfilled when it first appeared in 1936. It is a rare document; very few of the great artists of the world have so frankly given us in writing their ideas about religion, art, love, and life as my husband does in these “confessions.” (Nijinsky 1971, xi)

[Nijinsky] was a humanitarian, a seeker of truth, whose only aim was to help, to share, to love [...] His aim was not to entertain or to reap success and glory for himself, but to transmit a divine message through his own medium — the dance. He could not escape, with his incorporeal, sensitive nature, the fate of all great humanitarians — to be sacrificed (Nijinsky 1971, xii)

Even considering all that we know of Romola Nijinsky’s doubly ambiguous role as the book’s editor, what is thought provoking is how hard-pressed both scholars and biographers seem to have been to find another formulation for what we read in Nijinsky’s text.

In any case, it is largely thanks to Joan Acocella and Kyril Fitzlyon, along with Christian Dumais-Lvowski, Galina Pogojeva, and Tamara Nijinsky, who agreed to publish the unexpurgated version of the diaries in 1995, that one is able to see the extent of the alterations made in Romola’s first edition. A comparison with the unexpurgated version shows to what extent Romola’s edition of the *Diary* was edited, altered, and rearranged, to what extent the published *Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* was, in fact, not Nijinsky’s. Nor even a diary; the manuscript itself is essentially anonymous, bearing no title, and it was drastically altered to create the first edition.¹⁰ Romola herself also calls it a “message,” giving the diary an epistolary dimension, or “confessions,” which would place the book in the tradition of

⁹ When Nijinsky was finally taken to Zurich to be diagnosed, he is supposed to have said to his wife — “*Femmeka* [little wife], you are bringing me my death warrant.” The subsequent violent scenes involved in Nijinsky’s institutionalization are well documented by Nijinsky’s biographers: after the initial examination Nijinsky was declared sane. The symptoms he exhibited were thought to be normal for a Russian. After being examined a second time he was diagnosed as schizophrenic. He tried to resist hospitalization in his hotel room, where he stayed until he was forcibly taken away to the hospital. Curiously, it is only after his hospitalization that many of the symptoms of schizophrenia began to emerge: obvious hallucinations, catatonia, the feeling that he was no longer his own body.

¹⁰ Nijinsky did not oversee the notebooks’ publication. Therefore, we do not know what the book he was writing would have become if he had continued writing. During the course of writing the notebooks he gave the work different titles: first he says he will call the book *Feeling*. Later, however, he signs off on the first two notebooks and says that he will call them *Life* and the one he continues *Death*.

St. Augustine, Rousseau, or Tolstoi. There is, at the very least, some uncertainty about what to call this book. A “diary,” thus, only in scare quotes.¹¹ The shock of the extent of the changes made to produce an admittedly very beautiful book is softened by considerations that Romola “lived in a time when the preservation of an uplifting legend was more valued than textual integrity,” that she made her living off of Nijinsky’s reputation, and therefore understandably eliminated passages that seemed, “repetitious, obsessional, simultaneously searing and boring” (Acocella 1995, iii). Beyond trying to protect herself, Romola may have been trying to protect Nijinsky and her family. In any event, the conclusion of the editors of the unexpurgated version seems correct; in her edition Romola sought to make the diaries a nobler and more ennobling work:

Most of her rearrangements seem to be in the service of making the diary more respectable. [...] The many cuts and revisions of Romola’s edition can be summarized by saying that she tried to eliminate the less romantic aspects of Nijinsky’s illness: the oddness, the illogic. (Acocella 1995, xxvi–ii)

Restored to its textual integrity, the unexpurgated version of the diaries emerges as a very different book. It emerges less as a book, in fact, than as a fragment, a trace. For despite the “sense of an ending” it produces at certain stages, and which in another sense permeates the text from beginning to end, the writing was abruptly terminated by the decision to institutionalize Nijinsky. The unexpurgated “Diary” remains a work of tremendous force and beauty, a text which can also be said to be repetitive, monotonous, the fourth notebook “barely readable” (Acocella 1995, 232). Given all the ambiguities of the intentions that may have been behind it, if Romola’s first edition tried to make the diaries into a more beautiful, uplifting work, to publish the private life and definitive message of a great man and humanitarian while giving the text a nobler form, the writing of the unexpurgated version of the diaries is steeped in Blanchot’s more obscure absence of the work, with strange murmurs of silence and madness that ruin, fragment, or sacrifice the work as a whole in advance. Indeed, the irony of the publication of the *Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky*, and here I would include both Romola’s edited version and the unexpurgated edition, which in my view was rightfully published in English translation under the same title and thus literally re-inscribes the disfigurement of the text’s historical production, is to underscore the intense anonymity and essential solitude of this work. *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* is inscribed with the strange history of how Nijinsky’s authority, abandoned indelibly to writing, was usurped in order to authorize a publication he might have imagined or anticipated differently, but which he could not in any case oversee. The publication of the

¹¹ In a thorough introduction, Joan Acocella has quantified the extent of the changes in Romola’s edition and cautiously speculated about what may have been the motives behind them. “To begin with, Romola extensively rearranged the sequence of the diary. For example, she took the beginning of the first notebook and used it to open the final section of her version. [...] To make an ending for that final section, she used the conclusion of the first notebook. Then she created an ‘epilogue’ out of some material that she sliced off the front of the third notebook.” (Acocella 1995, xxvi). “Romola also cut about 40 percent of the diary. For obvious reasons, she deleted all references to defecation and much of the copious material on sex. [...] She also had to deal with uncomplimentary references to herself” (Acocella 1995, xxxii).

text, originally incomplete, fragmented, ruined in advance, does less to clarify what Nijinsky wrote, to establish his message, than to re-inscribe its original ambiguity.

Nijinsky's "Chuvstvo," Tolstoi's "Zapiski sumashedshego"

Not necessarily seeking to overcome this ambiguity, an initial approach to Nijinsky's text might be made by drawing his notebooks into comparison with a work in the literary tradition that it resembles: in this case, given the prominence it assumes in Nijinsky's biography as well as the notebooks, with the work of the late Tolstoi. The interest of such a comparison would not be exhausted by simply quantifying influence or establishing which of Tolstoi's works Nijinsky read and incorporated into his notebooks.¹² Rather, it might serve to prepare the ground for more uncertain questions about the element of Tolstoyan inspiration, the Tolstoyan "sap," that flows through the material of the notebooks as one of its elements in the attempt to tell the two enmeshed and entangled texts apart and discern what is singular about Nijinsky's own writing. As an index of this entanglement, one need only cite Romola's interpretation of Nijinsky's *Diary* as a humanitarian message, his belief in the transmission of a divine message expressed through his own medium, in which one can vaguely discern the ascetic outlines of the figure of the late Tolstoi, a very problematic presence in Romola and Nijinsky's queer relationship.¹³ In this case, both the contrasts and confusions produced may prove enlightening. A juxtaposition of Tolstoi's posthumously published short tale *Zapiski sumashedshego*, *The Diary of a Madman* and the first notebook of Nijinsky's *Diaries* may serve as a point of departure.

