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This project argues that the rhetoric of perfection is a form of authoritative discourse that has its roots not only in the formation of ballet, but also the formation of culture as a whole where its hold extends particularly to women. Ballet's rhetoric of perfection is thus a microcosm of a rhetoric of perfection that functions in and is perpetuated by society at large. This project will first describe ballet's culture of perfection and its dominant rhetoric of perfection. Then, I explain how the rhetoric of perfection operates in both body and language and how this rhetoric is enforced through surveillance and rendering the dancer docile. I will then demonstrate that perfection is impossible at the level of materiality and the places that the rhetoric of perfection begins to obviously break down. From here, I will introduce the concept of a rhetoric of performance that exists within ballet's culture of perfection as an alternative to the rhetoric of perfection. I will establish, through analysis of dancers' autobiographies, that the rhetoric of performance may also strive for an ideal that is unreachable, but it only asks the dancer to continue to explore her *inner* depths for a deeper connection to this rhetoric, rather than seeking external approval.

REWRITING RHETORICAL PERFECTION: CLAIMING AGENCY AND
ENACTING EMBODIMENT WITHIN BALLET'S
CULTURE OF PERFECTION

by

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This is for my dad, Jim Scudder (1946-2009).

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

THE COMPETING RHETORICS WITHIN BALLET'S CULTURE OF PERFECTION

As a late bloomer in dance, I never had a realistic chance for a career in ballet. The culture of perfection, operating through physical training, rhetoric, and discipline, dictates that girls must not only be born with a “ballet body,” but that those bodies must be shaped and molded by ballet before the joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments have set into “normal” alignment, because normal does not work for ballet. I started out at a small studio near the gym where I practiced gymnastics, and I initially took ballet only in order to obtain the necessary grace to impress the judges on floor and beam. However, enough of a seed was planted that when a series of injuries ended my gymnastics career, I knew where to continue the search for physical and bodily perfection that I had begun in gymnastics. I was a child who craved the impossible, and both gymnastics and ballet fit my criteria for providing me with utterly unattainable goals from the outset.

Realistically, starting gymnastics at age 12 and making it to the Olympics as I dreamed was not possible, but I trained and practiced as if it were. I had a similarly futile dream as a dancer of performing with a top company in New York, even though I only started seriously dancing just before my sixteenth birthday. In gymnastics, I had the natural strength, flexibility and athleticism to progress quickly enough that my coaches did not try to introduce me to realistic goals, perhaps hoping that my overwhelming drive could take me to places that girls with only a few years of training were not supposed to go.

However, my dreams for ballet were even further from possibility. I am neither naturally thin—I have a stocky, muscular, athletic body—nor do I have the natural requisite turnout, having started ballet well after my legs were firmly entrenched in their sockets. Therefore, ballet’s culture of perfection ended my career before it even started. Combined with my temperament, it also made it impossible for me to ever fully and truly enjoy ballet. My physical factors, a completely delusional driving ambition, and a home life that required frequent escape catapulted me into a short-lived abusive relationship with ballet and bulimia that ended after only a couple of years what could have been a long and healthy vocation. In hindsight, especially now that I have returned to dance and gymnastics after a 15-year hiatus and discovered aerial arts along the way, I realize that it did not have to be like that. To progress as rapidly as I did, I certainly had enough natural aptitude that a professional career in some form was possible. However, for me, that was not good enough. Just like competing in college gymnastics was absolutely unthinkable, so was dancing in college. My all-or-nothing thinking rejected college dance because the goal was the ballet company New York City Ballet. I now know that this extremism is quite characteristic of ballerinas and is something that drives many to the art form in the first place.

When I returned to ballet after a 15-year hiatus, I found that the culture of perfection was still alive and fully functioning, but this time I was determined to handle its demands in a different way, for I understood that one of that culture’s powerful elements was its rhetoric of perfection. The rhetoric of perfection is the discursive dimension representing the set of values and beliefs embedded within ballet’s culture of

perfection that dictates the appearance, technique, and all aspects of self-presentation for ballerinas and would-be ballerinas. These expectations are transmitted to ballerinas largely through language. My issues with dance have always been not only physical but also cognitive. I was diagnosed with severe dyslexia at age five and spent all of my elementary school years in what were then termed “LD” classes, trying desperately to make the two hemispheres of my brain communicate with each other, the result of which was usually tears and hours and days spent doggedly trying to complete math tests that my classmates completed in minutes. As a dancer, this has been a severe liability, and nothing reduces me to that humiliated child again like a dance teacher, director or choreographer yelling, “Shana, what is *wrong* with you? What are you *doing*?” when I am utterly unable to master combinations quickly or translate movements from right to left. I will demonstrate that questions such as these tie to the rhetoric of perfection and its use of the negative discipline of “never good enough.” This mentality then becomes tied to the dancer and creates rigid understandings of how to embody ballet.

While ballet’s rhetoric of perfection focuses on the negatives of physical and cognitive abilities embodied through the female dancer, the rhetoric of performance highlights those rhetorical situations when a dancer’s agency is possible. I recently took to the stage as a dancer for the first time in nearly 20 years. I was cast in a modern/contemporary piece by a young MFA student, 12 years my junior, a brilliant emerging choreographer and thinker about the meaning of dance and what makes a dancer and a composition on the stage. However, the student choreographer with whom I worked intuited my cognitive difficulty and continually reassured me that in her works,

the steps reside within the mind of the dancers once the choreographer has shared her vision. She does not take them back; they are now ours, and therefore, there is no such thing as a mistake. It took me months of rehearsing to really understand this way of envisioning dance, but once I did, and the pressure of being “perfect” in its negative sense was fully lifted from me, I actually was able to complete the steps and discovered a love and freedom in movement that inspires me.

While motivated and focused from this experience, the negative aspects of ballet’s rhetoric of perfection still returned with full force. The following week, I was rehearsing a ballet piece at another studio with a traditionally trained choreographer who was herself a dancer with incredible technical skill and who had been offered a contract with a top company at one point and had danced with companies in Europe, as she continually reminded us. I have seen this woman perform and do not doubt her brilliance as a dancer. However, it was from her that I heard those words again: “Shana, what is *wrong* with you? What are you *doing*?” I wanted to quit dance immediately. I again believed that yes, in fact, I was much too stupid to be a dancer, too old and mentally defective, and that it was a complete mistake to have ever donned a pair of pointe shoes, especially at my age. It took processing with friends, attending dance classes with instructors with a different vision, and witnessing some incredible works of art onstage for me to realize that it was not *her*; it was the rhetoric of perfection that was speaking through her. By looking back at the system that created her and the rhetoric of perfection that ballet instills, I remain cognizant of her own ballet history and the ways she re-enacts that system and rhetoric, even when destructive to others.

These anecdotes from my recently revived vocation as a dancer illustrate the general expectations for both physical and cognitive perfection that ballet still entails. I intentionally use the word “vocation,” as ostentatious as it may seem to claim that my amateur experiences amount to anything like a “vocation,” to claim my place in the dance world, a place that is not dependent upon financial compensation, recognition, or even technical skill. I claim it as a result of my intense passion for the art form and my continual pursuit of dance as a means of expression. My objective is to demonstrate how within ballet’s culture of perfection, the rhetoric of perfection dominates over other possible rhetorics. However, a contrasting rhetoric—the rhetoric of performance, as demonstrated in the choreographer who allowed the dancer’s own vision and agency—is gaining precedent. I also credit both rhetorics for moving me forward with this analysis. I want to foreground the Foucauldian elements of discipline contained within the rhetoric of perfection while demonstrating that no dancer’s embodied rhetorical agency can speak back to this rhetoric. If it had not been for the student choreographer that I described initially, as well as other choreographers (particularly in aerial arts) who I have worked with since, I do not think I would have even known the difference between working under the rhetoric of perfection and operating within the rhetoric of performance, because the critical, disciplined world of ballet is all I have ever known. These women provided me with a vision and exciting possibilities for myself both as a dancer and as a rhetorician writing about dance. In this illustration, the contemporary choreographer exemplifies the idea of embodied agency tied to performance and models embodied rhetoric at its finest. The embodied rhetoric that the contemporary choreographer exemplified is expression

that is generated from the body itself, from the cognition and the physicality of the dancer. When a dancer makes the steps her own and is fortunate enough to work with a choreographer who encourages this sort of creative collaboration, this is an embodied rhetoric of performance, capable of undermining ballet's strict and pervasive rhetoric of perfection.

This project argues that the rhetoric of perfection is a form of authoritative discourse that has its roots not only in the formation of ballet, but also the formation of culture as a whole where its hold extends particularly to women. Ballet's rhetoric of perfection is thus a microcosm of a rhetoric of perfection that functions in and is perpetuated by society at large. This chapter will first describe ballet's culture of perfection and its dominant rhetoric of perfection. I will do this by presenting several definitions of "culture" and how these definitions are linked to ideas about perfection. I also apply Kenneth Burke's concept of terministic screens in order to explain the role of the term "perfect" in the creation and definition of the rhetoric and culture of perfection. Then, I explain how the rhetoric of perfection operates in both body and language.

Ballet's Culture of Perfection and Its Dominant Rhetoric of Perfection

Ballet exists in a culture of perfection within which both the rhetoric of perfection and the rhetoric of performance operate. These are two competing rhetorics that have a relationship to the concept of perfection, but enact and embody this concept in different ways. In order to claim that ballet is steeped in a "culture of perfection," it is necessary to first define what constitutes a "culture" and how this applies to the world of ballet.

While many different definitions of the term “culture” exist, even the definitions that are meant to apply to the whole of human culture at large are applicable to smaller subcultures, such as the culture of ballet. Raymond Williams provides a fourfold definition of culture as “(1) a general state or habit of mind, having close relations with the idea of human perfection; (2) a general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole; (3) the general body of the arts; and (4) a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual” (qtd. in Barnard 614). Even in this holistic definition of culture, the concept of “perfection” as well as the connection with human culture and artistic pursuits is evident. Ballet’s culture of perfection is a subculture that contains at least three of these four elements of culture. The “general state or habit of mind” in ballet is certainly closely connected to the idea of perfection, and this expectation of perfection is not confined to the steps performed on the stage and in the studio alone. Not much emphasis on intellectual development is afforded to the ballerina; in fact, such pursuits are discouraged, so this is the only place where the culture of ballet diverges from this definition. The connection with the arts is evident, and ballet is indeed “a whole way of life” that encompasses many aspects of the dancer and those involved in the dancer’s career and development, and in the staging and producing of the ballets as a whole—as well as everything that goes into maintaining and running a ballet company.

