

Words into Movement: The Ballet as Intersemiotic Translation¹

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In 1959, Roman Jakobson, in his famous article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, extended the concept of translation from the merely verbal to include transfer between different sign systems. On the basis of this, most ballets, which generally derive their aesthetic structure and narrative content from some preceding text, may legitimately be considered as examples of intersemiotic translation. Indeed, many classical ballets are based upon not one but two prior texts - a musical score, which largely determines the form and emotional thrust of the choreography,¹ and a canonical or popular work of literature of which the score is itself a ‘translation’; hence there is a dual transfer involved. This is the case in the three versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that I wish to look at here, all of which are simultaneously based upon Prokofiev’s score and Shakespeare’s play.

If we define ballet as translation into kinesthetic/visual medium of a work previously encoded in verbal or musical form, then the tools used in the discipline of Translation Study may be validly applied to these works. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine some of the constraints operating upon three different ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, produced at different moments during the twentieth century, which I will do so with reference to the categories suggested by André Lefevere in his 1985 article “Why Waste our Time on Rewrites?” These are, in his order,

¹ Published in *Teatro e Tradução: Palcos de Encontro*, Maria João Brilhante & Manuela Carvalho (Eds) Lisbon: Colibri, 2007 (pp.125-138).

“patronage, poetics, universe of discourse, natural language”, and, for translations, “the original text.” (pp.227-235)

While these categories will certainly be familiar to translation scholars, I have found it useful to approach them from a slightly different angle, and in a different order, from Lefevere. The first constraint that I shall consider in my analysis of the ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet* is that provided by the *originals* or source texts upon which the ballets are based, namely Shakespeare’s play and Prokofiev’s score. Although this was the fifth and final category in Lefevere’s list, it is the most obvious starting point for a study of a work deemed to be a translation and, as Lefevere (1985, 233) himself says is the locus where all the other constraints come together. Hence, I shall start by looking at the ballet’s debt to these preceding texts, moving on to a consideration of how the medium itself limits and conditions those aspects of the originals that can realistically be transferred. This is Lefevere’s fourth category of *natural language*; we can think of it here as the kinesthetic code, or the language of dance.

This code, of course, is not something fixed and unchanging; rather, like all languages, it develops and evolves in accordance with a changing society. As a system of communication, involving not only an inventory of devices such as “genres, motifs, symbols, prototypical characters and situations”, but also a “concept of what the role [of ballet] should be in society”, it corresponds to Lefevere’s second constraint, namely *poetics* (ibid. 229). Indeed, this category proves to be one of the most fruitful in our analysis, as the very marked differences between the three versions of *Romeo and Juliet* studied here clearly owe a great deal to changing notions of what is permissible within the boundaries of this particular art form.

Lefevere himself points out that “the functional component of a poetics is obviously closely tied to ideological influences from outside the sphere of the poetics proper, generated by ideological forces in the environment” (ibid. 229). This, then, leads us on to a discussion of the importance of *patronage* in determining the artistic choices made by a choreographer or director of a ballet production. Patronage is Lefevere’s first category, and the one to which he devotes most attention. He identifies three elements: an ideological component, which limits the choice and development of both form and subject matter; an economic component and an element of status (ibid. 227). These three

aspects may be dispensed by a single person or institution (undifferentiated patronage) or by different ones (differentiated), depending upon the economic system operating in the society at the time.

The final constraint that I shall discuss here, Lefevere's third, is the *universe of discourse*, i.e. "the knowledge, the learning, but also the objects and the customs of a certain time to which writers are free to allude in their work" (ibid. 232-3). This perhaps can be understood best as the whole context of reception – a network of significances to which contemporary readers or audiences have access and to which any target-culture-oriented translator (or in this case, choreographer) will refer in his production. Hence, in ballet, no less than in literary translations, film adaptations and other kinds of rewriting, there is often a tendency to update and domesticate traditional tales by introducing (consciously or otherwise) references to contemporary values and habits.

Consequently, a ballet, like other art forms, can no longer be perceived as some self-contained artifact existing on some remote abstract plane. On the contrary, these productions are revealed to be historically situated, indeed very intricately enmeshed, economically, ideologically and semantically, in their particular sociocultural contexts.

Romeo and Juliet

There have of course been many versions of *Romeo and Juliet* over the years in all sorts of media. But as regards ballets, the most significant choreographies have been the following:

- Leonid Lavroksy's 1940 version for the Kirov starring Galina Ulanova; this was conceived in the spirit of Socialist Realism, with the emphasis upon the social conflict of feuding families and an elaborate reconciliation scene at the end. It was made into a film in 1954, and reworked in 1989 by Yuri Grigovitch;
- John Cranko's 1958 version for La Scala, Milan, starring Carla Fracci. Unfortunately this version is not available on video;
- Kenneth Macmillan's 1965 version for the Royal Ballet, starring Nureyev and Fonteyn, who were of course superstars in that period; this was essentially conceived in the spirit of realism and as a family spectacle, full of colour;

- Rudolf Nureyev's version, first performed with the London Festival Ballet in 1977 with Patricia Ruanne and himself in the leading roles, and reworked in 1984 for the Paris Opera.