1883. 20 октября. Сегодня возили меня свидетельствовать в губернское правление, и мнения разделились. Они спорили и решили, что я не сумасшедший. Но они решили так только потому, что я всеми силами держался во время свидетельствования, чтобы не высказаться. Я не высказался, потому что боюсь сумасшедшего дома; боюсь, что там мне помешают делать мое сумасшедшее дело. Они признали меня подверженным аффектам, и еще что-то такое, но — в здравом уме; они признали, но я-то знаю, что я сумасшедший. Доктор предписал мне лечение, уверяя меня, что если я буду строго следовать его предписаниям, то это пройдет. Все, что беспокоит меня, пройдет. О, что бы я дал,

¹² Nijinsky explicitly states that by the time he wrote the notebooks he had read half of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* and alludes to the later works, and *For Every Day* which he privileges.

¹³ Nijinsky's involvement with the Tolstoyan movement has been well-documented by his biographers. Suffice it to say that during his time with the Ballets Russes he came under the influence of Tolstoi and befriended Kostrovsky, who shared his enthusiasm and whom Romola doesn't seem to have liked very much. While living in Switzerland under the influence of Tolstoi Nijinsky tried and failed to convince Romola to become a vegetarian. He was also practicing "marital celibacy," which led Romola to seek companionship with another man, who also happened to be Nijinsky's psychiatrist. The question of the "acetic ideal" — humility, poverty, chastity — when it comes to Nijinsky is indeed a very interesting one, but I will not be able to really address it other than to say, with Nietzsche, that when an artist adopts the acetic ideal it is an ambiguous event. By calling the relationship between Nijinsky and Romola "queer" I mean to allude with a sort of black humor to Rimbaud's *Season in Hell*, where the section on the infernal bridegroom and the foolish virgin concludes with the apostrophe: "drôle de ménage," translated as "queer couple" by Louise Varèse. The question of Romola and Nijinsky's troubled relationship is an interesting one that obviously informs the content of the notebooks; it is, however, too large a topic to be discussed here. So I leave it to the biographers.

чтобы это прошло. Слишком мучительно. Расскажу по порядку, как и отчего оно взялось, это освидетельствование, как я сошел с ума и как выдал свое сумасшествие. До тридцати пяти лет я жил как все, и ничего за мной заметно не было. Нешто только в первом детстве, до десяти лет, было со мной что-то похожее на теперешнее состояние, но и то только припадками, а не так, как теперь, постоянно. В детстве находило оно на меня немножко иначе. А именно вот так. (Tolstoi 1978–85, XII 43)¹⁴

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Я хорошо позавтракал, ибо съел два яйца всмятку и жареный картофель с бобами. Я люблю бобы, только они сухие. Я не люблю бобы сухие, ибо в них нет жизни. Швейцария больная, ибо она вся на горах. В Швейцарии люди сухие, ибо в них нет жизни. Я имею горничную сухую, ибо она чувствует. Она много думает, ибо ее иссушили в другом месте, где она прислуживала долго. Я не люблю Цюриха, ибо он город сухой, в нем много фабрик, а затем много людей деловых. Я не люблю людей сухих, а поэтому не люблю людей деловых.

Горничная прислуживала заварак моей жене, двоюродной сестре (если не ошибаюсь, так называется родитель. Сестра моей жене) и Кира с сестрой Красного Креста. Она носит кресты, а не понимает их значение. Кресть есть то, что носил Христос. Христос носил большой кресть, а сестра маленький крестик на ленточке, который приклепоена к головному убору, а убор съехал назад для того, чтобы показать волосы. Сестры кресты думают, что так красивее, а поэтому оставили ту привычку, которую доктора хотели им внушить. (Nijinsky 2000, 47)¹⁵

Tolstoi's posthumous tale, which despite over a decade of work (1884–1903) he never seems to have finished to his satisfaction, takes the form of a single, dated entry of a diary, memoirs, or "notes," which are clearly concentrated on telling a story in the proper order. The story will recount the history of the narrator's madness. The opening of the notes begins with the narrator telling us that he has just given testimony at the provincial court, where opinion was divided. They argued and eventually concluded that the narrator is of

¹⁴ "20 October 1883 To-day I was taken to the Provincial Government Board to be certified. Opinions differed. They disputed and finally decided that I was not insane — but they arrived at this decision only because during the examination I did my utmost to restrain myself and not give myself away. I didn't not speak out, because I am afraid of the lunatic asylum, where they would prevent me from doing my mad work. So they came to the conclusion that I am subject to hallucinations and something else, but am of sound mind. They came to that conclusion, but I myself know that I am mad. A doctor prescribed a treatment for me and assured me that if I would follow his instructions exactly everything would be all right — all that troubled me would pass! The torment is too great. In due order I will tell how and from what this medical certification came about — how I went mad and how I gave myself away." (Tolstoi 1991, 295).

¹⁵ "I have had a good lunch, for I ate two soft-boiled eggs and fried potatoes and beans. I like beans, only they are dry. I do not like dry beans, because there is no life in them. Switzerland is sick because it is full of mountains. In Switzerland people are dry because there is no life in them. I have a dry maid because she does not feel. She thinks a lot because she has been dried out in another job that she had for a long time. I do not like Zurich, because it is a dry town. It has a lot of factories and many business people. I do not like dry people, and therefore I do not like business people. The maid was serving lunch to my wife, to my first cousin (that, if I am not mistaken, is how someone related to me by being my wife's sister is called), and to Kyra, together with the Red Cross Nurse..."

sound mind, admitting that he is subject to *affektam*, to *affects*, to extreme states or attacks of abnormal excitement, hallucinations, and something or other besides. They arrive at this medically informed conclusion, however, only because by using all his strength the narrator has been able to keep himself from speaking out in full; he fears the madhouse, fears it because he will be prevented there from carrying out his *sumashedshee delo*, his *crazy, or mad business*. As for him, the narrator goes on, he knows he is mad; in the notes he will undertake to tell the publicly un-avowable story *po poriadku, in order* — the relatively calculated art of the story consisting in that very order and in the very different setting of the space of literature. The story develops from the first appearances of something like his current condition in childhood, through a series of more recent events, up until the *nastoiashchego nachala*, the *real* beginning of his madness. It is so ordered, however, that the end reveals what the beginning ironically conceals: the story of Tolstoi's mad birth of the soul.¹⁶ “Madness” here is word that must be bracketed, for it is used as a technique of strange-making, a simulation of holy foolishness to critique modern society, rather than at face-value.¹⁷