Many of the Western roots that shape our idea of culture and civilization already contain an implicit striving towards perfection; therefore, ballet is essentially an exaggeration of a narrative that was already in place well before the idea that one should dance with her legs turned out was ever conceived. *The Dictionary of the History of*

Ideas cites Johann Gottfried von Herder, who noted that “man is acutely conscious of his imperfections as hence ‘always in motion, restless, and dissatisfied.’ Unlike the bee ‘which is perfect when building her first cell,’ man’s life is characterized by ‘continuous becoming’ (*Werke*, V, 98)” (Barnard 615). Von Herder, however, posits that this restlessness, this striving for perfection that is characteristic of human culture, is connected to man’s sense of freedom, an aspect of human life that is not present in the same way or to the same degree in other animals. Von Herder claims that, “His perfectibility or corruptibility is closely bound up with this distinguishing feature,” and that, “Man’s sense of imperfection and his sense of freedom, then, are posited as the essential (psychological) prerequisites for the emergence and development of human culture” (Barnard 615). Ballet’s emphasis on perfection connects to a deep cultural need for the pursuit of this elusive concept. In ballet, dancers have the freedom to choose either the rhetoric of perfection that accepts an external locus of control, or the rhetoric of performance that grants agency through an internal locus of control, but it often takes time for dancers to learn that this is a choice they are making between two different rhetorics, each with a different relationship to ballet’s culture of perfection¹. Each connects to a kind of striving, but in different ways. The rhetoric of perfection requires a striving for something outside of the dancer, an external definition of perfection that is unattainable. I will establish, through analysis of dancers’ autobiographies, that the rhetoric of performance may also strive for an ideal that is unreachable, but it only asks

¹ There are likely other subcultures within ballet that are outside of the purview of my examination; I am focusing on ballet’s dominant culture.

the dancer to continue to explore her *inner* depths for a deeper connection to this rhetoric, rather than seeking external approval.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on class, culture, and education is useful in examining the training of the ballerina and the ways in which the culture of ballet is developed through this process, both as a whole and within each dancer. Von Herder was also interested in similar aspects of cultural development and collective identity, which he "identified chiefly with language, shared symbols and values, customs and norms of reciprocity" (Barnard 618). The culture of ballet certainly shares this kind of common languages, values, and symbols, and these are taught to dancers from an early age through a very regimented and specific method of training and enculturation. Bourdieu examines the school's role in cultural transmission, the hierarchies and power structures within such schools, and how they teach and perpetuate culture. Ballet is a kind of aristocracy where the ballet masters, choreographers, and company directors function as kings, and thus Bourdieu's interest in the education of the aristocracy applies to the world of ballet. He also refers to culture as a "game"; the rhetoric of perfection is also essentially a game, and Bourdieu's ideas on the game of culture thus apply to ballet:

Culture is a stake which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presupposes and demands that one take part in the game and be taken in by it; and interest in culture, without which there is no race, no competition, is produced by the very race and competition which it produces. The value of culture, the supreme fetish, is generated in the initial investment implied by the mere fact of entering the game, joining in the collective belief in the value of the game which makes the game and endlessly remakes the competition for the stakes. (250)

The rhetoric of perfection is a stake and a game. The value of this game is so engrained within many dancers that it takes just as much concerted effort to expose the game and its fallacies as it does to train them in the ways of the game. For example, most young dancers do not question that the School of American Ballet (SAB) is the most desirable ballet school to attend, as it is the feeder school for the top company in the United States, the New York City Ballet. Therefore, the way it trains dancers, the rhetoric employed, and the very culture of SAB is not likely to be questioned, as it is viewed as the pinnacle of perfection in ballet. As Bourdieu points out, any participation in a culture requires some acceptance of its terms. In order to remain in ballet at all, therefore, dancers must participate in the culture of perfection. This creates some difficulty when dancers attempt to step outside of this culture, because they must do so while still participating in it. Such conundrums are the reasons that dancers often choose to leave ballet entirely in order to claim agency as dancers rather than remain in the culture of perfection and have to therefore negotiate amongst competing rhetorics and identities for the remainder of their careers.

If a dancer does choose to leave ballet, she must then negotiate a world that is starkly unfamiliar. Much has been written about the ways in which dancers often remain somewhat naïve in the world outside of their chosen fields. Bourdieu explains that playing the game of Culture, i.e. navigating the world of “high culture,” involves maintaining “a child’s relation to the world” because it requires maintaining a “distance from the world” (54). For a ballet dancer, the “world” consists of a studio and a stage. Nearly all aspects of life and schedule revolve around these locations to such a degree

that serious dancers find it very difficult to maintain life outside. Bourdieu writes that this single-minded focus results in a precocity in acquiring cultural capital, but a naiveté in regards to the rest of the world, outside of pursuits that are marked as “cultural.”

Kenneth Burke’s concept of “terministic screens” explains the rhetorical imperative in ballet’s culture. Perfection is particularly applicable as a terministic screen, especially because, “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (Burke, *Language* 45). Perfection as a concept deflects reality. Calling something “perfect” requires that the object be read in a certain way, blocking out all imperfections. Simply by naming something as perfect, it becomes so. The same is true for the converse; if an object or action is labeled as imperfect, then it immediately becomes imperfect simply through the use of this terminology. The terms we use determine our reality (46). Burke writes:

We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity. (50)

Two types of terms exist: terms that bring things together and terms that tear them apart (49). This is the way all terms work, but I am interested in the term “perfect” because of the impossibility of it being materially manifested. Though perfection is a term that invites the viewer to read the object as perfect, this term is actually one that tears apart

because it calls everything outside of this object or action imperfect. It divides the perfect from everything else. So what, then, is its opposite? What is the term that unites the divide created by perfection? The rhetoric of performance is not the opposite of the rhetoric of perfection; it just operates differently. It is an embodied form of agency where the dancer calls her own shots. However, as Burke writes, “each man is ‘necessarily free’ to be his own tyrant” (52); therefore, each dancer is free to choose either the rhetoric of perfection, the tyrant, or the rhetoric of performance, the liberator, as her guiding force in her art and life.

The rhetoric of perfection might exist at the level of language, but the expectation surrounding this rhetoric is that it is translated into a concrete visual phenomenon through the body. Wendy Hesford writes about the idea of “visual capital” and “visual economy” in her 2011 monograph entitled *Spectacular Rhetorics*. She quotes David Campbell to clarify this notion of the visual as a means of exchange: “the idea of a visual economy makes clear that the visual field is both made possible by and productive of relations of power, and that these power relations bear at least some relationship to wider social and political structures which are themselves associated with transnational relations of exchange in which images are commodities” (qtd. in Hesford 8). Campbell is further paraphrased as arguing that “visualization makes certain social practices and relations, as well as identity categories, possible” (9). While Hesford’s text is concerned with images that affect transnational understandings of gender and power, her analysis is applicable to my study of ballet, image, power, and perfection. This is not only true with images of ballet that are made accessible to an audience, whether live, on film, or in photographs,

but also the mental image of perfection the ballerina carries, and the way this image does (or more often does not) translate in the ubiquitous mirror. Therefore, my first chapter highlights the phenomenon of the mirror and its influence on two intersecting populations: ballerinas and women suffering from eating disorders, both of whose identities and self-concepts are overly determined by how well the image of perfection in their minds matches the actual image of their bodies in the mirror, which is also problematic given that they are reading this mirror image through the distorted negative rhetoric of perfection.

The rhetoric of perfection creates subcultures and communities, among ballerinas as well as among the eating-disordered. Hesford writes, “rhetorical acts create contexts, projected imagined publics, and establish communities” (10). Therefore, the context for the rhetoric of perfection does not already exist fully-formed, nor is the ballerina a passive link in a destructive chain that forms this rhetoric: she creates this context and thus creates within that context the agency to change the meaning, implications, and material outcomes of the rhetoric of perfection. Clearly, the “projected imagined publics” figure prominently in this rhetoric, the key word being “imagined.” The ballerina is always performing for an imagined audience, even when she is on an actual stage. The audience and its reaction live in her mind and drive her to try to fulfill those perceived expectations. The important point here is that this audience is *imagined*, even when it is real, for it is utterly impossible to know the reactions of most or even a few audience members, and especially to know the contents of its collective mind, and the judgments therein. The fact that this audience is imagined is important, because if it

exists in the mind of the ballerina, then this creates the possibility for its transformation from a critical audience representative of the rhetoric of perfection to one that is more supportive of the dancer's agency and her efforts to embody the rhetoric of performance.

Communities are also forces in a dancer's life that can either reinforce the rhetoric of perfection or help support the rhetoric of performance. The third aspect crucial to creating and maintaining the rhetoric of perfection is the establishment of communities. For this I use the work of scholars such as Erving Goffman in his text *Asylums* where he explores the subcultures that exist in mental hospitals and their context as related to the social situation of the patients. I am not the first scholar to use this text as a framework in discussing the subculture of ballet: I was led to this text through Suzanne Gordon's *Off Balance*, published in the 1980s and thus within the same decade as Gelsey Kirkland's memoir *Dancing on My Grave*. Both of these works brought public attention to the lives and conditions of ballerinas and focused heavily on the costs and consequences of the rhetoric of perfection, without necessarily naming it as such. Gordon's work also led me to take up her interpretation of the world of ballet as a total institution, a concept taken from Goffman, and this particularly will provide the analytical framework for Chapter 2, where I analyze the role of docility and surveillance in removing dancers' agency within the rhetoric of perfection.

