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Noverre's lament: inscription, posterity,
and the ephemeral art of dance

Abstract

Jean-Georges Noverre defined pantomime ballet, or *ballet d'action*, as an ephemeral art. In his published writings, Noverre argued that to notate a ballet's movement was both inadequate – in that the present day's dance notation could not record a pantomime ballet – and inappropriate – in that the passions, the core of pantomime ballet, could not be recorded as discrete, repeatable units the way steps could have been. At the same time, Noverre was deeply invested in posterity, both his own, and that of pantomime ballet as a form. This essay examines the values of ephemerality and posterity in the writings of Noverre, reconciling the contradictions inherent in these values by considering Noverre's views on what he considers appropriate means of documentation in view of future readers and dancers.

1. *Introduction*

Pourquoi ne connoissons-nous aucuns maîtres de ballets? C'est que les ouvrages de ce genre ne durent qu'un instant, et sont effacés presque aussitôt que l'impression, qu'ils ont produite.

Jean-Georges Noverre, *Lettres sur la danse, sur les ballets, et les arts* (1803–1804, vol. 1, 1)

Les beautés de cet art sont fugitives et passagères; on les admire lorsqu'elles se montrent, et elles échappent lorsqu'on veut les saisir.

Jean-Georges Noverre, *Lettres sur les arts imitateurs en général, et sur la danse en particulier* (1807, vol. 1, 154)

In the second half of the eighteenth-century, the term 'éphémère' – originally applied to short-lived phenomena from the natural world – came to be applied as well to '*ouvrages*', or works (Féraud 1787–1788). Although '*ou-*

vrages éphémères' most famously referred to journalistic texts, playbills and performance programs represent another major area of popular, inexpensive print materials that circulated widely during this period. Such printed ephemera played a major role in the creation and circulation of theatrical works, including eighteenth-century pantomime ballets, also known as *ballets d'action*.¹ Pantomime ballet was a new performance form that depicted a narrative centering the passions, set to music, without spoken text, and using gesture and movement.

Although all performance is fleeting, dance – given its status as a body-centered, rather than text-centered, durational art – is considered to have a particular relationship to the concept of the ephemeral, summarized by performance theorist André Lepecki (2004, 126) as “dance’s somewhat embarrassing predicament of always losing itself as it performs itself”. Lepecki, following Jean-Noël Laurenti, identifies the late eighteenth-century as the moment in which dance’s relationship to inscription changes. As Lepecki summarizes, a shift occurs “from a perception of dance as unproblematically translatable from code to steps [...] to an understanding of dance as elusive presence, dance as the fleeting trace of an always irretrievable, never fully translatable motion: neither into notation, nor into writing” (Ibid.: 127). Although the shift described by Lepecki minimizes the flexibility in the uses of dance notation documented by Marie Glon (see 2015; 2018), Lepecki has nevertheless identified a major shift in the discourse surrounding European dance.

Although all dance is ephemeral (and indeed, the concept of ephemerality in dance has become so omnipresent as to have become meaningless) ballet master and theorist Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810) believed in some sense that pantomime ballet was doubly ephemeral. It was ephemeral first, in the way that any time-based art disappears, but also – and this is why Noverre had such difficulty clearly expressing his objections to notation – because it was not, in its ideal form, reducible to signs. The individual performer, free in their interpretation, harnesses their own enthusiasm to make the passions visible and legible to spectators. In its ideal, this improvised process cannot be recorded because any given ballet is recreated anew at each performance, not through

1 I use the term ‘pantomime ballet’ to refer generally to the narrative ballets of the second half of the eighteenth-century in various national and linguistic contexts. See Sabee 2022, 12–17. For a comprehensive overview of Noverre’s ideas, see Pappacena 2011.

the slightly different execution of steps or gestures, but through the channeling of the passions. By their very definition, the passions occur in gradations that cannot be reduced to signs.