After recounting a few childhood incidents where something like his present condition is prefigured — they recall the impersonality of Freud's “a child is being beaten” and hinge upon the underlying cruelty of real life — come three events, in which the narrator as a grown man in the world is overcome by sudden, intense attacks of anxiety while away from home. The attacks of strange anxiety happen once in the town of Arzamas while the narrator is traveling on business, once in Moscow while taking care of a legal matter, and once on his estate when he loses his way hunting in the forest. While the onset of what he calls his *arzamaskii uzhas*, assaults him with the force of affect, not so much a *fear* as a *sensation* of death which the narrator conveys with great power, and which comes to undermine his whole life and personality, in the end, these terrible events turn out to be only different stages or thresholds of the real beginning of his madness: the enlightenment the madman experiences when he leaves church one day after feeling consoled only to see beggars standing outside. As he sees them “the light illuminates him,” and in a sudden, unexplained insight he glimpses the truth of life: not only that poverty and death “shouldn't be” but that “they are not,” and that if they are not outside him, neither are they inside him. The apparently unsatisfactory “ending” — its aesthetic validity has been criticized, and despite over a decade of work, Tolstoi never did finish the story the narrator promised to tell — recalls Ivan Illych's enigmatic version of the biblical *consumatum est*, кончена смерть [...] ее нет больше (Tolstoi 1978–85, XII 107), since the death and insanity of modern life at least for the narrator, for a moment, has been overcome.

The *Diary* has clear affinities with the figure of Nijinsky, both the Nijinsky of legend as well as in the notebooks. As an index of this affinity one might recall the scandal Nijinsky caused by wearing a cross in public in St. Moritz. There are also clear affinities with Blanchot's *Essential Solitude* in the narrator's *arzamaskii uzhas*, or with *La folie du jour*, where the figure and name of Tolstoi briefly appear in the narrative, somewhat like Zarathustra's

¹⁶Here, I would like to cite Nabokov's “nabokovian” word “soul-birth” for what occurs in the death of Ivan Il'ich. See his *Lectures on Russian Literature* (Nabokov 1981).

¹⁷I am indebted to the reviewers of *Poljarnyj Vestnik* for this formulation of madness as a device of “strange-making” to critique modern society.

ape in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.¹⁸ But beyond this, the *Diary* has a peculiar place in the interpretation of Tolstoi's work, a fact which is indicated by how the editors of the *Norton Critical Edition of Tolstoy's Short Fiction* placed the tale among the "Background and Sources" material (Tolstoi 1991). Soon after its posthumous publication in 1912 the "autobiographical" element of the unfinished, unauthorized tale was seized upon and the narrator's *arzamaskii uzhas* became a commonplace of biographical criticism.¹⁹ The philosopher Lev Shestov (1975, 87) called the story the "key" to Tolstoi's work, which once inserted into the work as a whole would turn the separate parts of its mechanism together, set it into motion, perhaps to unlock its secrets, perhaps to advance into another space. Though few would attribute such importance to the unfinished short story, and even fewer would accept it as a straightforwardly autobiographical text, Shestov's interpretation of the *Diary* is nevertheless suggestive, if only because, by juxtaposing the narrator's description of his *арзамский ужас* with a letter Tolstoi wrote to his wife in 1869, where Tolstoi recalls how he suffered from an attack of strange anxiety while staying overnight in the real town of Arzamas on a similar business trip, he creates a zone of confusion between the great works of fiction — novels and stories like *Anna Karenina*, the *Death of Ivan Il'ich* — and the more straightforwardly "autobiographical" material we find in *A Confession*, in the diaries, or Tolstoi's letters, passages of which the story clearly recalls.²⁰ Though it permeates the space of the unfinished tale, this zone of confusion does not allow one to identify the narrator of the *Diary of a Madman* as Tolstoi himself: he is a (perhaps failed) character, puppet, persona, mask, simulating holy madness while making the quintessential autobiographical gesture, telling the story, as the narrator puts it, [как он] стал тем, что есть (Tolstoi 1978–85, XII 53). It does, however, cause one to ask if it is Tolstoi himself and only his own story of himself that one finds in the *Confession*, in the diaries, in the letters to his wife, or if one finds in these works, too, an entirely other story, or a wholly other madness. At the very least, the "affect" of *арзамский ужас* traverses both, as do traces, train tracks and footprints of the strange events of Astapovo, where Tolstoi's flight in "his own figure" will bring the absence of the work to its tragic, farcical in-conclusion: [...] но вдруг представилось, что мне не нужно ни за чем в эту даль ехать, что я умру тут в чужом месте. И мне стало жутко. (Tolstoi 1978–85, XII 46).²¹

Looking ahead to the text's affinities with Nijinsky, who in the notebooks appears as a narrator in his own figure, "a true schizophrenic" beneath the guise of "god's fool," and who understands Tolstoi's fiction as a mask for truth, Tolstoi's unfinished *Diary of a Madman*, would seem to belong less to the work proper of Tolstoi — the greater part of which in a

¹⁸ "J'avais accepté de me laisser enfermer. Momentanément, me disait-on. Bien, momentanément. Pendant les heures de plein air, un autre résident, vieillard à la barbe blanche, me sautait sur les épaules et gesticulait au-dessus de ma tête. Je lui disais: 'tu es donc Tolstoï?' Le médecin me jugeait pour cela bien fou" (Blanchot 1973, 28).

¹⁹ Kathleen Parthé (1991) offers an excellent reading of *the Diary of a Madman*, its image of death, as well as the "commonplace" of Tolstoi's Arzamass-anxiety.

²⁰ Mary Beard (2013) has offered a good account of Tolstoi's death as well as the complicated relationship between his writing in the novels and in the autobiographical works. She summarizes her thoughts with the reflection that, "Tolstoi was a man who defined himself *in and by* writing, in an inextricable amalgam of fiction and fact."

²¹ "But suddenly it seemed to me that it wasn't at all necessary for me to travel so far, that I would die here in a strange place. And everything became uncannily dreadful" (my very rough translation).