The broader cultural context is the backdrop to this rhetorical analysis, particularly that of the ultra-thin woman who has been touted as the ideal by the mass media since the 1960s. Hesford contends that, "To analyze why an image and the meanings attributed to it are persuasive, culturally resonant, and politically viable at any

given historical moment, or *kairos*, is to consider the texts and contexts with which it is entangled—to read intercontextually” (10). In this sense, Susan Bordo’s work *Unbearable Weight* is a key text to applying the rhetoric of perfection beyond ballet and demonstrating that this rhetoric actually affects all Western women. Through Bordo’s work, I examine the social context that created and maintains this rhetoric not only in specific communities but within an entire gender category. The cultural overdetermination of the rhetoric of perfection speaks to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia*. Hesford utilizes heteroglossia in her examination of the spectacle in transnational rhetorics. She defines heteroglossia as “a polyphony of voices, identities, and positions and their negotiation of power and control” (11). Therefore, heteroglossia encompasses the intersecting social, cultural, and political positions of women in the ballet world and within U.S. culture at large. Heteroglossia foregrounds the constant negotiation for agency that occurs within a ballet company, among its ranks and especially between ballet master, choreographer, ballerina, and male dance partner. Hesford writes that “Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of language enables us to critically examine texts, including images, as multivocal rhetorical performances that arise out of specific historical and social contexts and in relation to specific discursive practices, instead of seeing either texts or contexts as discrete or isolated entities” (11). Therefore, every image, performance, and text written about the ballet is written within and must be examined through such a context. Ballet has created, enacted, and maintained a certain rhetoric of perfection since its inception, but that rhetoric looks drastically different in the twenty-first century than it did in the eighteenth. The body of

the contemporary ballerina in its quest to embody this particular rhetoric does not resemble the body of the early ballerina. Though ballerinas have always been smaller than the average woman, the first ballerinas were only slightly so, and the expectation was not that they appear emaciated, for this would not have been an appealing body to audiences of the time. Throughout history, the actual ballerina has experienced many shifts in agency and material conditions, but all of these shifts in embodiment are linked to the rhetoric of perfection; therefore our concept of perfection has altered, and the ballerina has attempted to imitate and transmit this rhetoric in a concrete and material fashion through the body. This notion speaks to Gillian Rose's statement that "human subjects are produced through discourse" (qtd. in Hesford 12). Thus, the ballerina is actually created through discourse, through the rhetoric of perfection. Not only does she attempt to embody this rhetoric; she is actually an agent and creator of it, which again speaks to Hesford's notion that "rhetorical acts create contexts": the context *and* the subject are created through discourse, through rhetorical acts, and thus the ballerina is formed through discursive acts, both corporeal and at the level of language, both by and about her body, as object, creator, and spectator.

The notion of discipline and the docile body as articulated in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is the framework for articulating the rhetoric of perfection in ballet. Foucault articulates the importance of surveillance and the panopticon in maintaining the regimentation of the body. Hesford writes that, "The logic of spectacularity as a site of dominant power may be to arrest the public's gaze—to discipline, display, and isolate the subject" (16). Therefore, the gaze itself is a source of

discipline. Laura Mulvey, in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” articulates the pleasure that gazing brings to the viewer, but also the subsequent power that the gaze articulates and the ways it serves to make docile the seemingly disembodied subject-image. Mulvey derives her criticism from the field of psychoanalytic theory, applying it to feminism and film studies as she examines the phenomenon of the male gaze in film, and the ways that feminist film reclaims agency from that gaze and turns the gaze back on itself. Mulvey’s ideas on not only the controlling and dominating force of the gaze, but the possibilities for its reversal, suggest application in the world of ballet, which has also been historically controlled and defined by the phenomenon of the male gaze. The male gaze has not only been instrumental in shaping the look of the ballerina, but her movements as well have been choreographed and controlled by this gaze. In a sense, this gaze functions as a rhetor, in that it shapes the body and movement of the ballerina according to its desires.

Performativity

According to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, gender is a performance that materializes the gender order it invokes. In many ways, the rhetoric of perfection functions in similar ways to Butler’s use of gender norms: it is made material through the body. However, just like gender ideals, perfection is something that can never be actually realized. Each attempt has an iterative quality that opens the way for the realization that perfection actually cannot be materialized through the body and thus it also opens the way for resistance. However, before this resistance can be realized and

achieved, the impossibility of achieving the ideal must first be recognized. This is particularly true with the actual physical body of the ballerina, and her attempts to conform to the ideal balletic body type. For many ballerinas, the art of starving is part of this gendered performance. Not only is dance a performance, but so is anorexia in that the body enacts starvation in an attempt to conform to an ideal shape and then present that shape externally on the body. Anorexia forces the body to appear as the ideal ballerina/woman, but the very act of starvation itself induces a state of docility that in many ways replicates expectations for the female gender as a whole. Hilde Bruch acknowledges the “exhibitionism” that anorexia entails, drawing parallels between anorexia and high-profile political displays involving starvation to draw attention to certain causes (3). Therefore, there is something performative about starving, and the starving body becomes a spectacle. For Butler, every embodied behavior is performative; our bodily behaviors create, manifest, and materialize the norms that seem to govern them. These norms do not shape behavior by molding bodies like containers; instead, the mutual co-creation of norms and bodies is what the concept of “performative” is meant to name. The performative nature of anorexia is that it materializes the norm of thinness, thus creating that norm in the process of its materialization. Bruch writes of one of her patients:

Actually, Dawn’s whole life had been something of a performance. She would only show the sweet, compliant, submissive behavior of which, in an outburst of honesty, she spoke of as “the great put-on.” She had been afraid of showing any feelings that might cause disapproval, even though they might be just below the surface. It was important to hold a tight lid on what she really felt. (*Golden* 57)

Are anorexics, then, ultimately materializing the “perfect woman”? A study in docility with no voice, no agency, no mind, and finally, no body either? Both ballet and anorexia take femininity to an extreme, and manifest it in exaggerated ways. The ballerina is also often supposed to appear frail, weak, and helpless, as she is carried around the stage by a muscular man in the pas de deux. Is it any surprise, then, that many ballerinas become anorexic (or that potential or actual anorexics become ballerinas)? Both of these embodiments are simply exaggerations of gender roles and expectations for women. Bordo writes about the twin forces of collusion and resistance to feminine cultural norms as represented by the body of the anorexic: “Through embodied rather than deliberate demonstration she exposes and indicts those ideals, precisely by pursuing them to the point at which their destructive potential is revealed for all to see” (176). In essence, anorexia is a type of rhetorical agency that illuminates, through an exaggerated embodiment, the expectations for all women, both of body shape and docile behavior. The anorexic is the perfect woman. The perfect woman is docile to the point of being close to death.

History of Ballet

Contemporary ballet’s culture, which reinforces the concept of perfection as the waif-like ballerina, has a long tradition. Historically, the image of the sylph in the Romantic ballets composed in the 1830s was not one of strength and power, but one that established both woman and ballerina as ethereal beings literally held up by a male partner. The history of ballet engenders the rhetoric of perfection as a negative

hierarchical patriarchal system. Pierre Beauchamp invented ballet in France in the 17th century and it was perpetuated by his star pupil, Louis XIV. The technical terms that Beauchamp coined are the terms that are still used in every ballet studio and every ballet class around the world today. In the 1820s, Italian Carlo Blasis wrote two textbooks that set into print the teachings of Beauchamp that had been passed down among his students: *An Elementary Treatise Upon the Theory and Practice of the Art of Dancing* and *The Code of Terpsichore*. Though ballet was codified in the 17th century, the first recognizable “ballets” were actually staged about 200 years earlier in 15th century Italy as “lavish dance spectacles intended to display the wealth and generosity of the European courts” (Jacobs 115). The first full-length ballet was produced in 1781 for Catherine de Medici. The story centered on the myth of Circe. At five hours long with lavish sets, costumes, and a large cast, the production was so expensive that it nearly bankrupted the French monarchy. However, this production solidified the status of France as the center and motherland of the ballet world for the next 350 years (Jacobs 116). As ballet spread throughout Europe, four distinct methods of ballet technique began to emerge from Beauchamp’s original teachings: French, Danish, Russian, and Italian/English (Jacobs 115). These are still the primary schools of balletic technique.

Ballet was not accessible in the United States until the 1820s and 1830s, when French and Italian companies began touring. However, it was not until the 1930s that any ballet schools or companies were established in the U.S. One of the first of both was founded by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein in New York City in 1934 with the American Ballet Company, which later became the New York City Ballet, and its feeder

school, the School of American Ballet. Balanchine brought teachers with him from Russia to train his dancers in the strict Russian style of ballet in which he was trained, and which he sought to translate and perpetuate in his new country.

George Balanchine literally viewed himself as the creator of his dancers, in a physical, moral, and spiritual sense. Gelsey Kirkland writes that “Balanchine’s conception of the human form was essentially mechanical. The body was a machine to be ‘assembled’” (43). He absolutely forbid any quality of interpretation of his choreography by his dancers, for, “The interpretive stamp of a dancer threatened to mar the choreographic design of the master” (43). However, Kirkland notes that this idea of Balanchine’s was a fallacy, because “his ballets succeeded or failed in part because of the personal touch bestowed by individual dancers, whose passion and personality manifested itself in spite of Balanchine’s best efforts to the contrary” (43). In order to encourage this “blank canvas” approach, Kirkland writes that Balanchine “encouraged his dancers not to think: ‘You have to be vary [sic] careful when you use your mind . . . or you will get into trouble” (47). Like a priest,

Balanchine assembled steps that were supposed to have been predetermined by God and humbly described himself as an instrument of divine will. His word was holy. To have a private audience with such an exalted being was inconceivable; we settled for brief encounters, moments of confession and supplication outside the elevator that led to his office, catching him on his way, terrified to invade the inner sanctum of his thoughts. (49)

Balanchine achieved a physical, mental, and even spiritual control of his dancers.

Through this authority, Balanchine set the precedent for exaggerating the already slender

body of the ballerina and made even that into an extreme, a parody, one that also perpetuated the dancer's docility and therefore malleability.