This late eighteenth-century shift in discourse occurred in large part due to the evolution in dance that occurred immediately prior to and continued during this period, namely, the invention of pantomime ballet; the primary system for recording dance in Europe, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation, had been developed to notate *la belle danse*, now known as baroque dance. Pantomime ballet, however, considered the meaning of a performance to stem from its staging of the passions rather than from the dance steps it contained, rendering Beauchamp-Feuillet notation unhelpful for the recording of such performances. Noverre emphasizes this newly ephemeral dimension of dance in his writings, in what Lepecki (2004, 126–30) refers to as “Noverre’s lament”. Noverre in turn relates dance’s ephemerality to the inferior status of the ballet master during the eighteenth-century and to the status of dance itself. Yet while Noverre’s writing emphasizes the inability for dance to be preserved on paper – and indeed, the undesirability of such an approach – Noverre simultaneously produced volumes of textual material explicitly intended for posterity. Although the *livrets* had originally been created as part of the genesis of individual ballets – in other words, they represent theatrical ephemera – others were designed with posterity in mind from the time of their creation. Although Noverre laments dance’s disappearance, he does not envision or advocate an approach to the form that preserves present dances for future audiences. Rather, he sees the writing of dance theory as a means to ensure the posterity of ballet masters and dance as an art form, and the rhetoric employed around ephemerality is but one element of this approach.

2. *Notation in the context of pantomime ballet*

During its prime, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation had not only served to record dances, but also “served as an instrument for communication and elaboration within the milieu of dancing masters” (Laurenti 1994, 85–86). Despite its development in the French court, the notation did not serve only as a tool for the unidirectional dissemination of dances from the court outward to the provinc-

es or to dancing masters in other European nations.² Rather, as dances in the notation were transcribed and re-edited in other nations, they were changed, whether by error or purposeful alteration, including proposed updates to the notation system itself. Furthermore, dancing masters outside of France in turn used Beauchamp-Feuillet notation to transcribe and publish their own dances, rather than those emanating from France (Glon 2015, n.p.; Glon 2018, 250).

By the midcentury, however, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation had fallen into disuse as the use of baroque dance vocabulary declined (Franko 2011, 324); although Noverre relied on baroque dance in his compositions, he also used additional vocabulary and mime that lacked a mode of notation in the system (Nye 2011, 163). In practice, due to these changes in technique, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation was becoming an obsolete system, inadequate for the representation of the new kinds of movements at the core of pantomime-ballet. Furthermore, it also came to symbolize the virtuosity of baroque dance vocabulary, criticized by ballet reformers and *philosophes* alike.

Noverre criticizes notation for three primary reasons. First, he claims, it takes too long to decipher (1760, 363). Second, as noted above, dance vocabulary had changed in the years since Beauchamp-Feuillet notation was developed and the system lacked a way to notate the movement of the arms, body positions, and head positions and movements (1760, 365). Third, and most forcefully, Noverre argues that a notated dance is inferior to a live one, claiming that a notation only allows the person consulting it to perceive “traces” of the original (1760, 367). Here, Noverre misunderstands, whether willfully or not, how the notation was used in practice – namely that notations were not intended to substitute for the live performance of dances but rather that they facilitated the sharing of dance material across time and space (Glon 2015; Laurenti 1994, 86).

This claim will become a core point within the literary quarrel between Noverre and Italian ballet master Gasparo Angiolini that occurred between 1773 and 1776 (Lombardi 1998; Fabbricatore 2017): Angiolini, unlike Noverre, considered Beauchamp-Feuillet notation to function simply as a form of notation, no better, no worse than music notation. He writes, “La cifra della coreografia nella maniera, che io la comprendo, non sarebbe nè più, nè meno

2 Marie Glon (2015, n.p.) cautions us that although the idea that Louis XIV “ordered” the notation system in order to establish French supremacy in dance “is not necessarily false,” it should be approached with caution.

imperfetta di quella della musica” (1773, 61). Although Laurenti claims that Noverre “does not succeed in formulating [this criticism] clearly” (1994, 86), I would argue that here Noverre attempts to make a case for dance’s exceptionalism, whereas Angiolini relies on analogies between dance and music.