Given the unavailability of the Cranko choreography in film form, I have been unable to include it in my analysis.² As regards the other three, there are considerable discrepancies between available versions of the same choreography as a result of the use of different dancers, stages, costumes, even sets. This highlights the essentially unstable nature of performance, which is rarely perfectly reproducible. Moreover, any analysis that depends upon a video recording is also heavily mediated by the process of filming; our interpretation is influenced by camera angles, close ups of facial expression, the editing process and of course framing devices that would not have been available to the live audiences seated in the auditorium. All this naturally undermines the universality of any observations made.

Lefevere's Constraints as Applied to Ballet Versions of R&J

Constraints are often a source of great creativity for choreographers. As this analysis shows, some of the most inventive and culturally interesting solutions have resulted from the need to find a way around different kinds of constraints.

1) The Originals:

a) Shakespeare's Play

The main difficulty in adapting a work of literature to the ballet stage is essentially the question of how to translate words (which may be abstract, poetic or hypothetical) into movement. Simple narratives constructed around a series of concrete events naturally have staging potential (which partly accounts for why many of the great classical ballets are based upon fairy tales); but the extended speeches and dialogue of more canonical literature are difficult to transpose without a serious loss of force.

Of course dramatic works such as Shakespeare's play also contemplate a certain amount of action in addition to words, and it is therefore those scenes that provide most of the raw material for the ballet. Hence, in Prokofiev's score, which provides the overall

structure for the choreography, we see a considerable shift of focus in favour of action scenes, which have been developed and extended (the fight in Act I Sc. I lasts for four musical episodes and a total of ten minutes, while the ball, from the receiving of the guests to their final departure, involves eight musical episodes and lasts a full twenty eight minutes). The more static or verbal scenes, on the other hand, occupy much less space proportionally in the score than they do in Shakespeare's play.

When the content of the discourse is hypothetical or abstract, the composer provides only minimal help to the choreographer; most of the semantic content has to be transmitted through movement, with support from the visual signs (props, set, costumes, etc). This constraint has resulted in some very inventive solutions. For example, the scene where Friar Laurence is explaining his plan to Juliet is, in Nureyev's version, achieved with an ingenious use of lighting: the stage darkens and an illuminated cell appears in a far corner of it where another Juliet can be seen drinking the potion and enacting out the projected events (Prokofiev's dreamy 'potion' theme and the fuzzy lighting help to indicate that this is an unreal or hypothetical situation). Macmillan, whose version is much more centred on the here-and-now, uses simple mime and props to transmit the same idea; while Lavrovsky resorts to the conventional ballet device for suggesting the domain of the unreal – a troupe of girls in white gauzy dresses, who mediate Juliet's pas-de-deux with the (absent) Romeo.

Similarly, Juliet's anguished soliloquy before taking the drug (Act IV Sc. III) is done very differently in the different versions. Both Lavrovsky and Nureyev focus on the psychological domain using spectres (the ghosts of Mercutio and Tybalt in the case of the Nureyev; Romeo and Tybalt in the case of Lavrovsky). Macmillan, on the other hand, does not attempt to depict Juliet's inner torments, but merely shows us her external behaviour – a frantic anguished dance in which she hurls the vial to the floor, before sinking catatonic on to the bed.

b) Prokofiev's Score

The score perhaps constrains the choreography even more than the play, since not only the structure but also the emotional force of the work are determined by the music. The characters each have their own musical portrait theme or "leitmotif", which orients the

way the role may be interpreted, and it is the interaction and development of these musical themes that forms the structure of the whole.

The choreographers have generally maintained the fifty two episodes of the musical score in the same order as Prokofiev intended. The only significant alteration was made by Nureyev, who moved Episode No. 7 (which Prokofiev had intended to represent the wrath of Prince Escalus) to the beginning, thus allowing it to set the tone for the whole work. As this is a very discordant passage, full of dramatic crescendos and shrieking brass, it puts the emphasis clearly upon the theme of conflict, thus changing the focus considerably from the colourful romantic spectacle of the Macmillan production.