In terms of the physical aesthetic of the waiflike ballerina, the dangerously low weights that have dominated ballet since the 1980s ultimately reflect the hold that skeletal female frames have had on society as a whole for the past 30 years. Because ballet is largely based in the illusion of weightlessness, in each of the cultures where ballet has taken root and flourished, ballerinas have always been thinner than the average woman; the problem is that now there is an enormous divide between the actual size of most women (size 14-16) and the size of women who dominate the images in the media (size 0). In the 1930s and 1940s, before the influence of TV, film, and the internet took hold, there were not two types of women against whom ballerinas were compared (the real average woman versus the media average woman) – they were one in the same. Now ballerinas are expected to be even smaller than the *media* average woman, a size 0, because that is what the public is mistakenly led to believe an actual woman should look like. Paula Kelso writes,

The world of ballet has its own ideas of what the body should look like that are more extreme than the rest of society; however, the current ballet aesthetic would not be popular if dancers lived in a culture that did not value extreme thinness. All ballet companies across the world value thinness; however, it seems that only North American companies, especially the United States, have this dangerous goal of skeletal thinness. (n.p.)

Therefore, as much influence as Balanchine has had on the “ballet body,” his preferences would not have held, much less been carried forth by every major choreographer and ballet master since, if there were not already solid roots grown into the soil of Western

culture that allowed his dictates to take a firm hold, spread, and flourish. Our culture in general has an obsession with thinness for women, and at the same time has the highest rate of obesity in our history and one of the highest in the world. Ballet then would be the most extreme example of a national or cultural false ideal and impossible physical goal.

Pas de Deux: The Competing Rhetorics of Perfection and Performance

Ballet is both an embodied practice and a subject of discourse. The discourse surrounding ballet contains a “rhetoric of perfection” that has been embedded within since ballet’s inception and codification in 17th century France. However, ballet’s rhetoric of perfection is a specifically gendered rhetoric centered on the symbol of the ballerina as all that is perfect, feminine, pure, and ethereal. This gendered rhetoric of perfection therefore creates a problem of embodied agency for the dancers themselves, where the (often male) choreographer acts as the “mind” or the will, and the docile body of the dancer is reduced to a mere object of that will. The rhetoric of perfection provides a discursive ideal that is unattainable by actual physical bodies. However, many dancers are working against this rhetoric of perfection, some within the form of ballet, while others have left the constraints of ballet’s obsession with perfection to explore other embodied discourses.

Ballet is steeped in both a culture and rhetoric of perfection that primarily operate through the levels of language and embodiment, pointing to goals that are physically unattainable. This emphasis on perfection for the dancers themselves ultimately leads to a loss of rhetorical agency, because ballet privileges the authority of a masculine

rhetorical system that exists outside of the female dancers' own minds and bodies. When a female dancer embraces physical and cognitive agency, this is the positive rhetoric of perfection, or what I am calling a rhetoric of performance, in which agency is shared among dancers, choreographers, and audience, rather than held entirely by the masculine choreographer. Because perfection, as a subjective term, can be reclaimed and redefined by those who employ it, dancers working within the rhetoric of performance can define "perfect" in different ways outside of the definitions that have traditionally been imposed upon them. Perfection could mean embodied rhetoric. To dance perfectly could mean to embody the movement perfectly and completely, to fully express oneself through the beauty of movement, to absolutely claim the dance and the steps as one's own. This is the positive rhetoric of perfection that redefines the negative rhetoric of perfection and undercuts its pervasive influence.

As a system that creates understandings of gender and performance, the rhetoric of perfection provides a site for exploring the ways powerful men control, interpret, and manage female dancers, as well as a site for identifying instances when women dancers refuse or speak against that control. Because of my own background as a dancer, I not only analyze this rhetoric of perfection through its verbal strategies of reinscription but also through the embodied rhetorics deployed by women with their artistic creations. For example, this hierarchal gendered power structure is reinforced by the fact that there are few major ballet companies who have female artistic directors or choreographers. However, in emerging dance cultures, such as aerial arts, women dominate on the stage, in the air, and behind the scenes. Some female dancers and makers of dance are able to

transform even ballet into an act of embodied rhetoric, reclaiming their agency through both verbal and embodied rhetorics of performance rather than perfection.

While this project is firmly grounded in the theory and practice of the field of rhetoric and composition, I also seek to contribute to dance studies, an emerging field of study that tries to theorize dance as a specific and embodied art form. Jessica Simon of *The Chicago School of Media Theory* discusses the need for serious and specific studies about dance when she writes:

While it would be unthinkable that a university would not have a department of Art History or Literature, very few institutions have a department of Dance, and when they do, the focus is usually on practical dance technique classes, designed to give students a break from the demands of their ‘real’ work. The implicit message is that dance is something you do, not something that you approach with the same amount of rigorous theoretical inquiry as one would approach a painting, or a written text. In the traditional model within media theory of “Image, Sounds, and Text”, dance falls into a strangely indeterminate space. It produces a visual image, however, that image is ever changing in space and time, and ultimately disappears altogether. It is sometimes accompanied by the sound of music, and it can be read like a text—but a ‘text’ that is ‘written’ on the body, without words. (n.p.)

I argue that the field of rhetoric provides an ideal vocabulary and set of analytical concepts with which to discuss dance, due to the scholarship many feminist rhetoricians have conducted in recent years on the rhetoric of the body and its subsequent implications and possibilities. This is the context in which I situate my exploration into ballet’s rhetoric of perfection, and the tools by which this rhetoric is exposed and dismantled.

In the context of this project, I define “rhetoric” as both any particular message as well as the broader, interlocking set of messages that work together to reinforce specific norms and meanings. By “rhetorical agency,” I refer to a speaker who is given, or claims,

the credibility to deliver her message. However, I do not take it as a given that the choreographer is the only one with rhetorical agency: I want to examine the rhetorical agency that is claimed by dancers, especially in their autobiographical texts and other verbal works by which they redefine the contexts and meanings of their embodied performances. I hope ultimately to argue that without a dancer exercising agency, there is no dance. Dance is possible without a choreographer—it's called improvisation—but without a dancer, a body conveying movement, dance does not exist. This is one of the reasons choreographers often seek to stifle the voice of the dancer: they know that it is they who are really the ones who are not needed in the equation; it is not the dancers who are disposable.

The rhetorical triangle in the world of ballet is largely composed of audience, dancer, and choreographer, with the dance as the text. Other figures often fit into this dynamic as well, such as the reviewer, who is essentially an audience member, but one who has the power to speak back, unlike the general audience members. The only place in the triangle where the dialogue is unidirectional is between the dancer and the general audience, an exchange where both great power and tremendous vulnerability exists. This is where the dancer, if she so chooses, freely communicates with her audience, receiving a brief respite from the dialogue with the choreographer. Misty Copeland describes the freedom of expression she finds on stage, and describes how it contrasts with her daily reality as a professional ballerina:

As a professional, you have to endure a tremendous amount of criticism and judgment leading up to a performance. You can barely take a step in rehearsal before the dance mistress will clap, stop you, and give you a critique. But during

the actual performance, when the music swells, and the crowd hushes, it's all up to you—how high you leap, when you breathe. There's no more time to worry or try to make it better. It either works or it doesn't. You land with grace or you stumble and fall. That absoluteness, that finality, is freedom. And the stage was the one place where I felt it. (25)

In addition, this passage addresses the issue of gender and the ballet master/choreographer. The choreographer is not always male, though I largely refer to this person using a male pronoun when speaking in general terms. This is because although the actual body of some choreographers and ballet masters (or mistresses, as they are called) may be coded as female, their interactions with dancers often re-inscribe masculine and patriarchal power dynamics. This is generally not an interaction that grants much agency to the ballerina: it is a very hierarchical form of rhetoric, and much of this study focuses on the gendered aspects of this relationship.

The dancer has agency under both the rhetoric of perfection and the rhetoric of performance, but a different kind of agency functions in each construct. The rhetoric of perfection calls forth what Diane Davis refers to as a preoriginary response to what Bakhtin calls authoritative discourse. Davis refers to Lundberg and Gunn who write that “every action, discursive or otherwise, is only born of an engagement with the set of conditions that produced it” (qtd. in Davis 111). Any rhetorical agency arises from engaging with those conditions in the first place. Under the rhetoric of performance, the dancer transforms these original conditions, shaping an agency that is her own, one that rejects authoritative discourse and dismantles the preoriginary response even in its presence. Both are forms of agency, but this project seeks to trace how a dancer, if she chooses, moves from the rhetoric of perfection, a rhetoric that circumscribes her agency

by positioning her body as the inevitably imperfect means by which a choreographer accomplishes *his* particular vision, to the rhetoric of performance, one in which the dancer herself takes on authority and embodies an agency independent from authoritative discourse.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter II, “Ballet’s Rhetoric of Perfection,” establishes and describes the ways in which the rhetoric of perfection is embodied in ballet, tracing the history of this rhetoric from 17th-century France to 21st-century United States. Drawing on cinematic, documentary, and textual representations of ballet, I argue that the rhetoric of perfection forges a link between ballet and anorexia, and I explore the varied implications of this link for dancers’ (constrained yet potential) exercise of rhetorical agency.

Chapter III, entitled “Docile Bodies, Total Institutions, and the Problem of Agency,” argues that the total institution of ballet and the regimentation of the ballerina’s body work together to create a docile body that has very limited agency. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, I argue that the docility of the soldier parallels the creation of a ballerina in important ways. For Foucault, the malleability of bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136) is more important than the specific physical characteristics that make one an effective or ineffective soldier. Using his insights into the techniques of surveillance and bodily subjection, I argue in this chapter that developing discipline creates a kind of embodied knowledge that limits

dancers' rhetorical agency, operating to increase a dancer's capacity and efficiency even as it reinforces her use of that power in a "relation of strict subjection," as Foucault puts it.

Therefore, the more the ballet body is disciplined, the more it increases its aptitude, the less power and agency it actually has because at this point, the dancer is merely a body, an object of the dance, of the discipline, and not a rhetor, until and unless she embodies and transforms the rhetoric of the dance and makes it her own.