In the passage, Noverre attempts to explain why he considers the notated copy to be inferior to the original. He writes:

Je n’y vois & l’on n’y verra que le premier crayon ou la premiere pensée de leurs talents; je n’y distinguerai que des beautés éparses, sans *ensemble*, sans *coloris*; les grands traits en seront effacés; les proportions, les contours agréables ne frapperont point mes yeux; j’apercevrai seulement des vestiges & des traces d’une action dans les pieds que n’accompagneront ni les attitudes du corps, ni les positions des bras, ni l’expression des têtes; en un mot, vous ne m’offrirez que l’ombre imparfaite du mérite supérieur, & qu’une copie froide et muette d’originaux inimitables (Noverre 1760, 367–68).

As Laurenti writes (1994, 86), “The same difficulty is found in musical notation, and indeed, in the notation of any discourse, above all a discourse charged with rhetorical force. How can the presence of the object be regained through that which decomposes it? How can a fluidity of movement be conjured by the immobile?”. Noverre’s confusingly-worded objection seems simply to be that the notation is a copy, rather than an original, despite the fact that proponents of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation would have agreed with Noverre; a notated dance had never been intended to substitute for a live one.

The immediately previous passage, however, is revealing in this regard. Noverre proposes to ask a series of questions to the practitioners of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation that regard reputation and posterity: “À quoi cette science leur a servi? Quel lustre a-t-elle donné à leurs talents? Quel vernis a-t-elle répandu sur leur réputation?” (Noverre 1760, 366). (He assumes that they would respond negatively to all of these questions). To get around this, Noverre proposes to reformulate the notation system by enlisting the aid of the celebrated painter François Boucher and engraver Charles-Nicolas Cochin. Through their collaboration, notation accompanied by images might be able to convey some of what Beauchamp-Feuillet notations lacks: “les attitudes du corps, l’expression des têtes, les contours des bras, la position des jambes, l’élégance du vêtement, la vérité du *costume*” (Ibid.: 384). With the addition of descriptions and stage plans created by these two artists, Noverre believes that dancers’ names and images will finally be preserved for posterity: “Quel moyen

plus sûr pour [l'Académie royale de danse] & pour les Danseurs qu'elle croiroit devoir célébrer," he writes, "de voler à l'immortalité que celui d'emprunter les ailes de deux grands hommes faits pour graver à jamais au temple de Mémoire & leurs noms & celui des personnages qu'ils voudront illustrer?" (Ibid.: 385).

Yet Noverre appears conflicted even on this point: later in the same letter, he proposes revision to be a key means of keeping a ballet vibrant. Describing a hypothetical situation in which Jean-Barthélemy Lany is asked to restage a ballet five or six years after its creation, Noverre proposes that revision would be a superior approach compared to an attempt to recreate the ballet exactly as it had been performed in the past. To recreate from memory, rather than a textual aide, will create 'new' ballets better than the originals: "s'il dédaigne un pareil secours [Beauchamp-Feuillet notation]" Noverre writes, "il ne les composera de nouveau qu'avec plus de goût; il réparera même les fautes imperceptibles qui pouvoient y régner; car le souvenir de nos fautes est celui qui s'efface le moins" (Ibid.: 393). If we are to follow Noverre in this passage, the ballet does not pretend to exist as an immutable work, even at the level of the ballet master/choreographer.

During the eighteenth-century, "copying texts, and especially images, [played a role] in the process of making new knowledge" (Fransen and Reinhart 2019, 211). The participation of Boucher and Cochin in documenting pantomime ballet, however, would arguably have created a secondary, related artwork, rather than a notated copy of the movement contained within a ballet. Why would this approach have been more appealing to Noverre than that of the notated copy? Although in the previous section of this essay we encountered the three reasons Noverre gives in the *Lettres* for foregoing the notation of his ballets, I would argue that to notate dance steps – rather than gestures, or even affect – also runs counter to the core of his experimental project.

Noverre envisioned pantomime ballet as a form in which the passions, rather than the steps, were paramount. If the staging of the passions indeed formed the aspect from which pantomime ballet derived meaning, then it would not make sense to notate steps at all, but rather, to determine a means of notating the passions. As Christina Thurner writes regarding this period, "The stirring of souls and the conquering of hearts by emotion signal a conception of art in general, and of dance in particular, which no longer strove toward mimesis, an aesthetics of representation, but initiated instead a sensualist aesthetics of affect" (2012, 18). The relationship between music and acting harnessed

dance's expressive potential in attempting to create "an affective correspondence between stage and audience" (Ibid.: 20). If this relationship is central to the meaning of pantomime ballet, how might it have been recorded?