2) *The Code*

Although ballet, like other kinds of performance, may partake of the semiotic potential offered by the set, lighting, props, costumes, music, etc, it is the kinesthetic code (i.e. the expressive resource of the body and of movement through space and time) that defines this particular art form and carries most of the semantic responsibility. The choreographer's raw material thus involves both *shape* (the forms assumed by bodies, individually and in ensemble, and the way they are positioned in the dance area) and *time* (rhythm and speed of movement, and general dynamics). Early dance theorists believed the semiotic potential of dance to originate in nature: Rudolf Laban (1966), for example, claimed that that dance derives from a kind of living architecture already present in the world, created by human movement and made up of pathways tracing shapes through space; while Doris Humphries (1955) stresses its origins in the natural rhythms of the body and in the supposedly universal values of symmetry/asymmetry as expressive of order/disorder. Today, however, there is more awareness of the historical nature of dance, of the fact that dance movements derive from a culture and are conventionalized into patterns which are transmitted and learned.

A fruitful approach to these works, then, is to examine the way in which the code itself has changed across time and in different social environments. This is effectively the Poetics of dance, corresponding to Lefevere's second constraint.

3) *Poetics*

Ballet at the end of the nineteenth century was a highly conventionalized code with only a limited number of acceptable movements; rigid norms governed the way in which character, situations and mood were to be portrayed. The twentieth century saw a gradual loosening up on all levels, a process which is interestingly reflected in the three versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that we are examining here.

The Lavrovsky was conceived in the spirit of the nineteenth-century romantic ballet and thus the semiotic value is invested almost entirely in the choreography. There is no set to speak of, the costumes signify only stereotypically, and the lighting merely illuminates the dancers on a bare darkened stage. The range of steps used is also very restricted. There is no attempt at realism and the narrative has to be interpreted through the conventions of classical ballet. Hence, the balcony scene, bedroom scene and scene at the tomb are all represented by conventional pas-de-deux, with no effort to depict the specificities of the situation. Character is purely stereotyped: the couple are the archetypal romantic hero and heroine and Tybalt is a swashbuckling pantomime villain. Also noticeable is the hierarchical nature of the casting (something that was only really subverted in Nureyev's generation as director). This dictated that the leading role should be danced by the prima ballerina, even if this meant that the adolescent Juliet were in fact older than both her mother and the nurse. It also meant that male roles were severely limited, with all the focus falling upon the leading females.

In the Macmillan production, naturalism is the dominant mode on all levels, as befitted the spirit of the age. The set is highly realistic and very complex, with lots of steps, windows and balconies on different levels, and there is a high degree of coherence between one scene and the next (the curtains in Juliet's bedroom are also glimpsed from the outside in the balcony scene, for example). Props, costumes and lighting all aim at verisimilitude and the elaborate crowd scenes involve multiple goings-on and a mass of incidental detail. There is psychological realism too, with clear influence from naturalistic acting (emotional states are depicted through behaviour and facial expressions, which the film gives in close-up). Supernatural elements have predictably been minimized; and, unlike the Lavrovsky production, the dead here act dead; in fact, one of the most beautiful passages from this work is the famous pas-de-deux at the tomb, when Romeo dances with the limp lifeless body of Juliet.

The Nureyev production is different again in that the symbolic now takes over from realism as the dominant mode, not only in the choreography but also in the other dimensions of performance. Hence, the lighting and set are used metaphorically to set the mood (the vast empty stage of the Bastille in Paris is mostly a dark cloud-filled blue with the action presented in silhouette before it, brightening only to a dull orange in the less sombre moments); and location is suggested metonymically (a statue on the skyline suggests the town square; a line of trees for Mantua; a patterned frieze or bedstead to invoke an interior). Props too are symbolic (a bronze face reminiscent of a screaming mask of Greek tragedy on the outside of the Capulet house; a skull on Friar Laurence's altar) and costumes are colour-coded, with green for the Montagues and red for the Capulets (Juliet's approaching maturity is signaled by the exchange of her gauzy shift for a rich brocade costume, as worn by the women of the tribe; the scene where she is being forced to marry Paris is depicted as being forcibly laced into the red Capulet dress).

As regards the choreography of the Nureyev version, while this is still the idiom of classical ballet, it now incorporates movements from many other sources: there are authentic Renaissance court dances (such as the Wheel of Fortune dance performed at the ball) and folk dances borrowed from other cultures (eg. the Siena Flag Dance); modern dance is used in the wedding scene and in the pas-de-quatre after Juliet agrees to marry Paris; there is a strong influence of the American musical (the 'rumble' from *West Side Story* noticeably leaves its mark on the fight scene at the beginning), while mime, circus, naturalistic acting and the ritualistic gestures of youth street cultures have also contributed.