strange decision he tried to renounce — than to its unfinished, undecidable “affective text.” Fragments of this text, this blur of writing, can be found traversing novels like *Anna Karenina*, short fiction like *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, the (unfinished) *Diary of a Madman*, the *Confession*, personal letters, and the diaries. Tolstoi's account of how the idea of the *Diary* — at that time conceived as the *Diary of a Non-Insane Man* — first came to him in March 1884 speaks to its ambiguity: Пришли в голову “Записки несумасшедшего.” Как живо я их пережил. (Tolstoi 1978–85, XXII 325).²² How “vividly he lived through,” he says, suffered, survived or experienced the idea of the notes, including their access of *arzamaskii uzhas* which in his letter to his wife in 1869 he wished that no one else would ever experience, as well as their penultimate anarchic beatitude — perhaps inspired by his reading of Schopenhauer. It is strange how this experience recalls the fictional diary, where the author attempts to transmit the affect to all. *The Diary of a Madman* would be Tolstoi's attempt to incorporate dread and anxiety into the narrative of the (triumph?) of his preferred form of madness: his mad dream of life, a truly human life, with feelings of spiritual brotherhood, without property or division, indeed, for the madman, without poverty or death — and the need to maintain this madness in the face of the real world. The unfinished story, which rhetorically provides a face both for the death that is banal, everyday life and for the mad realization of something akin to eternal life is thus aligned with Tolstoi's aims and his definition of art in *Chto takoe isskustvo?: peredacha chuvstv*, a transmission of feelings the author has experienced. What remains un-asked is the status of this “experience” and what we have been calling this “affective text:” this fragmentary writing touching on the experience of death scattered in fragments across *Anna Karenina*, *Ivan Il'ich*, *Confession*, the *Diary*, and the diaries. It is a question which has been asked often enough in relation to Tolstoi in different ways. One version of it might go something like this: can the incredibly vivid affectivity that one discerns in Tolstoi be ordered, unified or subordinated to a whole, meaningful story or moral? Once again one thinks of Blanchot's *La folie du jour*, the *récit*, which is not a *récit*, of an experience foreign to the form of a story or the narrative of a mad intimacy between the law, language, and the madness of the day. In any case, when Nijinsky writes his own notes, which in a certain sense repeat the situation of Tolstoi's *Diary of a Madman* without the strict authorial order and in a wholly other context, he too seems to have this in mind, “the transmission of feelings,” or “Feeling” itself. The *Notebooks*' aim is much like Tolstoi's, then, on the surface. Yet what a very different feeling his notebooks give, such that the signs of the book come to be interpreted as symptoms not of Nijinsky's art and irony but of schizophrenia, with its backward splitting of the palpably silent and foreign Greek *phrenos*, the inmost mind or heart, as the swollen source of the English “frantic,” “frenzy.” And how very different his notebooks are in their form of movement and expression...

Before returning to the opening passage of the first notebook cited above, indications of the connections between this literature, feeling, and as the difference of Nijinsky's writing of feeling should at least be remarked:

²² Also, see the letter as cited in Shestov's *In Job's Balances*.

I want to write in order to explain to people the habits that make feeling die. I want to call this book “Feeling.” I will call this book “Feeling.” I like feeling and will therefore write a lot. I want a big book about feeling because it will contain your whole life [В ней будет вся твоя жизнь]. (Nijinsky 1995, 58)

Like Tolstoi, Nijinsky writes to explain what *Chuvstvo* or *Feeling* is, to explain the habits that make feeling die. He writes to transmit feeling, an ambiguous word which he uses in an idiosyncratic sense.²³ His use of the word is at times very close to Tolstoi’s evangelism, his universalism of brotherly feeling — all men have feeling, art is the transmission of universal feelings. This statement might have been expressed by both. Yet if Tolstoi’s transmission of feeling is already ambiguously affected by irony and simulation, so that only a “madman” can reveal the absence of feeling in real life, Nijinsky’s writing of feeling is affected by something much more so. Without transition, the writing in the passage cited just above switches from speaking in the first person, as “I,” to addressing a “you” [*ты*] whom we cannot initially identify, though in what follows it appears that rather than Nijinsky speaking, it is God who is addressing Nijinsky. The fluidity of pronouns, the sliding of persons in this passage was mitigated in Romola’s first edition by the use of italics. The lack of italics in the original manuscript must have created a fluidity that was too disturbing, or not disturbing enough. For the writing approaches madness here that cannot be conjured away by the influence of eccentric or unconventional ideas, like those inspired by Tolstoi or Schopenhauer, a threshold of madness that Nijinsky will cross in both his book and in life. And perhaps this is why Romola’s emphasis of Nijinsky’s *ideas* on art, life, religion, his doctrinal message, most of which can already be found in Tolstoi, strikes one as unconvincing, focusing as they do on the notebooks’ ideal or indifferent aspects, while it is the singularity of the text that speaks to its affective force.

In the passage, which is over fifty pages in, Nijinsky arrives at a title (which he will later seem to forget). He decides to call this book *Feeling*. The force of the title recalls how the book has been written in part in response to the terrifying possibility of feeling’s death. Nijinsky, or God, likes feeling, and therefore he will write a lot. He will write a big book about feeling because it will contain your whole life. He dwells with pleasure on the book to come. The writing has the creative ambition of a Mallarméan work: everything in the world exists to end up in a book. Yet it is at this same moment, with regard to Tolstoy, that a difference makes itself felt. The “you” of the passage is addressed in the intimate singular *ты*. It therefore does not address a crowd of people or connote formal distance. It may refer to the whole life of the reader (this is how things appear at first); it may refer to the whole life of Nijinsky (we understand later that somewhere God began addressing Nijinsky); or it may be the whole life of God (who is addressed in the intimate singular). One cannot really decide. Only later in what follows does it really become clear that it is God who is addressing Nijinsky. And in a certain sense, Nijinsky will identify himself with everyone, as

²³ “If Nijinsky’s vocabulary is sometimes faulty, more often it is simply idiosyncratic. A good example is the meaning he attaches to ‘feeling’ (*chuvstvo*), a central concept of the diary. To him ‘feeling’ means intuitive perception, the ability to understand something — a person, a situation — by merging with it emotionally. Such understanding, which in his mind can be akin to a spiritual experience, is seldom achieved deliberately, and never by means of what he calls ‘thinking’ or ‘intellect’.” (Fitzlyon 1995, XLVIII-XLIX).

well as with God. In any case, it is clear that when Nijinsky writes feeling he senses that he has touched upon something essential about what he is doing, that all the madness of his book fluctuates in this word. Feeling here might signify a form of awareness, a sense of the word present in the Russian expression *priiti v chuvstvo*, to regain consciousness; it simultaneously represents a force of sensation that extends beyond our conscious understanding or our ability to remain whomever we might imagine ourselves to be, a non-rational difference we find expressed in the expression *chuvstvo liubvi*, the feeling of love. Indeed, feeling even as an everyday word speaks to our inability to be or remain ourselves, our inability to be indifferent, or stable as in the fiction of a pure or ideal mind: to the degree I feel, to that degree I change, I am already beyond or outside myself, in the body, in the world. While to the degree that I have ceased to feel, to that degree give nothing to be felt, I am dead, I have ceased to be, I was. Nijinsky's summons of dead feeling is inordinately disturbing, not only because he will eventually suffer catatonia; it speaks to how the word expresses an excessive immanence of life that cannot be reified, reduced to words or thought, and how the capacity to feel, to sense is related to art. Feeling in Nijinsky's notebooks will furthermore embody a strangely non-subjective tonality of life, an indeterminate, singular affectivity. The theme of feeling, its death, or its drying up, is prefigured in the passage from the beginning of the notebooks cited in juxtaposition to Tolstoi's *Diary of a Madman*.