John Weaver, an English ballet master, had earlier experimented with textual means of writing down pantomime. In the program for his *The Loves of Mars and Venus, a dramattick entertainment of dancing*, Weaver provided a pantomime glossary. In the glossary, Weaver describes an emotional state, a personal quality, or even some performative utterances, such as the act of threatening. Attached to each of these terms is a description of the relevant bodily movement (1717, 21–23, 28). In many cases, the term acts as a keyword in the program, theoretically allowing a spectator to decode the emotions and some of the action in the scene unfolding onstage.

Such an approach, however, was counter to what Noverre envisioned (1760, 16). Rather than mapping gestures onto words, as in Weaver's model, Noverre's pantomime ballet, to quote Sophia Rosenfeld (2004, 65), "faced none of the expressive limitations currently associated with words". Noverre's emphasis on the infinite variety of gesture, as compared with verbal language, presents distinct difficulties in developing any kind of recording system:

Lorsque les Danseurs animés par le sentiment, se transformeront sous mille formes différentes avec les traits variés des passions; lorsqu'ils seront des prothées, & que leur physionomie & leurs regards traceront tous les mouvements de leur ame; lorsque leurs bras sortiront de ce chemin étroit que l'école leur a prescrit, & que parcourant avec autant de grace que de vérité un espace plus considérable, ils décriront par des positions justes les mouvements succesifs des passions (Noverre 1760, 122).

Rather than an emphasis on steps, narrative, or specific gestures, Noverre expected dancers to surpass these textual approaches to performance. In the passage above, he underscores the role of sentiment in the dancers' approach; rather than executing steps or moving through a mime sequence provided to them by someone else, feeling plays a key role in the representation of their internal state externally. As he summarizes, the "mouvemens de l'ame [...] ne peuvent se limiter par un nombre déterminé de gestes" (Ibid.: 265). (By this argument, then, the problems with Beauchamp-Feuillet notation that he describes are not the only aspects of the system that have kept him from using it; the passions, for Noverre, cannot be confined to a one-to-one correlation with signs, whether verbal or pictorial, and thus simply cannot be written down.

3. *Enthusiasm, improvisation, and reception*

It is not immediately apparent what these gestures – not linked to words, and infinite in their variety – would have looked like, but Noverre claims his approach to staging and rehearsing a ballet would have been closer to that of a poet who gives himself over to the actor's interpretation than a dancing master who demonstrates a step for a dancer to copy (Ibid.: 16–17). The process of the execution of a given gesture, he writes, begins in the soul: “Suivons les mouvements de notre ame, elle ne peut nous trahir lorsqu'elle sent vivement; & si dans ces instants elle entraîne le bras à tel ou tel geste, il est toujours aussi juste que correctement dessiné, & son effet est sûr. Les passions sont les ressorts qui font jouer la machine: quels que soient les mouvements qui en résultent, ils ne peuvent manquer d'être vrais” (Ibid.: 266).

This process of internal emotional agitation generating artistic creation is directly tied to the concept of enthusiasm, genius, and in turn, improvisation: “Portez l'amour de votre Art jusqu'à l'enthousiasme. On ne réussit dans les compositions théâtrales qu'autant que le cœur est agité; que l'ame est vivement émue; que l'imagination est embrasée; que les passions tonnent, & que le génie éclaire” (Ibid.: 59).

If the performance emanates from an internal agitation, rather than a set movement text to be executed, the stakes of inscription are indeed markedly different from those involved in notating *la belle danse*. At the time of Noverre's writing, Louis de Cahusac, writing in his now famous article “Enthousiasme” for Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, rehabilitated the concept, “distaning it [and related terms] from their negative connotations” that would have associated them with the irrational (Cuillé 2021, 93). For Noverre, like for Cahusac in the *Encyclopédie*, enthusiasm is a positive quality in an artist, creating the spontaneity and passion that in turn can facilitate a genial performance.