Another significant change is the incorporation of framing devices which deliberately undermine any illusion of reality. A curious prologue has been added, in which cloaked bald figures playing dice claw their way across the front of the stage, before proceeding to push apart the city walls. There is also an interesting menu of devices borrowed from cinema (multiple frames are created through lighting, and the choreography incorporates 'freeze frame', 'slow motion', and the 'cross-dissolve' technique to simulate Romeo awakening from his dream in Mantua), all of which effectively serve to break the illusion and mark the passage into psychological mode. In fact, the representation of the psychological domain, such as dream states and alternative

realities, is a very important aspect of this production, effectively marking a change in social focus from the solid realism of the Macmillan.

3) Patronage

The Lavrovsky version was of course highly constrained by the norms of Socialist Realism, having been first produced in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. *Romeo and Juliet* was a favourite of the Soviets and by 1940 guidelines existed as to how it should be interpreted on stage (Shurbanov & Sokolova, 2001:101-4). Hence we see here the stereotyping of the characters into two camps, those perceived as the ‘forces of progress and humanity’ (Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, Benvolio, Friar Laurence and the people) and those seen as the obstacles to that progress (Tybalt, the Capulets in general, and Paris); the portrayal of Juliet as the heroic fighter against convention, and the predictable reconciliation scene and apotheosis of the lovers at the end.

The Macmillan and Nureyev versions are of course dictated more by market forces than by any imposed ideology, and reflect the changing tastes of their times. The Macmillan is a colourful family spectacle designed to pull crowds (the choice of superstars Fonteyn and Nureyev to play the leading roles reflects this), which emphasizes the romantic aspect of the tale above the tragic. The world it depicts is one that does not disturb or offend, but confirms social norms and expectations in a way that would have been comforting to its audiences.

This is not the case with the Nureyev, however, which reflects a society that is no longer quite so secure about its values and hierarchies. The production also capitalizes upon themes that were becoming topical or fashionable; for example, there is a marked homosexual subtext to the filmed version, which, in connection to images of plague and references to fate, clearly suggest a very contemporary preoccupation with AIDS.³

5) Universe of Discourse

The notion of ‘universe of discourse’, as applied to the poetics of dance, refers to the entire cultural framework of reception that gives meaning to the signs used.

Hence, Lavrovsky’s universe of discourse was the code constructed by Socialist Realism, which canonized Shakespeare as one of the “great precursors of Communism”

and appropriated *Romeo and Juliet* as an allegory of the struggle between the forces of darkness and light (Shurbanov & Sokolova, 2001, 101-4). One of the most interesting consequences of this was the refusal to entertain the concept of fate or doom. This meant that all such references were erased or reformulated so that human agency (centred on the figure of Tybalt) becomes responsible for the tragedy.

Macmillan's version presents us with a reassuringly stable world, in which power is centralized, social hierarchies clearly defined and the boundaries between age, gender and social class are all firmly in place. The tangible physical world is also clearly marked off from the 'imaginary' or 'unreal' in a way that leaves no place for ghosts or the supernatural.

By Nureyev's time, however, things have changed. Now, social authority is seen as fragile and transient (the Duke only appears at the very back of the stage as a distant ineffectual figure); gender norms are subverted, and individual identity is presented not as something fixed and unified, but rather as something in flux, that can be disturbed by dreams and potions. Indeed, in this version, the psychological world at times appears more real than the physical, marking an important shift in perception in the universe of discourse as a whole.

To conclude, then, this analysis of the constraints operating upon three ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet* have shown us something not only about the works themselves but also about changing contexts of reception. It highlights the fact that, as with any translation, or indeed any cultural artifact, the text itself arises out of a particular social configuration. The poetics and indeed the very code itself respond to and are affected by changes in the cultural environment, feeding back into society in their turn in an endless cyclical process of growth and change.

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- Macmillan: a) Royal Ballet with Margot Fonteyn & Rudolf Nureyev (Carlton, VHF) 1966
- b) Royal Ballet, Covent Garden with Wayne Eagling & Alessandra Ferri (NVC Arts DVD), 1984
- Nureyev: a) Paris Opera Ballet with Monique Loudières & Manuel Legris (NVC Arts DVD), 1995
- b) 'Dancer's Dream', documentary of Paris Opera Ballet with Elisabeth Maurin & Manuel Legris (TDK DVD), 1999

¹ This subservience of dance to music was challenged in the mid 1930s and '40s by new theories that inverted the relationship or did away with it altogether (modern and contemporary dance).

² This has been studied extensively by Nancy Isenberg (2004), who interprets it within the Italian postwar context.

³ I have explored this aspect in more detail in my article “Star Cross’d Lovers in the Age of AIDS: Rudolf Nureyev’s *Romeo and Juliet* as Intersemiotic Translation’ in *Literary Intermediality. The Transit of Literature through the Media Circuit*. Ed. Maddalena Pennacchia Punzi (New York: Peter Lang, 2007)