The opening sentences of the notebooks seem composed from a great distance, approaching language through a series of staccato, stuttering sentences linked together by persistent repetition and the association of words. Nijinsky writes he has had a good breakfast, with beans; he likes beans, only they are dry; the maid is dry, she is dry because she was used-up at a previous job; Swiss business people are dry, too; Switzerland is sick because it is in the mountains... In spite of their repetition and "staccato" feel, the sentences are nevertheless animated by an intense, if stationary movement, such that nothing seems still. Nijinsky circles the situation, and what he comes up with is an intense sense of dryness. From dry beans, to sick mountainous Switzerland, to dry people, to the maid dried out in another job, to Zurich and its dry businessmen: it's dry. Madness is already near, legible across the text as a thought concealed in the sickness of Swiss sanatoria when the notebooks begin. Nijinsky will write the book to explain what feeling is and the habits that make feeling die, to transmit life to a world that has dried up with lack of feeling. The language is far from sentimental, however, and is very nearly opposed to the rhetorically "rich" style habitually associated with the communication of emotion. Nijinsky's style is syntactically poor: we have the bare bones of a few variations of words, a minimal, yet enormous movement. The quality of dryness is by turns associated with the beans, the maid, business people. There are no less than seven *убо* that leap into a single, final *ноэмомы* — *for, for, for, for, for, for, for, therefore*. In the second paragraph we find a greater variety of detail in sentences linked by the prevalent conjunction *a*, a contrasting *but* or *and*, and a single *номомы, чмо*, *because*. Nijinsky signals he writes as a foreigner, uncertain of how Russian describes the relationships of the extended family. Unfamiliar too is how he speaks of the maid, saying "I have a dry maid, for she feels." One wonders: does he have this maid because she feels; is she dry because she feels; or does she give the feeling of dryness? In a way, the whole story of the notebooks, in all its unfamiliarity, is prefigured by

the opening: the whole topography from St. Moritz-dorf to the Zurich hospital appears, as do the grounds for the transmission of feeling, which Nijinsky senses has dried up. The coalescence of the varied elements that compose the paragraph at the end, where the omnipresent clarifying *ibo* leaps into the conclusive *poetomu*, produces an analogue of logic through what is an abysmally non-logical movement. Nothing extraordinary has been related yet, though Nijinsky will soon go on to write of his “marriage to god,” tell the story of the madness of his walks near the abyss, explore the chaos of the first World War, the Russian Revolution, and episodes of his life to help people understand what life and death are. And yet these few short sentences, in their manner of movement, compose the whole dreadful topography of the book in relation to the unsaid of Nijinsky’s feeling, the secret process that he is undergoing.

Nijinsky will continue writing until his wife disturbs him, worrying him about the performance he is supposed to give that night at the Suvretta house. This small interruption, an incidental detail, nevertheless distinguishes Nijinsky’s style of writing from Tolstoi’s narrator in the *Diary of a Madman*. There, aside from the testimony the narrator says he has given and withheld at the provincial court, events happening around the act of writing itself are not narrated. The madman never stops writing until the ending. He never gets up to move, walk, or sleep, he never interrupts himself to consider the pen he is using or the paper, never recalls how he stopped writing to dance or move his body. In contrast to Nijinsky’s notebooks — written in a single movement over a period of three months in indelible ink — Tolstoi worked on his story for over 10 years, though it is evident from the story’s construction that he never completed it. In Nijinsky’s notebooks, where, as Acocella puts it, “before us we have the man and in the background the muffled sounds of his fate being decided,” there is no way to tell if the book is finished or unfinished, since Nijinsky has not prepared a plan ahead of time. There is only writing, then not. In the meantime, little interruptions are constantly being narrated. In a way they become the very matter of the book: the pages they fill as the events of the surrounding world impinging on Nijinsky, and the book as it puts an end to the writing as a final product. After Nijinsky’s wife urges him to get ready for his performance, he finally agrees to go upstairs, where he falls asleep. He resumes writing only that night after his performance at the Suvretta house when he has returned home, describing how he woke up later that day, the whole evening at the Suvretta house — where he experienced only horrifying things (and “his marriage to god”) — the ride back, and a walk he took at some undetermined time near an undetermined abyss, when god asks him to throw himself in:

...I was afraid, but after standing for a while, I felt a force that was drawing me in the direction of the abyss. I went to the abyss and then fell down, but was caught in the branches of a tree, which I had not noticed. That amazed me, and I thought it was a miracle. God wanted to test me. I understood Him and therefore wanted to disentangle myself, but he did not allow me to. I held on for a long time, but after a while I became afraid. God told me that I would fall if I let go of this branch. I let go of the branch, but did not fall. God said to me, “Go home and tell your wife that you are mad.” I realized that God wished me well. (Nijinsky 1995, 14)

Knocks at the door and noises outside, a man yelling “*Oyga!*” and the nervous creak of his sister-in-law, perhaps, sneaking back into the house at night distract and interrupt him. Afterwards, he continues:

I am not afraid of my story, only people are afraid of death. I will continue my story of my walk in St. Moritz. (Nijinsky 1995, 15)

In her introduction, Acocella analyzes Nijinsky’s language by comparing the style of the notebooks to the writing of other schizophrenic patients, noting that linguistic abnormalities are among the symptoms of schizophrenia: the “name psychiatrists have applied to what they *think* is a unified pattern of behavioral abnormalities” (Acocella 1995, xxxviii; original emphasis). What she senses in the “eerily similar” style of both is a tense effort to maintain control in the midst of a massive derailment, a movement that progresses by association of words and perseveration affected by a constant drifting towards terrible thoughts and an effort to counter that drift. This critical/clinical comparison is compelling, yet it is also necessary to note that at certain points Nijinsky yields to the movement of writing with singular abandon, with what can only be called a lucid sanity and speed almost too swift for thought. There is in these notebooks what Nietzsche called *Rausch*, or *rapture*, the elated condition of creation as a process of life, and one is likely to find only echoes of Nijinsky’s style at its most intense in scholarly monographs or, for that matter, in the thoughts of everyday people going through various thresholds of their own.²⁴ In addition, a less cautious interpretation of this comparison might suggest an all too static reading of Nijinsky’s notebooks as the product of an already recognizable form of madness, schizophrenia, whereas this literature involves an intense appeal, an infinite movement that is distinct from the eventual end of creative life that will characterize Nijinsky’s last years. Indeed, part of what makes the notebooks so ambiguous, and so compelling, is how they are a transition, or a passage of life, a movement between a relatively stable physiognomy and chaotic flux. While madness as a possibility is a presence throughout, the notebooks differ from Nijinsky’s eventual condition as a person confined. The madness of these books is not totally insane, and Nijinsky’s writing can be read as a supremely ambiguous assent to what he is experiencing, even as he resists the interpretation that would relegate his entire work or person to mere material for diagnosis. In this assent lies an ethical riddle, perhaps: Nijinsky’s fateful *amor fati*.