This stylistic freedom in eighteenth-century performance broadly speaking, Hedy Law recounts, was directly related to motion (2020, 136). It also relates to reception, in that, in contrast to discursive theater, in which, Noverre argues, spectators might be touched differently because an actor's delivery might be too intense for one spectator and not enough for another, pantomime left to the spectator the ability to interpret it to the degree appropriate for herself (1807, vol.1, x). This benefit of pantomime, Noverre claimed, would create an effect “plus général et plus uniforme” (1807, vol. 1, xii). This is because

pantomime “laisse à chaque spectateur le soin de lui prêter un dialogue qui est d’autant plus juste qu’il est toujours en mesure avec l’émotion que l’on a reçue” (1807, vol. 1, xii). Due to its non-verbal nature, in concert with the non-verbal nature of the passions, pantomime allows the performer to express sentiment more accurately than with language.

Encyclopedist Jean-François Marmontel agreed with Noverre in that pantomime’s non-verbal nature lent it a kind of power.³ Also like Noverre, Marmontel believed that the improvisatory role of the performer diverged from that of the actor in spoken theater: “L’acteur est continuellement le copiste du poète, le *pantomime* est original,” Marmontel wrote. “L’un est asservi au sentiment & à la pensée d’autrui, l’autre se livre & s’abandonne aux mouvements de son ame” (1777, 231). For both thinkers, following from the impossibility of recording the nuance of emotional states in language, notating gesture would have been impossible. Marmontel articulates here why the concept of a singular, identifiable work might not function in the context of pantomime ballet: while in theater, actors ‘copy’ the author’s text in their recitation of it, dancers, in pantomime ballet, as well as other forms harnessing pantomime, they “supplied their idiosyncratic interpretations of the texts and contributed another layer of moral liberty to the compositions” (Law 2020, 3). Via this interpretive layer, in which bodily performance surpasses the possibilities of text, dancer-mimes ‘create’ an original work in each iteration of a performance.

4. *Restaging Noverrian pantomime ballet*

Following this logic, it is difficult to even conceive of what a copy – or restaging – of a Noverrian ballet might be. One point of view is that ballet programs functioned as a kind of notation, and that while other elements might be copied in a restaging, they would be subsidiary to the re-performance of the original narrative (Nye 2008, 55). One ballet master in particular, Charles Lepicq (1744–1806), undertook a particularly large number of restagings of Noverre’s works, restagings that diverged markedly in their dance content from the Noverrian originals. Taken together, these restagings and Noverre’s opinions

3 The line of reasoning for the remainder of this section appears in expanded form in Sabee 2020.

of Lopicq over the course of his career shed additional light on how Noverre conceived of pantomime ballet's identity as well as its ephemeral elements.

Lopicq, Noverre's student and disciple, arrived in Naples in 1772. During his time there he staged both his own ballets as well as his versions of those by Noverre. Yet Lopicq's take on Noverrian ballet as he staged it in Naples diverged in one significant manner the way these ballets would have been staged under Noverre: Lopicq included numerous dancers with training in the so-called *grotesque* genre. Grotesque dance emphasized athletic feats, jumps, and great flexibility, above and beyond the staid aesthetics of the *danse noble*, the dance genre that underpinned the danced elements of pantomime ballet. It enjoyed extreme popularity in Italy and in this context dancers who specialized in the noble or *demi-caractère* genres would still have been trained in grotesque dance. As Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell writes, "almost all of those who studied in Italy received a grounding in the difficult techniques of the aerial style and a schooling in the art of pantomime" (2005, 26).

The expertise of dancers in multiple genres and the movement of dancers between them is significant because Noverre believed that grotesque dance, in contrast to noble dance, did not possess discursive power. (Of the *danse grotesque*, he writes, "Elle ne dit rien" [1760, 229–230]). This standpoint diverged from Italian and specifically Neapolitan points of view. Notably, Gennaro Magri underscored dancers' need for versatility:

I veri Ballerini, o siano Serio o Comici, devono avere egualmente il possesso generale di tutto quello si appartiene al ballo; né distinzione veruna puol correre da un Carattere all'altro, che se difficile è il ballar serio, non è più facile il vero comico grazioso. E che forse l'arte di esprimere per mezzo de' gesti la Pantomime, l'Azione comica, la deve avere il Grottesco meno di quella del Serio, per esprimer questi la sua Tragica? (1779; 2018, 16)