Chapter IV, entitled "The Imperfection of Materiality," argues that perfection can only exist in language and that attempts to act out perfection in the body inevitably fail, even as perfection as a norm strongly shapes embodied behavior. Though the idea of perfection has long imbued the discourse of ballet, the idea that the human mind and body is able to reach such a state, and that this goal was definable and attainable, certainly did not originate on the stage, or in a pair of pointe shoes. *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* contains a lengthy entry entitled "Perfectibility of Man," which outlines the Western trajectory of the idea of perfection and its multiple meanings, creators, and contexts. This chapter revisits historical ideas of perfection in order to explicate the resonance among religious discourse and the discourse of ballet, including the similar techniques employed for bodily mastery by medieval mystics and ballerinas, such as self-mutilation and extreme asceticism. Therefore, the rhetoric of perfection advances perfection as a goal, even as careful scrutiny reveals that perfection only exists at the level of language and not in the body at all. Therefore, perfection does not actually exist

in the way that ballet's application of the rhetoric of perfection claims that it does. It is not physically possible, only possible through language that does not directly translate into embodiment.

Chapter V, "Claiming Agency and Embodying a Rhetoric of Performance," illustrates the impulse among dancers to reclaim their embodied agency, an effort I call the rhetoric of performance. Using the writings of a number of dancers, as well as work by feminist scholars of rhetoric such as Cheryl Glenn, Cheryl Geisler, and Kristie Fleckenstein, this chapter argues that it is possible to claim agency and enact the rhetoric of performance while still operating within ballet's culture of perfection. In particular, I use dancers' writing to demonstrate that, for dancers, language resides within the body, not (only) in words and spoken language, and I extend my insights from the rhetorical practices of dancers to broader constituencies, arguing that the act of dancing itself connects anyone who does it to rhetorical agency at the level of both body and language.

Chapter VI argues that dance in any form is creation, articulation, and expression of argument, emotion, and the basic essence of human experience with the body. Having argued in Chapter 4 that dancers can embrace their rhetorical agency in various ways, I turn in the conclusion to implications of dancers' embodied techniques for unraveling the rhetoric of perfection and the masculine patriarchal system that the rhetoric supports. Consequently, the conclusion explores new forms of dance created by former ballerinas who, frustrated with the constraints placed on their agency in the world of ballet, become

aerial dancers, pole dancers, and burlesque performers. I analyze how these relatively new art forms grant more artistic agency to women.

The inclusion of aerial arts into this discussion elucidates the fact that there *are* different cultures of movement, highlighting the cultural and rhetorical nature of embodiment performance. Modern and contemporary dance represent clear and vocal resistors of the rigid culture of ballet, but in the past couple of decades, aerial dance, which includes aerial silks, lyra, trapeze, and pole dance, has emerged as a powerful form of rhetorical embodiment for female dancers. These forms of dance perform the work of reclaiming on multiple levels, because acrobatic circus arts and pole dancing, like ballet, have their own nefarious histories of stripping dancers of their credibility and agency as rhetors. The fact that women are taking control of their bodies through these art forms is a significant act of rhetoric, as I argue in my concluding chapter.

Although this project articulates the significant constraints placed by the historical and contemporary rhetoric of ballet on female embodiment and empowerment, I am not arguing ultimately that one must leave ballet in order to claim agency. As Suzanne Gordon writes in her expose of the ballet world, *Off Balance*, it is not the fault of the art form, but of those in power. Therefore, I examine the rhetoric of ballet in order to celebrate the rhetorical contributions of women like Gelsey Kirkland, Jenifer Ringer, and Misty Copeland, for the embodied and verbal arguments these dancers have developed to both expose power disparities and to change them.

CHAPTER II

BALLET'S RHETORIC OF PERFECTION

Within the rhetoric of perfection, the agency of the dancer consists only of her communication with the audience. This communication act is monologic, as the audience can only speak back through applause, and even that is an unreliable communication act, as a polite audience will applaud for any performance, whether or not they actually enjoyed it. Also, according to this rhetoric, the dancer is in essence a medium for the choreographer; she transmits his vision to the audience. Agency in this model flows unidirectionally, from choreographer to dancer, and then from dancer to audience.

In this chapter, I will define rhetorical agency in the rhetoric of perfection in terms of Diane Davis's notion of the preoriginary response, and also in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's authoritative discourse. Then I will trace how this agency, or lack thereof, is demonstrated in several areas applicable to ballet: the size and shape of the dancers' bodies, the division of the body and the self, the attribution of god-like qualities to those in power, the absence of a voice in crucial career decisions, and the negative student-teacher relationships that often uphold this rhetoric of perfection.

According to Diane Davis, the primary aim of rhetoric and the way we respond to it is to forge connections, build community, and strive for some form of solidarity, even if those ends are never achieved, or the means seem to defeat this purpose. Rhetoric is deeply connected to the notion of belonging and the human impetus toward some sort of

shared identity, of which communication is an essential aspect. Davis defines this concept of rhetoric as inherently relational as “inessential solidarity”:

Sender-receiver theories of communication that focus narrowly on “speakers” and “messages” miss the fact that to address “you,” in writing or speech (or, say, dance—any performance of the inscription), is already to touch the limit; and to be addressed, to “receive” an address, is first of all to be exposed to that exposedness. There is no communication except on this limit, this “site” of exposure where the address takes place and where the “masterful scholarly ethos” is toast. Hope lies in the fact that the appropriation of what is inscribed (the said) necessarily testifies to the inappropriable exposure that insists and resists. Writing and speaking are functions of this inessential solidarity, expositions not of who one is (identity) but of the fact that “we” are (relationality). (16)

Connected to this “inessential solidarity” is what Davis has defined as the “preoriginary response.” This is where agency comes into play. Davis draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to define and articulate the preoriginary response and to explain that this impetus to respond is a function of our relatedness; it is not something we necessarily choose: “What Levinas shows without seeing is that this underivable obligation to respond that is the condition for any ethical action whatsoever amounts to a preoriginary *rhetorical* imperative” (111). Rather than defining the preoriginary response as a lack of agency, however, Davis simply defines it as a different kind of agency, one that is derived from obligation; the preoriginary response is an innate agency that existed even before the interaction that prompts the response. It is an impulse that is always already there, in essence, just waiting for a trigger to cause it to arise.

Davis argues that it is important to recognize the existence of this preoriginary response because with it carries ethical obligations: “After Levinas, the most pressing ethical task, it seems, would not be to recognize one’s freedom to choose but to affirm

that it is already too late to pose the issue of responsibility in these terms” (111). It is not the choice of response that needs to be evaluated; it is the fact that we do *not* have a choice that needs to be recognized and confronted. The responsibility lies in recognizing the existence of this preoriginary response and thus viewing the rhetorical act not as a means to an end, but as the end in and of itself, thus raising the stakes for the communication act:

Still, if there is an ethical task that rhetoricians could take up in the name of making a difference, a task that would not simultaneously efface the structure of exposure that grants the very possibility for “pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity—even the little that there is”—perhaps this would be it: to approach speaking and writing, any form of the address, not simply or firstly as the *means* of communication (as servants of the said), but *as* communication itself, as modes of the saying, expositions of an ethical relation that precedes identity, intellection, and intentionality. (112-113)

As Davis points out earlier, this argument also holds true for other communication acts, including dance. For dancers, the preoriginary response is the impetus toward the rhetoric of perfection, the always already tendency to strive. The preoriginary response towards the rhetoric of perfection will be there, but a conscious choice can *also* be made to respond *alongside* of that preoriginary response in a way that is now wholly a response to this rhetoric, but that reflects the agency of the dancer outside of the preoriginary response towards the rhetoric of perfection².

It is also crucial to recognize not only the existence of the preoriginary response, but also to acknowledge the type of discourse to which this preoriginary response is speaking. The rhetoric of perfection is a type of authoritative discourse and just like the

² More on these types of responses in Chapter 4.

preoriginary response, it is an internally persuasive discourse; its effectiveness lies in the fact that it has been internalized and metabolized by the respondent. Bakhtin defines authoritative discourse as “the word of the fathers” and one which is encountered “with its authority already fused to it” (342). Authoritative discourse is also not something that can be taken piecemeal; “one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it” (343). If the discourse is rejected then so is the authority that created it: “It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority” (343). Therefore, the preoriginary response to authoritative discourse is not simply a response to the communication act, but to the authority who created the discourse that created the act. It is a total response, just as the communication act arising from authoritative discourse is a complete transmission of the authority that created the discourse: “Authoritative discourse can not be represented—it is only transmitted” (344). It is inherently infused with power and authority and it also carries with it the preoriginary response that inspires rhetorical action.

The rhetoric of perfection in ballet is a form of authoritative discourse that contains within it a preoriginary response that in essence defines this particular type of agency by its very existence. Therefore, the responses outlined below are responses that reflect this type of agency, or lack thereof. Through the fact of authoritative discourse as well as the inherent preoriginary response, the rhetoric of perfection lives and thrives in these cultures, and before this rhetoric can be unpacked, it must first be identified, defined, and recognized. This process begins by demonstrating how it plays out in ballet.

Since there are many aspects of ballet that take on religious overtones, so does the language. This is where Kenneth Burke's concept of God-terms becomes applicable. Terms such as "choreographer," "dance mom," and even the word "ballet" itself can function as a god-term. Burke explains god-terms as words that function in a similar way as the word "God": "As for a unitary concept of God, its linguistic analogue is to be found in the nature of any name or title, which sums up a manifold of particulars under a single head (as with the title of a book, or the name of some person or political movement). Any such summarizing word is functionally a 'god-term'" (*Religion* 2-3). In ballet, these terms move from the general (choreographer) to the specific (George Balanchine), as "Balanchine" functions just as much as a god-term as does the word "choreographer," as does the School of American Ballet (SAB) or New York City Ballet (NYCB or City Ballet). This is because these institutions of ballet have become more than simply names of people or places; they have become terms under which ideas are held. "Balanchine" can mean one who set the standard for the body of the American ballerina, the founder of American ballet, one of the most influential choreographers, etc. SAB is a term that means the top ballet school in the United States, or it can mean the specific technique taught at that school. NYCB can mean the top ballet company in the U.S., or it can mean the ballets choreographed by George Balanchine. These are specific god-terms derived from the more general god-terms choreographer, ballet school, and ballet company, which also have significance in themselves.