In any case, making the time and matter of events surrounding his creation into a component of the writing itself while countering a drift toward an immanent limit or abyss, marks a style where language is defined not so much by what it signifies, but by what causes it to move, to flow (Smith 1997, li). Literature, or writing, like the “schizophrenic-process” reveals itself here as an experience or becoming that opens onto a dreadfully impersonal, though immanently creative activity, “a purely affective text” as the unwritten book every book enfolds, or the more secret book of flesh and blood (Deleuze 1997). Though Nijinsky says he wants to write this book to explain what feeling is — to write a big book about feeling because it will contain your whole life — he does not really try to develop the notion

²⁴For a discussion of “*Rausch*” in this context see Heidegger (1991, vol. 1, 115)

of feeling as a concept. He does not organize his writing in advance conceptually in order to define it. Curiously absent is a grand narrative telling the story of Nijinsky's life in order. His writing rather goes, halts or takes off on the impression from his immediate surroundings; or it goes on a walk that leads away from home on an awe-inspiring trail, deep into the night as he follows what might either be piss or blood in the snow at the behest of god's commands. This is indeed what takes place after the night of his last performance at the Suvretta house.²⁵ He knows the commands make no logical sense — lie down in the snow, get up, lie down, go, stop, throw yourself in the abyss, tell your wife you are mad — yet he follows them. The same frightening uncertainty is present as he watches a man stand over a grave who might be a murderer of someone whom he knows is not dead. Nevertheless, he feels the person is dead. He realizes the man he sees is standing in a graveyard and mourning his dead wife, whose crude cross of sticks Nijinsky crosses-out, since the man doesn't understand that death is part of life. Nijinsky tells the story of his walks a number of times throughout the notebooks. The walks constitute the notebooks' movement as they alternate with scenes inside the house. He follows his wanderings away from home beyond the edge of the abyss. He does not stop writing until his hand grows stiff with effort and refuses to go on. One could say that the writing of Nijinsky's text grows between these two hazardous elements: his notebooks, with their awful and awe-inspiring recollections, and events of the immediate, surrounding world together with the bodies that inhabit that world. We see a striking example of this as well as Nijinsky's writing of feeling just prior to the description of the walk, when Nijinsky's wife — whom he has not yet named — tries to interrupt him. She wants him to fall asleep. Then she tries to read his notebooks — they are in Russian, a language she does not know — as he is writing while they are lying in bed together. He closes his book, laughs nervously; she feels him, he writes, she feels well, only she doesn't understand and is afraid of his aims.²⁶ Here Nijinsky writes of the immanent feeling between bodies, which are constantly changing, and which can hardly be clarified in advance, that is, if one believes it can ever be clarified at all.

Like Tolstoi, Nijinsky wants to write to transmit feeling, which is there animating the immanent life between himself and others. It is a feeling bound up with the incipient story of his walks, the story of madness he no longer fears; his manner of expression, however, as well as the matter of a schizophrenic process distinguishes his style from Tolstoi's *Diary of a Madman* and sets us before other problems.

And yet, before moving on to a closer reading of Nijinsky's notebooks and what is

²⁵ The events of this performance have been recorded by Nijinsky's biographers, but basically the story goes that Nijinsky sat in a chair facing the audience for ten minutes, causing extreme discomfort. He then "danced the war that you failed to prevent" to the music of Chopin's prelude 21, a solemn piece of music.

²⁶ "My wife sleeps next to me, and I am writing. My wife is not asleep, because her eyes are open. I stroked her. She feels things well. I am writing badly because I find it difficult. My wife is sighing because she feels me. I feel her and therefore do not respond to her sighs. She loves me with feeling today. Someday I will tell her that we must marry in feeling, because I do not want to love without feeling. For now, I will leave it alone, because she is afraid of me [here in the manuscript he crosses out, "she thinks that I have gone mad, but I know her ner..."] [...] My wife disturbs me because she feels. I laughed nervously. My wife is listening on the telephone, but she is thinking of the fact that I am writing. I write quickly. She asked me what I was writing. I closed the notebook in her face because she wants to read what I am writing. She feels that I am writing about her, but she does not understand. She is afraid for me and therefore doesn't want me to write. I want to write, because I like writing... (Nijinsky 1995, 8–9).

perhaps their most characteristic expression, Nijinsky's signature, some caution should be observed unless the comparison between Tolstoi and Nijinsky should appear as too univocal or decisive. The idea that one could tell works of the late Tolstoi such as the unfinished *Diary of a Madman* apart from Nijinsky's *Diary* based on the notion that one is the fictional narrative of a fictitious narrator while the other is the actual literature of a true schizophrenic is entangled in the tricky question of autobiography and what is perhaps *la folie par excellence* that it reveals.²⁷ At issue here is not only Tolstoi's *arzamaskii uzhas* which transforms the fictitious *Diary of a Madman* into the original replica of Tolstoi's own unavowable madness, disfigured in the history of his final flight, but also the publication history of Nijinsky's *Diary*. Paul de Man's analysis of autobiography and its trope of *prosopopeia* as "de-facement" is very instructive in this respect.

De Man writes that any book is to some extent, autobiographical. Once it is signed every work becomes confessional; what is written on the page becomes a figure for what is written in the name. Gogol, Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, Nijinsky, the history of Russian Literature in this respect is the history of the names on the title pages of so many *Notes* or *Diaries of a Madman*. Autobiography, de Man goes on, is "a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, in some degree, in all texts" (De Man 1984, 70). Nevertheless, and this is most important, just as all texts are autobiographical, by that same token, "none of them is or can be" (De Man 1984, 70). No text is autobiographical, a book or a story somehow produced more naturally by a life, even those like Nijinsky's that seem to present themselves as such. What we call autobiographical texts are, for de Man, variations of the trope *prosopopeia*, meaning: to give a face or a voice to a dead, inanimate, or voiceless entity; or a fictive apostrophe to a dead, inanimate, or voiceless entity.

Using the example of Wordsworth's *Essays on Epitaphs*, "an exemplary autobiographical text," de Man shows that to the extent that we depend on language as trope and are required to yield whatever we may be to the supplement of writing to make ourselves understandable, we are in the situation of those who are, "not silent, which implies the possible manifestation of sound at our own will, but silent as a picture" (De Man, 80). In attempting to recover an understanding or image of ourselves through language, in reality we yield ourselves to our own original de-facement, giving a fictive voice to an otherwise absent, deceased, or voiceless entity. And the text itself will always re-inscribe this other story beyond the privative unity of understanding:

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of *prosopopeia* as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. (De Man 1984, 80)

²⁷ "*La folie par excellence*" is the title Blanchot gave to his preface to Karl Jaspers' comparative pathography on Van Gogh and Strindberg. There he uses this formulation to subtly criticize Jaspers' treatment of Hölderlin as schizophrenic, saying that reference to this recognizable form of madness leads Jaspers to an imperfect appreciation of Hölderlin's work. I evoke the phrase here so as to discuss the undecidable madness one encounters in Nijinsky.