Elsewhere, I have argued that Lopicq's work was shaped by the changing geographic and cultural settings in which he worked and that he endeavored to cater to local tastes while simultaneously honoring the legacy of his teacher Noverre (Sabee 2020).⁴ This approach is particularly evident in Lopicq's work in Naples. There, catering to public interest in and support for the more athletic

⁴ Other former students of Noverre, including Sébastien Gallet and Domenico Le Fevre also employed grotesque dancers in roles that had been designed for dancers trained in the noble style.

performances characteristic of the *grotteschi*, Lepicq incorporated dancers with substantial training in grotesque dance in his restagings of Noverre's ballets. Perhaps most notably, Lepicq worked with Veronica Cocchi (Morelli), a dancer with training in the grotesque style. Cocchi appeared regularly in leading roles in Lepicq's ballets, including in his *Medea, e Giasone*, staged after Noverre.

The way in which the libretto is credited reveals a certain approach to authorship, helping to elucidate which elements of pantomime ballet were considered ephemeral and which were considered durable. Specifically, it states that Lepicq is here the "inventore, e direttore e primo ballerino", although the ballet itself is entitled "Medea e Giasone, ballo tragico d'invenzione del celebre sig. Noverre" (Metastasio 1775, 20). This approach to authorship could be interpreted as closer to that of the nineteenth-century, in which the librettist and choreographer independently contributed the scenario, and choreography for a production. Yet given the tight linkage between Noverre and Lepicq, it seems likely that Lepicq would have reused certain elements of Noverre's original choreographic composition, though it is extremely unlikely he possessed a written document allowing for a production that could purport to replicate Noverre's original pantomime ballet. Furthermore, the inclusion of dancers with substantial grotesque training would have created a type of adaptation; both the noble and *grotesque* genres (and indeed, also the combination of the two genres, in those polyvalent dancers working in Italy where expertise in *grotesque* dance underpinned training more generally) would have sculpted a particular physicality in dancers with this training. In this way, the dancers with whom Lepicq was working in Naples would have executed his *Medea, e Giasone* differently than the dancers who had appeared in Noverre's Stuttgart original.

It is difficult to know what Noverre would have thought about such a performance, given the vehemence with which he denigrated grotesque dance and denied its expressive potential. Nevertheless, late in both ballet masters' careers, Noverre dedicated significant space in the 1807 edition of his *Lettres* to Lepicq. Here, he writes:

Les belles proportions de sa taille, la noblesse de sa figure, l'harmonie enchanteresse de ses mouvements, et le fini précieux d'une exécution d'autant plus étonnante qu'elle étoit toujours facile, et que les efforts du corps étoient sans cesse dérobés par les grâces; tant de perfections réunies lui obtinrent le plus brillant succès tant à la cour qu'à la ville (1807, vol. 2, 118).

Here, Noverre clearly describes a dancer working in the noble genre. Yet he also notes that he created the '*genre mixte*' for Lopicq and Marie-Madeleine Guimard, who excelled in it after the conclusion of Guimard's career working in the serious style (1807, vol. 2, 117). Bringing these views together, Noverre refers to Lopicq as a "Prothée de la danse [qui] réunissoit tous les genres (1803, vol. 2, 158)". Despite their divergent views on grotesque dance, Noverre appears to have appreciated Lopicq's efforts, and the two reconvened on several occasions for Lopicq to perform leading roles in Noverre's works.

If Noverre appears to have taken no issue with Lopicq's restagings, perhaps it is due to the fact that their narrative structures remained the same. Open to interpretation would have been the dance, and most especially, the mime. Doubly ephemeral, many of the danced elements of Noverre's performances would likely have been substantially altered for their new performances. Yet Noverre and Lopicq's relationship reveals not only how the two ballet masters understood the concept of restaging, but also Noverre's eye to his own posterity. While his openness to Lopicq's approach may well have been based upon his view of dance and mime's ephemerality, in turn based on the relationship between the passions expressed and the dancer tasked with performing them, it may also have been influenced by the role Lopicq played in facilitating the circulation of Noverre's name and works.