The god-terms in ballet carry with them specific expectations for behavior, conformity, and compliance when they are invoked. The novel *Bunheads* provides a

fictional representation of these expectations and what it is like to live under their shadow. Although a work of fiction, *Bunheads* describes the world of the ballerina in the manner that only a former ballerina such as Sophie Flack could do. On the opening page of the novel, she writes, “*We spend most of our time hidden from the audience, working as hard as we possibly can to strengthen and control our bodies so that when we step onstage, everything we do looks perfect and effortless*” (1). This statement portrays the incredible work that goes into maintaining the illusion of perfection. The audience sees the picture, but behind the frame exists the kind of training that only elite athletes endure. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the god-terms in ballet shape the dancer’s body, the rhetoric of perfection and the cult of youth, the dancer’s movement, the role of the mirror, ballet moms, and negative student-teacher relationships.

The Dancer’s Body

The rhetoric of perfection was imbedded into the definition and practice of ballet from its inception. When Louis XIV founded the first ballet school in 1661, he also codified the idea that ballerinas sometimes could not merely be trained; they also had to be born with a certain physical build, which originally applied to men as well as women. Ellen Jacobs writes that, “In order to execute the increasingly arduous steps with aplomb, ballet dancers had to be structurally well suited to the task and trained from childhood. Perfection became both an aesthetic ideal and a physical necessity” (117). One of the primary events in ballet history that began to make ballet what it is today was the concept of dancing on the tips of the toes, which led to the invention and development of the

pointe shoe. Mademoiselle Gosselin of the Paris Opera Ballet was the first to experiment with dancing on pointe in 1809 (Chazin-Bennahum 189). The development of pointe is important to the rhetoric of perfection because it created new definitions and expectations for body line and aesthetics for female dancers. For Gosselin, not a top soloist, the very act of dancing on her toes caused many people to remark “that no male dancer or ballerina had ever approached her perfection” (189). Therefore, it was the very act of physical virtuosity that caused viewers and critics to label her dancing as “perfection,” regardless of her skill in interpreting the role or her quality of artistic expression.

The physical elements of the rhetoric of perfection, while they seem to affect female dancers to a greater degree, are imposed upon male dancers as well. In the documentary *Ballet High*, one dancer named Johnstuart was told from the beginning that “he doesn’t have the right body,” reports his mother. “My shoulders are broad, my legs aren’t that long, and my feet aren’t that great,” Johnstuart elaborates. His mother says, “He doesn’t have the typical ballet body.” Notice that there are value judgments placed on every one of his “shortcomings.” Because he doesn’t have certain attributes, his body and its various parts are “wrong” and “bad,” an impossible conundrum for a dancer because this construction puts them in a continuous losing battle against biology in which they are set up to fail and to feel like they are not just different, but inherently wrong and flawed as *people*.

Often the rhetoric of perfection and its physical dictates is transmitted in ballet through the company director. Not only does the company director control the members’ careers, but even the physical shape of their bodies is under his purview. One of the

ways in which dancers are stripped of agency is through a discipline-wide allegiance to a specific body type, often enforced by these directors, who are in many ways in charge of the ballet world because they are responsible for providing dancers with their jobs and therefore their livelihoods. In the United States, this body type was essentially defined and perpetuated by the man who is generally credited as being the creator of American ballet: George Balanchine. The character of Otto in Sophie Flack's fictionalized account of dancing for a top New York City ballet company, *Bunheads*, is most certainly based on Balanchine. Mai is the character in the novel who exemplifies the perfect ballerina with the perfect ballet body: "Mai is incredibly thin, and Otto uses her as the model for the ideal ballerina body. I've heard that she eats only once a day, and then only white foods. As I look at her, I can believe the rumors, even though I don't want to" (136-7). This statement reflects another way in which company directors maintain control: by encouraging competition amongst dancers in every way, with the very shape of their bodies as well as with their dancing. Flack makes this reality explicit when she writes, "Otto encourages competition between his dancers, as if there weren't enough already" (12). This competition ensures that the dancers will never achieve the kind of solidarity amongst each other that they would need to collectively claim agency and challenge the company director. His autonomy is assured, as each dancer is constantly looking over her shoulder, looking for the thinner, more technically proficient dancer, and working that much harder to surpass her efforts.

Balanchine figures prominently in many memoirs by ballerinas. In her 2014 memoir *Dancing Through It*, former New York City Ballet principal Jenifer Ringer

writes, “Much has been written about what the perfect ballet body is, and what Balanchine’s ideal of the perfect ballerina was: small head, long neck and limbs, slim hips, arched feet, tall and very thin” (54). His criteria was quite specific, and unforgiving. He often justified these aesthetic imperatives by citing the mechanics of the technique he had developed. Former ballerina Violette Verdy writes, “He was driven by a desire for perfection, naked rather than disguised, but totally recognizable. Though a suspicious instrument, the body for Mr. B. was transformed without the seductive effects of ornamental costumes, lighting, and décor” (qtd. in Chazin-Bennahum xx). Balanchine’s definition of the perfect ballet body extended far beyond the realm of his own students and company and is still quoted in dance studios around the country as defining the ideal.

These extreme physical requirements prompt extreme behaviors to achieve them. This is why ballet and anorexia are so perfectly matched; the art form demands a thin body, and the same personality who is drawn to ballet is also drawn to anorexia, creating the perfect storm. It does not make sense that healthy eating habits would be a norm in this environment and disordered eating the anomaly. The more likely scenario is the other way around. Of these pressures, Ringer writes:

In some ways, appearance is everything in ballet. Dancers spend all day long in front of a mirror, never admiring but always looking for things that are wrong and need correcting. It is only natural that a dancer’s critical eye will turn not only to her balletic line but also to her physical body as well. We’re supposed to be thin, fit, honed. Some would argue that ballerinas should be painfully thin and actually bony, something associated with the Balanchine “look.” I was told by Dr. Linda Hamilton, a former City Ballet dancer herself, that a professional ballet dancer actually falls below the ideal weight for height recommended for a healthy person. In scientific terms, a ballet dancer’s body is that of an anorexic, unless

she happens to be among the 4 percent of the population who are genetically programmed to be at this low weight without eating disorders. And in the ballet world, very few directors care how a dancer maintains her weight—as long as she looks good, the means justify the end. (86-87)

This statement by a former ballerina with the New York City Ballet is quite telling.

Ballet masters expect their dancers not just to be thin, but to literally be *anorexic*.

Anorexia is a serious and often fatal mental and physiological disorder, yet physical perfection in ballet equals actually having this disorder, at least in “scientific terms.”

Ringer also details the shift in attention that occurred when she began losing weight rapidly, becoming anorexic, and essentially receiving positive feedback for developing a serious and deadly physical and psychological disorder: “. . . management seemed very pleased with my appearance, and I was getting nothing but professional encouragement.

They said nothing about my weight, but ballet masters seemed friendlier than usual, and I was constantly getting cast in better and better roles. The only thing different about me was my weight” (88). One would think that “management” would be concerned with the health and safety of a dancer whom they are beginning to consider for lead roles.

However, this underscores the disposability of the ballerina: if she becomes sick or injured due to her disorder, there are thousands of equally thin and sickly disposable girls lined up to take her place. When one breaks, another is ready.

There are also cultural factors that operate in the ballet world as they do in larger society that may be even more powerful than the imperative towards thinness. For Misty Copeland, an African-American soloist for the American Ballet Theatre (ABT), the fact that she had the “Balanchine body” was initially an inspiration for her to continue her

intensive dance training. Copeland describes a moment when her first dance teacher recites Balanchine's physical standards to her: "The perfect ballerina has a small head, sloping shoulders, long legs, big feet, and a narrow rib cage" (44). However, in this instance, Copeland's teacher was actually able to turn around a message that discourages many dancers from the outset and use it as a mode of encouragement for her prodigal pupil. Copeland writes of this moment, "She looked up and stared at me, adoringly. 'That's you,' she said softly. 'You're perfect'" (45). It was not until Copeland moved to New York and began dancing professionally that she learned that there was more to this definition of balletic perfection that went unwritten, namely, that the body Balanchine was describing was always white.

The whiteness of ballet is something that is unspoken, to the point that it is generally accepted as simply a given. Copeland writes extensively in her memoir *Life in Motion* about the constant and consistent racism that she continued to encounter in the ballet world. It was something that she faced perpetually, from the outset: ". . . I moved to New York when I was sixteen, and the other ballerinas would look at me, not sure that I was black but certain I wasn't white, and proceed to ignore me" (52). Not surprisingly, the company that defined the perfect ballet body, New York City Ballet, was the first to specifically reject Copeland due to her race (98-99). However, even though she was accepted into the company at American Ballet Theatre, Copeland still experienced a profound sense of loneliness and isolation due to her race and class:

Ballet has long been the province of the white and wealthy. Our daily, toe-crushing exercises make pointe shoes as disposable as tissues, and they can cost as much as eighty dollars a pair. I came from a family that didn't always have

enough food to eat, and I was nearly fourteen years old when I saw my first ballet. Most of my peers had grown up immersed in the arts, putting on their first tutus not long after they learned to talk. They had summered in Europe while I didn't get my first passport until I was seventeen. Their families had weekend homes. I had spent part of my adolescence living in a shabby motel. But I also stood out in another, even more profound way. I was a little brown-skinned girl in a sea of whiteness. (155-156)

Much of ballet's rhetoric of perfection is out in the open: dancers are told to lose weight, Balanchine's description of the perfect ballerina is extensively quoted. But the rhetoric of racism demands a surrounding silence, and this attitude of this-is-just-the-way-it-is prevails in the ballet world. This is why dancers such as Misty Copeland are speaking back to this assumption of whiteness and making themselves as visible as possible, to claim agency not only for themselves, but for all people of color who hope to find a place in ballet³.