Language is not death, per se, but life as it yields to non-understanding. The story of my life says that it is not *my* life, but rather the re-inscription of an original de-facement. If Nijinsky's text seems to announce itself as more straightforwardly autobiographical than the literary *Notes* or *Diaries of a Madman*, at the same time, we have an intimation of how, when Nijinsky yields to the movement of writing, part of the pathos of his gesture lies in how he surrenders his life to the indelible movement of de-facement with a singular abandon. Indeed, a glimpse into his life prior to his writing the notebooks might deepen this reading. For the story of Nijinsky's spectacular career with the Ballets Russes is also in part a history of de-facement; particularly his innovative work as a choreographer in *Faun*, *Jeux*, and *Sacré du Printemps* threatened what was the only modern ballet company in the world with its excessive creative freedom, so that Nijinsky the dancer and choreographer was replaced by more conventional, if still talented, artists, some of whom would also take Nijinsky's place in Diaghilev's bed.²⁸ Historically, then, Nijinsky's story involves a loss of work when he begins to write, and his notebooks could be read as the place where the creative trajectory of his work, uncannily workless and placeless, was prolonged or intensified. This gesture could indeed be taken as synonymous with the condition for his purely affective text: i.e. a moment when the author as figure of identity and origin goes under, dies, as in Barthes' death of the author.

Tolstoi's mad narrator, whose *arzamaskii uzhas* also reaches into the ambiguous life of Tolstoi, would seem to describe another such instance of de-facement and another affective text. When the story is read autobiographically, confused with the *Background and Source Material* standing behind Tolstoi's own private life, how uncanny indeed that "life" becomes! A fictive, mad *Diary's* language: the background and source of life's understanding, a source standing for that life? This is to yield to non-understanding enough! And yet, while most critical attention paid to the *Diary* has been spent on the "autobiographical" events in the fictive town of Arzamas, it is possible that something just as important has been overlooked at the "end," at a point usually considered to be an instance of Tolstoi the preacher usurping the place of Tolstoi the artist. After recounting his experience of enlightenment upon exiting the church, the anonymous narrator, the madman writes, Тут уже совсем свет осветил меня, и я стал тем, что есть (Tolstoi 1978–85, XII 53). The *Norton Critical Edition* translates this correctly as, "Then the light fully illuminated me and I became what I now am." The art of "non-saying" or circumlocution "what I now am," recalls Tolstoi's oscillation over the title of his story: the diary of a non-insane man, a Christian man, or a madman? It highlights madness as a "strange-making" device, a simulation of holy foolishness to critique the insanity of modern society. The interesting thing about Tolstoi's apparently simple phrase, however, is best revealed by how the translator is forced to add the pronoun *I* and the adverb *now* to the relative clause, whereas good style requires the pronoun to be elided in Russian, even though the verb *есть*, constituting the sole exception in the language, doesn't decline in the present tense. A more awkward phrasing might show the problem: "here the light completely illuminated me, and I became that, which there is." In any case, what this moment gives one to think is how in the madman's

²⁸ For a full discussion of this aspect of the diaries, see Peter Oswald's thorough biography *Nijinsky* (Oswald 1991).

story the *I*, the authorial subject, is required at a certain point by language to disappear. Has been required by language, style or grammar, for one, but by the ambiguous sense of the narrator's madness, for the other. The story is the story of how all that he has hitherto been identified with — his habits and property — for him has perished. This disappearance of the *I* at the point where the *I* says it becomes what it is constitutes a re-inscription of autobiographical de-facement. Such a reading not only questions the commonplace biographical interpretation of the story, which forbids one to simply identify the narrator with Tolstoi himself, but autobiography as a conceivable enterprise, that is, if the basic gesture of both is predicated on the language of figuration's ability to reveal the self and the ambiguous disappearance of the *I* that highlights its own status as grammar, letter, writing. The disappearance of the *I*, this de-facement, does not simply contest the narrator's understanding of himself. It yields life to the irony of the unknown and to the strange temporality of writing: for though the narrator speaks in the present tense, as "notes" dated to 1883 whatever he says belongs to what is lost in the past, remaining only to be read. This de-facement of the self also constitutes the basic condition of possibility for affect: i.e. for that which emerges when the author as transcendent figure of knowledge, meaning, totality and self-control disappears. "An affective text" or a "purely affective text" in this context would therefore name less entirely new concepts than a feature of a concept that remains largely unexperienced and perennially un-thought: the primarily affective dimension of "Text," Barthes' interpretation of Blanchot's "the absence of the work." Looking into the source and background as the ability to no longer be, the *Diary* might indeed resonate anew with the noise surrounding what Rilke called Tolstoi's final flight "in his own figure" and the events at Astapovo surrounding his death, where the strangeness of this figure dying became — and with what diabolical innocence — figured in the images of an emerging international media.

But beyond this, one wonders if Nijinsky's notebooks don't perform yet another turn on what de Man is saying. It would indeed be difficult to maintain that the madness we encounter in Nijinsky's notebooks is generic. In any case, it does not seem to have been produced indifferently by the abstract nature of language or autobiography — "a confusion of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (De Man 1984, 81). There is not only language here but foreign or different language, as even the first paragraph shows. There is in Nijinsky a process, a procedure, a style that rends language apart as a unified form of subjective expression in a way comparable to how Nijinsky took the language of classical ballet movements apart in his earlier choreography, whose very excess of experimentation was probably the reason why Nijinsky lost his place in the *Ballet Russes'* version of the total works of art. The madness of Nijinsky's notebooks, which was locked up, doesn't seem to have been produced only as a result of an autobiographical project, just as it doesn't seem to be only a matter of the mind or intellect. It is there prior to the mind, in the depths, in a way, among the conditions for Nijinsky becoming a writer, and its echo exceeds the work as the trace of a deeply disturbing ambiguity. At the same time, Nijinsky's text, its movement of life, is violated when it is reduced from the standpoint of knowledge to material for diagnosis. If the writing resonates with the language and experience of schizophrenia, at times, it also communicates with the immanent sense of human life and recalls the astonishingly creative choreography of Nijinsky's early career with the *Ballets Russes*. If

Nijinsky's notebooks are singular, this is because their context can be saturated neither by his life before nor afterwards. Indeed, the writing of the notebooks constitutes Nijinsky's assent to writing as difference, to language as affect and becoming, as much as they do an ambiguous assent to fate, an undecidable affirmation that could just as well be termed his "great health."²⁹ One suspects that efforts to stabilize the notebooks in expurgated versions or overly simplistic interpretations would represent symptomatic responses to what Nijinsky's text or its de-facement might reveal. In this context, the opening of Nijinsky's second book could be read again. Immediately after signing off on the first two notebooks belatedly titled *On life*, he writes:

On death

Death came unexpectedly, for I wanted it. I said to myself that I no longer wanted to live. I have not lived long. I have lived for only six months. I have been told that I am mad. I thought that I was alive. They would not let me alone. I lived and rejoiced, but people said I was bad. I realized that people needed death, and I decided that I would not do anything anymore, but could not. I decided to write about death. [...] I have taken down all the drawings and pictures that I have been working on for the last six months (Nijinsky 1995, 151).