5. Inscription and its relationship to posterity

The "preoccupation with individual posterity was especially acute", Jessica Goodman writes, as "a certain confluence of social and intellectual changes lent the idea of future glory a new charge for French cultural producers in the latter years of the *ancien régime*" (2018, 2). Noverre, like other cultural producers of his time, was very conscious of what Goodman has referred to as "anticipated afterlives" (2018, 4).⁵ The question of the afterlives of ballets and ballet masters alike are present from the very opening of Noverre's *Lettres*:

5 Cf. also the contribution by Mark Ledbury (2025) about the topic of the 'afterlife' in eighteenth-century French art-history, in this edited volume.

La Poésie, la Peinture & la Danse ne sont, Monsieur, ou ne doivent être qu'une copie fidelle de la belle nature: c'est par la vérité de cette imitation que les Ouvrages des Racine, des Raphaël ont passé à la postérité; après avoir obtenu (ce qui est plus rare encore) les suffrages même de leur siècle. Que ne pouvons-nous joindre aux noms de ces grands Hommes ceux des Maîtres de Ballets, les plus célèbres dans leurs temps! mais à peine les connoît-on (Noverre 1760, 1–2).

Noverre admits that the dance artist might be thwarted by more obstacles than those working in the fields of painting and poetry. Some of these relate to dance's status as a time-based art ("ses Tableaux doivent être variés, & ne durer qu'un instant" [Noverre 1760, 3]) but others are connected to the fact that the composer (meaning the choreographer) is not fully in control of the art – his medium is the dancers, rather than color and a brush. Reliant on enthusiasm, and the liberty inherent in individual interpretation in order to generate a genial performance, there exists the possibility that the performers might not live up to the intentions of the work. Yet as we have seen, the liberty of the individual dancer in interpreting the passions represents a key element of Noverrian pantomime ballet.

Although Lepecki has qualified Noverre's views on dance's ephemerality as a lament, I would argue that Noverre also embraces this paradox as integral to his understanding of pantomime ballet's liveness and its emphasis on the performer's creative role in its execution. Rather than genuinely lamenting dance's disappearance (and this is particularly true in the later editions of his *Lettres*), Noverre embraces its ephemeral qualities as he rhetorically situates the importance of his writing in particular and writing on dance in general. Dance's disappearance, in other words, is to Noverre an invitation to write about and around dance. This aspect of his thought becomes more prominent over time, increasing toward the end of his career.

One rewritten passage, expanded since the early editions of his letters, brings together some of these ideas, and in so doing, provides a clue as to how to reconcile his views on the relationship between ephemerality and posterity:

Si la nature [...] a donné [au maître de ballet] ce feu et cet enthousiasme, ame de tous les arts imitateurs, l'immortalité ne peut-elle pas lui être assurée? Pourquoi ne connoissons-nous aucuns maîtres de ballets? C'est que les ouvrages de ce genre ne durent qu'un instant, et sont effacés presqu'aussitôt que l'impression, qu'ils ont produite (Noverre 1804, vol. 4, 1).

Here, Noverre links these ideas together, connecting ephemerality with the lack of status of the ballet master. But he also turns the question back on earlier poster-

ity, using such questions to muse on paper as to why no remnants of ancient pantomimes still exist (Ibid.: 2). This rhetorical interrogation in turn allows Noverre to write himself into history, as a discoverer of techniques and structures of the past, and in turn, as the inventor of pantomime ballet. In an expanded passage treating the ancient pantomimes Pilades and Bathyllus, Noverre writes:

Du moins si ces grands compositeurs, ne pouvant transmettre à la postérité leurs tableaux fugitifs, nous eussent transmis leurs idées, leurs principes sur leur art; s'ils eussent tracé les règles d'un genre dont ils étoient créateurs, leurs noms et leurs écrits auroient traversé l'immensité des âges, et ils n'auroient pas consacré leurs peines et leurs veilles à la gloire d'un moment. Ceux qui les ont suivis auroient eu des principes, et l'on n'auroit pas vu périr l'art de la pantomime et du geste, portés jadis à un point qui étonne encore l'imagination (Noverre 1807, vol. 1, 225).

Theory, in other words, can stand in the place of ephemeral practice in documenting dance. What Pilades and Bathyllus failed to do is what Noverre will do, and has done, in documenting his theories of ballet, rather than his ballets themselves.