Later in her career, Copeland learns the story of Raven Wilkinson, a black member of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the 1950s and the first African American to become a member of a major ballet company. Copeland writes about her experience reading about Wilkinson in the *New York Times*:

By then, I had been in ABT's corps for six years. That article was the first thing I'd ever read that reflected the heartbreak and loneliness I felt inside. I'd never before read such a perfect articulation of what I was experiencing: that there were many people who seemed not to want to see black ballerinas, who thought that our very presence made ballet less authentic, less romantic, less true. (176)

bell hooks describes the impetus towards an idea of "purity" in art and how this concept makes it difficult or impossible to achieve any level of diversity: "It is tragic that so many

³ More on this in Chapter 4.

mainstream artists or folks seeking to enter the mainstream wrongly imagine that they are keeping art pure when they devalue the importance of diversity, policies of inclusion, artistic support that prioritizes marginalized groups” (*Art* 142). This mistaken notion of purity is certainly tied to the rhetoric of perfection, and it is both a racialized and gendered concept that keeps ballet close to its origins: the ruling class white European aristocratic patriarchy where ballet began and in some ways still is entrenched.

No body of work displays this concept of artistic “purity” more than the classical romantic ballets. Copeland describes the awkward moments that ensued when ABT decided to perform *Swan Lake* after she joined the company. She was told secondhand about overt discussions that had occurred amongst company members that she could not possibly perform in this particular ballet because of her skin color. The discrimination was confirmed also to be on the part of company management when she discovered that she was not selected to perform at all in the second act, which is called “the white act.” However, even in order to perform in the first act, she still had to essentially wear “white face,” painting light powder and makeup on to make her skin look as pale as possible. She writes:

At first, I took it in stride as part of the performance, and I didn’t mind much. To appear ethereal and ghostlike in the white ballets, all of the dancers dusted their faces with white powder. But for many performances, playing a goat in *Sylvia*, or a sylph in *Giselle*, I was painting my skin a completely different color, taking the ivory base foundation used by one of the other girls and layering it on my face and arms to lighten my skin.

I became a joke among the other dancers. (175)

Copeland becomes “a joke” when she does not have the power within the company to speak back and somehow alter the circumstances that put her in this position. As bell hooks writes,

...for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter. (*Looks* 3-4)

Clearly these sentiments extend far beyond the rhetoric of perfection, but in ballet, the rhetoric of perfection is not devoid of a racial identity and a representation that is white, and is orchestrated and controlled by other white people. Misty Copeland is one of the only ballerinas to highlight the racialization of this rhetoric and to describe her experience as someone so completely left outside of its confines.

The Rhetoric of Perfection and the Cult of Youth

The assumption in ballet is that dancers reach their peak in their late teens, maybe early twenties, and are therefore trained for a very short, intense career that will be over by their early 30s at the latest. The over-valuation of youth in ballet is closely linked with the phenomenon of the “ballet mom” because often these ballet moms stopped dancing before they were actually ready to do so, pushed out of ballet by the notion that a dancer simply cannot continue to build her career past her 20s. This idea is the subject of exploration in Herbert Ross’s 1977 film *The Turning Point*. Essentially, this film depicts

a war of regrets between Dee Dee, a dancer who left the fictional American Ballet Company to get married and raise a family, and her best friend Emma, who is still with the company and is battling the prejudices against aging ballerinas as well as her own conflicted feelings about choosing ballet over family. Unlike many contemporary ballet films in which the young dancer is the center, the character of Dee Dee's daughter, Amelia, the up-and-coming member of ABC, plays a role that is more symbolic than substantive. This is also the case with Yuri, who seems to have been written into the film so that Mikhail Baryshnikov could play himself. Subtle commentary about the changing nature of ballet as a whole is also inserted in the scenes with Emma and Arnold, a young choreographer. Emma eventually relinquishes her role in one of Arnold's ballets because Arnold will not allow her the level of agency she requires to dance in a way that is true for her. The teenaged Amelia replaces her at Emma's suggestion, because Amelia will simply dance the way that Arnold dictates, and Emma is not able to do that. This scenario depicts a disparity in agency between young dancer and seasoned veteran: Amelia is happy to be the instrument for the vision of the choreographer, while Emma is conscious of her need to communicate her own vision as well.

One of the reasons dancers seem to "age out" of ballet might be because as they age, they begin to assert a greater degree of agency and thus become more "difficult" for choreographers to work with, particularly those who are insistent that the ballerina is simply the medium for their artistic vision and not a collaborator with whom that vision can be fully embodied. Arnold represents the Balanchine style of choreography, whose motto is, "don't think; just dance." The juxtaposition between this attitude and that of the

embodied artist is exemplified in an exchange with Emma where she asks, “What am I playing? What am I feeling?” to which Arnold replies, “Nothing, Emma. You just dance.” Emma’s response to this is, “You’ve got the wrong lady.” When the two are called into the company director’s office for conflict mediation, the director says to Emma, “I’m afraid Arnold wants his choreography to be the only star,” to which Arnold unabashedly responds, “It is, and it should be!” The end result of this conflict is that Emma tells Arnold that he should use Amelia, the youngest and newest member of the company, and this is because Amelia has not yet developed the agency and embodiment in her dancing to make the role her own. In her youth, she will simply do what the choreographer asks. In this way, *The Turning Point* critiques the rhetoric of perfection for prioritizing youth and malleability over experience, agency, and embodied expertise.

The Dancer’s Movement

One way of essentially removing the soul of a dancer and turning her into a mechanized body is through an emphasis on technical skill over artistic expression, for such expression would entail communication of the self and soul of the dancer. Flack writes, “I loved the discipline of the practice: There was always some step to improve upon, some position to perfect” (5-6). This is one of the ways the rhetoric of perfection in ballet operates; it is a self-perpetuating phenomenon, impelled by the very dancers who often suffer because of it. The invention of the pointe shoe is a watershed moment in the history of ballet, not just because it essentially defined ballet and made it forever distinct from other forms of dance, but because pointe requires a very specialized strength and

skill that not every dancer has the capacity for. In addition, dancing on pointe also introduced a new level of pain and the potential for physical deformity into ballerinas' lives. Gelsey Kirkland as well as Judith Chazin-Bennahum compare this practice to the Chinese custom of foot-binding. Kirkland takes the comparison a step further when she writes, "while [pointe] shoes actually enhanced the expressive facility of the ballerina, the masters of ballet had devised a means for binding the brain" (186). Therefore, as pointe dancing was in fact invented by a female ballerina to allow her further artistic expression, the men who came to control the ballet quickly removed the agency from the ballerina and made the pointe shoe their own expressive device for choreography. Dancing on pointe is also a completely gendered act in ballet: ballerinas do it; male dancers do not. Pointe shoes emphasize and essentially construct a very definite and constrained image of womanhood, and this image has come to define the figure of the ballerina.

This focus on the utility of the body above its expression did not originate with Balanchine, but has roots in earlier bodily mechanization. Judith Chazin-Bennahum traces its origins back to the Industrial Age. In *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1730-1830*, she writes, "Industrialization had an unfortunate impact on the conceptualization of the ballerina's body. It perpetuated what choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre decried in the eighteenth century—dancers paid more attention to technique than to expression. Management now treated the dancer as if she were "a machine, an extremely beautiful and fanciful one but, nevertheless, a machine" (6). In essence, then, Balanchine was not doing anything new; he was simply regressing ballet by 300 years.

In viewing the ballerina as a machine, it is easier for both the dancer herself and those who have power over her to enforce the level of bodily denial often required to make bodies conform to impossible standards of thinness. While anorexia is, of course, not solely the purview of ballerinas, participating in ballet, especially for those who are ambitious, puts young girls at a high risk for developing this disorder. Anorexia and ballet are connected not only because of ballet's insistence on excessive thinness, but also because both ballet and anorexia serve to sublimate certain traits of womanhood⁴. Darren Aronofsky's Oscar-winning film *Black Swan* provides a twisted parody of the idea of ballet as perfection in the character of Nina, the protagonist. Its main strength as a cinematic representation of the ballet culture is that it elucidates the connection between ballet and resistance to sexuality, the same connection that exists between anorexia and sexuality, with or without ballet.

Anorexia removes the body from the self through an excessive focus on achieving external perfection. Alissa Hall's 2006 autobiographical novel *The Thinnest Girl Alive: Diary of a Young Dancer* identifies the protagonist, Celia, as someone who fits neatly into this category: "On the outside, I've always been the good girl, always the one who makes straight A's in school, always spending my time juggling homework and ballet classes and friends" (8). This is the type of person who is drawn to ballet. It is also the type of person most at risk for developing an eating disorder, which is one of the many reasons why ballet and eating disorders often go hand-in-hand. Although not all ballerinas have eating disorders, most top dancers are perfectionists and thus possess

⁴ See Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*.

these same personality traits. Misty Copeland, who had only a brief flirtation with bingeing and compulsive overeating early in her career, writes, “I was a nervous child. And my unease, coupled with a perpetual quest for perfection, made my life much harder than it had to be” (18). Copeland describes how she transferred her characteristic perfectionism into ballet immediately: “Just like with my schoolwork, my drill-team choreography, and anything else I set out to do, my overwhelming need to please—to be perfect—was there in ballet class too” (38). It is this “perpetual quest for perfection” that drives many great artists, or those who becomes truly proficient in any field. Thus, the rhetoric of perfection has positive aspects, but its capacity to damage self and body is considerable.

In *Black Swan*, Nina is an exaggerated version of the perfectionistic ballerina type, but it is a type that certainly exists. When a boy in the film asks who she is, she responds, “a dancer.” He says, “I mean your name.” Nina is a dancer before she is Nina, and her mother perpetuates this distorted identity. Nina’s mother’s obsession with her daughter is depicted in her art studio, which is covered with paintings she has done of Nina. This is also indicative that the mother is obsessed with the external image of her daughter, which when one is identified with the image in the mirror becomes the totality of the person. When Nina meets Lily, a fellow dancer in her company, she sees a woman who is living a more fully integrated life: someone who dates, has sex, takes drugs, goes out dancing, eats cheeseburgers, AND is a brilliant dancer. Her mind cannot hold both of these realities, because in her world these things cannot exist simultaneously. Therefore,

her psyche splits and the introduction of Lily in her life partially leads to her ultimate demise and complete break from reality, culminating in her on-stage suicide.