When the editors of the *Unexpurgated Version of the Diary* restore Nijinsky's book to its textual integrity, they do not bring the work of Nijinsky to completion. Nijinsky died in 1962, and in the passage *On death* he already feels his life and work have ended. They do, however, restore to his writing the supremely ambiguous affective force to which he yielded his name, that "madness" which the first edition tried to re-organize into a work. If, as Nijinsky thought what he was doing was "*Life*" — and which was judged to be unbearable insanity — we are left to consider what it means when Nijinsky says "people need death" in the form of a book, and the question of the feeling that continues to smolder in the embers.

As the passage from *On death* recalls, during the three months in which he wrote, Nijinsky was also continually working on drawings, paintings, and set designs. His activity of drawing and painting is intertwined with the writing and should be accorded no less value. In the opening passage of the book *On death* we see how Nijinsky identified this activity with "*Life*," or with *his* life, or *a life*, six months in duration, and how he took the pictures down as a sign of death. In her own biography Romola describes the drawings and relates how her husband would lock himself in his room to make picture after picture of "eyes," figures based on the minimal formal vocabulary of the circle, or different combinations of arcs, drawings which have been likened to uncanny masks, "soldier's faces," fish, the symbol of Christ, or the female genitalia. The scope of this production makes it impossible to address in detail here.³⁰ What must be addressed, however, in the

²⁹ By the phrase "good health" I wish to recall Artaud's explanation of the phrase in reference to Van Gogh: "good health is a plethora of deep-seated ills, of a tremendous zest for living, through a thousand corroded wounds, which must be forced to live" (Artaud 1965, 157–58). Compare this with Nietzsche's description of "great health" in the *Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche 1967, 96).

³⁰The book *Tanz der Farben: Nijinsky's Augen und die Abstraktion* published in 2009 by Hubertus Gaßner and Daniel Koep is the best introduction to this part of Nijinsky's work. The only thing I would like to draw attention to here are the analogies between Nijinsky's style as a painter and as a writer. A close reading of the opening

context of any reading that problematizes the diaries' status as *prosopopeia*, is the drawing from the manuscript re-produced in the unexpurgated version immediately after Nijinsky signed-off as "God-Nijinsky" on the first two notebooks, which he titled belatedly *On life* — and immediately before he began the third notebook which at the same time he titled *On death*.

The drawing consists of four curves repeatedly traced vertically on the page, extending beyond the edges to form roughly the shape of an open eye. In the center of this shape, instead of a pupil, Nijinsky has drawn two similar, smaller open eyes, one below the other. Inside the smaller eyes, also in place of pupils, Nijinsky has signed his name in Latin characters, in the French spelling: *Waslaw Nijinsky*.

The drawing's histrionic beauty is disturbing, reminiscent of how de Man reads the "face," the locus of speech, in the work of Wordsworth: a silent gaze failing to find a surface on which to rest, an eye from which we "gather passion," but which, rather than emitting signs of recognition or composing the significant whole of a facial expression, only gives another turn to an intensely silent, opaque ground of the page. Indeed, the feeling of Nijinsky's eyes or faces, so many transformations of a style or procedure of drawing, is all the more intense for not conveying a reassuring, recognizable emotion or expression. The strangeness of the "drawing-signature" reveals the strangeness of the self and constitutes a re-inscription of Nijinsky's de-facement: the eye-shapes, separated from the representation of a face and placed one on top of the other, are open, yet they do not necessarily see or read the name. Instead they split the two parts of the name, even as they hold them together on the blank ground. This signature gathers all the ambiguity of an inordinate destiny in all its essential solitude. By signing the creative work in advance of the end, Nijinsky assents without reservation to the ambiguity and madness of fate, and no knowledge or discourse one might bring to bear upon the text can really mitigate the singular affective force of this gesture, which belongs to the work and exceeds it. The wordlessness of the drawing-signature, the very sacrifice of language-as-word that it performs, makes this all too apparent. Here writing or painting — in Russian they are expressed by the same word *писать* — are reduced to a few moving lines and a name. The proper name, however, is defined more by a singularity than by identity: written as it is drawn divided and spelled in the characters of a foreign language. At this point when it comes to the notebooks of Waslaw Nijinsky one speaks without knowledge or authority, and yet is compelled to say something more. And insofar as one responds, one speaks cautiously, venturing to say that if in works like Tolstoi one encounters an "affective text" or "Text" as it is affected primarily by the indetermination of death, by virtue of their intensity in Nijinsky's notebooks one encounters "a purely affective text," or an "infinitely-

passage of the notebooks reveals Nijinsky's idiosyncratic use of adverbs and conjunctions like *ibo; potomu, cho; a; poetomu* etc. The idiosyncratic force of these words is analogous to the turns of Nijinsky's circle in his style of drawing. That is to say, in Nijinsky's notebooks these words do not simply create a circle, a regularly developing discourse. At their most intense, however, they do create strangely intense and shifting patterns analogous to the series of blue and golden drawings by Nijinsky, where the general movement from drawing to drawing seems to sweep them along, unfolding and composing "eyes" or "masks". See the letter-verses of the fourth notebook in this sense. The darker drawings, where the circles are colored in with black ink, are likewise analogous to the language of the final notebook, where the many ellipses and silences do not detract from the writing's concentration.

strange-making,” disturbing even to the minimum of stability required by institutions and figures of authority. If this “purely affective text” reveals anything, it is an intense experience of the immanence of life as something exceeds what has been lived, the power of knowledge or recognition, and which is perhaps only to be felt.

Conclusion

Nijinsky’s notebooks can be read as a purely affective text. In the notebooks Nijinsky experiences the “open violence” of the work, an obscure experience that leads him to want to write “a big book about feeling that will contain your [твоя] whole life.” The work has the ambition of a Mallarméan book — where everything in the world exists to find a place. The experience of writing that life, however, does not lead to completion or understanding in the sense of a famous artist’s return to himself or a restoration of his whole life through the detour of writing. It leads rather aberrantly to an intense movement that infinitely disturbs the subject as the seat of authority, representation, and the movement of signification, an intense disturbance of the depths that Nijinsky writes as *Feeling*. That this work is written in proximity to the experience of madness and the devastating loss of feeling — catatonia, silence, death — may be no accident; at the same time, the madness of this *feeling* is to be sensed in the fact that it does not merely belong to the case Nijinsky. A human being’s capacity to live and be alive at all, to affect and be affected, implies no less.

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author: Peter Alois Orte
affiliation: UW Madison
email: ptrorte@gmail.com