As Goodman writes, “posterity, in its purest sense, can only ever be anticipated. It is almost always a projection into an unknown future, a continually receding vanishing point” (2018, 4). Indeed, his preoccupation with posterity and his role in dance's history grew over the course of his career. In *Lettre IX: Renaissance de l'Art de la Danse*, Noverre, never humble, opens with a particularly exultant passage that inscribes himself into a direct lineage following from the ancient pantomimes:

C'est par mon application, mon zèle et mes efforts, que je suis parvenu, Monsieur, à tirer la danse de l'état de langueur et de léthargie dans laquelle elle étoit plongée; j'eus le courage de lutter contre les préjugés fortement enracinés par le temps et l'habitude; [...] j'appris à la danse muette à articuler, à exprimer les passions et les affectations de l'ame; mes soins et mes succès la placèrent au rang des arts imitateurs (Noverre 1807, vol. 1, 124–25).

His preoccupation with what Goodman terms “an unknown future” is likewise visible in the “Avertissement” to the series of programs that appear in the 1807 *Lettres*, where Noverre complains directly about the copying of his work, although here he seems to reference the copying of his ballets, and not his texts:⁶

6 On the copying of Noverre's *Letters*, see Sabee 2022, 123–38, 152–58.

On a tant de fois mis mon ouvrage à contribution sans me nommer; on s'est si souvent et si hardiment paré de mes dépouilles, que j'ai senti qu'il ne me resteroit plus rien si je ne prenois le parti de déposer et de consigner le peu qui me reste, afin que l'opinion publique, je n'ose dire la postérité, puisse le reconnoître et le réclamer pour moi (Noverre 1807, vol.2, 332).

In fact, Noverre's programs had been printed in view of posterity as early as 1776, when the Austrian printer Joseph Kürzböck issued a compilation of programs from Noverre's ballets. In the "Avant-propos de l'éditeur," Kürzbock, or someone writing on his behalf, refers to the volume as a "pendant aux Lettres du même compositeur sur la Danse" (Noverre 1776, 4). Like the programs that Noverre would eventually append to the last two editions of his *Lettres*, these were explicitly 'not' theatrical ephemera, but rather documentation – to the degree it was possible – of Noverre's theories, in practice.

6. Conclusion

Why did Noverre's views about the afterlives of his ballets diverge so strongly from his strategies regarding the propagation of his dance theory? One will never exactly know. Perhaps Noverre was simply able to extract his individual concerns about posterity from his artistic priorities. This, however, seems unlikely given his expression of concern regarding the copying of his ballets. It seems more likely that he believed that, since his stage productions were ephemeral experiences, his written work could stand in to assure his future place in the annals of dance history.

At the same time, the improvised process involved in performing Noverre's ballets allows for a unique relationship between performer and spectator. If the benefit of pantomime is to deliver what Noverre terms an emotional effect that is "plus général et plus uniforme" (1807, vol. 1, xii), this is the lynchpin within Noverre's theory that relies principally on his double sense of ephemerality. Other tenets of pantomime ballet, such as the depiction of detailed, serious stories through movement and the creation of interesting and varied tableaux, could both be documented, even if they were not intended to be staged and re-staged. (Indeed, as we saw, Noverre even proposed one documentary model that relied on the artistic talents of Boucher and Cochin.) But how does one document the elicitation of emotion? What did it mean to feel horror in the eighteenth-century, and what gestures might have elicited horror,

pity, or empathy? This question opens onto another, namely, what gestures or movements might elicit horror, pity, or empathy today?

If the core identity and meaning of Noverre's ballets lie neither in their steps, nor in their narratives, but in the passions that they depict, then this is a key question for those invested in their recreation or reimagining. If a work's identity is its very malleability, its liveness and attachment to a given individual's enthusiasm and in turn, the transformation of an internal agitation into a dynamic external presence and action, then it would be nearly impossible for any form of notation to accurately capture its creators' intention. Yet in Noverre's point of view, inscription still offers a way forward. The theory laid out in the *Lettres* defines dance as inherently ephemeral in nature, but the *Lettres* themselves are a durable object that can be held in one's hand.

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