Even though dance writers such as Renee D’Aoust observe that dancers are encouraged to have a body but not a mind, *Black Swan* elucidates the limitations to inhabiting that body. The body is *only* an instrument for dance: all other desires and passions must be subjugated in the service of ballet. Some speak of ballet like a tyrant, much like the voice Portia de Rossi and others describe as the masculine voice of their eating disorder⁵. This is why Balanchine is such an interesting figure in Kirkland’s memoir: he literally embodies that voice. Ultimately, women cannot sustain a career in service of this kind of oppressive force. This is why those who are able to go on to use dance in positive ways, like Kirkland has, have had to break with those voices, actual and metaphorical, and find their own voice as artists and often as teachers, determined to transmit a different language of dance to their students than the one to which they were subservient during their own careers.

However, there are women in the ballet world who are attempting to gain agency through the language of ballet, even though ballet’s rhetoric of perfection itself often sets them up to fail at this subversive project, for, as Diane Davis writes, “you at least have to *know* you’re not measuring up” (153). *Pointe Magazine*’s December 2013/January 2014 issue had the theme of “Reinventing the Ballerina.” In a short piece entitled “Redefining ‘Ballerina’” by Laura Jacobs, she “redefined” the ballerina as someone who “goes beyond prettiness and perfection to make a language of ballet—not a language of words

⁵ See the section on “the voice” in Chapter 3.

but of visions” (71)⁶. This statement can be read in several ways. First, it can be read as ascribing some agency to the ballerina as rhetor, but it can also be interpreted as defining a ballerina as someone for whom not even absolute perfection is enough – she must *also* create and invent while at the same time maintaining the mantle of perfection. Kirkland writes extensively about the conundrum of the ballerina, the pretty, perfect being that is “seen but not heard” (1). However Kirkland writes that she had an inherent mistrust of appearances and learned to “look and listen for a deeper truth” (4), which is why she struggled so much in the ballet world, a world driven by largely by maintaining appearances and not questioning, just repeating and transmitting the authoritative discourse of ballet.

Role of the Mirror

The illusion of perfection is reflected and distorted by the mirror, the dancer’s constant companion and nemesis. In essence, the image in the mirror is first filtered through the lens of the rhetoric of perfection and then interpreted and judged as imperfect and thus unacceptable by the dancer. Therefore, the mirror serves as a dictator; it is ever-present to let the ballerina know that she is not yet perfect. Alissa Hall writes:

People who aren’t accustomed to spending all their day in a ballet studio take one look at that omnipresent wall of mirrors that every studio has and they immediately come to this snap judgment that the reason dancers like to dance is because they like to look at themselves. It certainly looks that way. All class long you can see girls lost in the mirrors, all of us watching our reflections dance and examining her with a critical eye. (19)

⁶ More on this in Chapter 4.

Here, Hall actually separates the person from the reflection. This is a small but telling act of disembodiment that could go one of two ways: it could serve to keep the essential self of the dancer intact, or it could further separate her from that self. If the dancer sees the image in the mirror as the body that needs perfecting, and is able to separate that body from who she is as a person, this could serve to help remind her that *she* is more than a *dancer* (reminiscent of Nina in *Black Swan* forgetting to identify herself by name when asked); that the body in the mirror is the dancer, that image could have a higher extension, or more turnout, or a cleaner “line,” but that she as a woman is still a valuable human being even if the reflection is less than “perfect.” Or, if the dancer is fully identified with that image, then this dictator, the mirror, only ends up providing further evidence that she is fundamentally flawed as a human being; she will never be perfect, the image is flawed and so she is therefore flawed. Even though this sounds like it is an integration of the true self and the mirror self, it is not, because in this instance, the dancer has fully separated herself from all other parts of her and only identified the image in the mirror as being fully who she is. Neither scenario is ideal.

By accepting rather than critiquing the image in the mirror, the dancer is able to merge that fractured part of herself into her body, which is a crucial process in locating rhetorical embodiment in ballet. Chapter 4 will discuss how Jenifer Ringer does in fact reverse this gaze, pull the mirror image into herself, and accept her body and even find gratitude in the fact that it does not conform to ballet’s rigid standards.

Most books written by ballerinas and eating disordered women devote significant attention to the power of the mirror. Many such texts contain entire sections or chapters referencing the mirror. Marya Hornbacher, in her memoir *Wasted*, writes:

I remember my entire life as a progression of mirrors. My world, as a child, was defined by mirrors, storefront windows, hoods of cars. My face always peered back at me, anxious, checking for a hair out of place, searching for anything that was different, shorts hiked up or shirt untucked, butt too round or thighs too soft, belly sucked in hard. I started holding my breath to keep my stomach concave when I was five, and at times, even now, I catch myself doing it. My mother, as I scuttled along sideways beside her like a crab, staring into every reflective surface, would sniff and say, Oh, Marya. You're so vain. (14)

Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave* contains a chapter entitled "Breaking the Mirror," and the final chapter of Jenifer Ringer's *Dancing Through It* is entitled simply "The Mirror." When Jenifer Ringer returns to dancing, the mirror is one of the first and most difficult obstacles she has to overcome:

I stared at myself for an uncomfortable moment or two, immediately going into self-hating dancer mode. From the beginning, we ballerinas are taught to look at ourselves in the mirror and find out what is *wrong* or *bad* or *ugly*. We try to perfect the shapes and lines our body is making and feel unsatisfied if our feet aren't arched enough or our legs aren't high enough or our arms aren't well shaped. I know some dancers who were told, ridiculously, that their necks were too short. They would wear their hair high to try to disguise the "problem," but I'm sure that most of the time when they look in the mirror, they think, "short neck." Me, I stared at my hips and thighs and arms and waist, disgusted by them and ashamed I'd even walked into a ballet class. (119)

The mirror is such a powerful force in the life of a dancer that Ringer devotes the entire last chapter of her memoir to it, describing the power and pull of the dancer's reflection, and the danger of seeing that image as the most important aspect of her self:

Dancers are surrounded by mirrors. They fill our dressing rooms and line entire walls of our studios. We're constantly checking ourselves: What looks right? But much more often, what looks wrong? What needs to be fixed or changed or hidden or eradicated? Even if we're alone in a studio, working on something just for ourselves, we cannot get away from the mirror. It is there, projecting a truth that can be easily distorted by the dancer's mind's eye.

Somewhere along the line, I gave the mirror way too much power. It became a malevolent presence in my life, always lurking around corners to suddenly appear on a wall or a door and taunt me with evil images of myself. There was a certain seduction it wove over me that drew my eyes ever toward it, even while the rest of me was constantly trying to run away. I hated the mirror, but I was still ever trying to please it, hoping that one day it would gaze back at me with approval. (255)

In terms of the rhetorical triangle, the mirror in this instance acts as a critical audience.

Ringer writes that she wants the gaze of the mirror turned on her with approval, but what she ends up doing is reversing the gaze entirely, or at least merging the mirror image with her own actual body and conveying approval instead of criticism and scorn.

However, as art historian and art critic James Elkins points out, the mirror has no power until it receives an image, and that image is identified, coded, and classified by the viewer:

Mirrors are like empty eyes, blind until I step in front of them—then they produce copies of my eyes, staring back at me. At night the hollow socket of the mirror looks on quietly, waiting for morning. I can feel, as I see it in my sleepy eye—or on my sleepy mind's eye, since my eyes are closed now—that it is somehow an eye with nothing to see. Its emptiness is not just a vacuum but the absence of an eye, the absence of sight. (48)

Therefore, while the mirror can seem to function as a critical audience, it really is not an audience at all. Nor can it be assumed that it neutrally reflects an accurate image that is then absorbed by the subject in an unbiased manner. Not only that, but the mirror often

actually distorts the image. Any woman, and especially any dancer, knows that there are “skinny mirrors” and “fat mirrors” and that one can appear to have a very different body depending on where in the studio she is placed. This is the same reason that performers live with the knowledge that “the camera adds 10 pounds” (some say it adds 20 pounds). Some claim that the stage does the same. I spoke to a photographer recently who explained that this is actually true, because the lens distorts, and makes images appear wider than they really are, but this distortion is only slight, slight enough that it looks as though the image presented accurately reflects the subject, when in fact, it does not. Therefore, if the mirror is the rhetor and the dancer is the audience reading the message the mirror delivers, this particular rhetor’s ethos is questionable at best.

In addition to being a rhetor, the mirror could also be interpreted as an audience member—a tricky and unreliable audience member. Its ethos is virtually nil. However, when the image in the mirror is the subject and the dancer is the audience, it becomes difficult to persuade her the truth in this logic. The mirror, for any woman struggling with her body, becomes the judge, even if the image is distorted, not only actually and physically, but certainly through the lens in her mind. It is as James Elkins reiterates: “The mirror has a special kind of empty eye. It waits to see, but it cannot see without me to see it” (49). The mirror is then a panopticon in the Foucauldian sense: it sees everything, and through its constant surveillance it enforces the rhetoric of perfection. There are other forces that act as panopticons as well, including the ballet mom, who as the punisher and disciplinarian is playing her role as guardian of the culture of perfection.

Authorities: Choreographer & Ballet Moms

There are many ways to conceive of faith and spirituality and some of these definitions, especially in the Western Christian tradition, would absolutely align with the rhetoric of perfection and the splitting of body and self. In addition, the argument could also be made that when there is a lack of faith in some sort of higher power, or even higher self, then that impetus towards worship that seems prevalent in human nature becomes misplaced. It is largely this latter construct that can be found in the rhetoric of perfection: those in power who transmit this sort of authoritative discourse are often cast in the role of God. In ballet, this is also largely a gendered construct, as those in power are often male, and those expected to worship and obey are often female.

The relationship between gender and power often finds articulation through the ways in which powerful men continue to replicate certain forms of dominance down generational lines. Kirkland writes about how Balanchine's "genius" and thus control was confirmed and perpetuated by other powerful men of the ballet world such as Baryshnikov. Kirkland writes, "he assumed that if he were unable to master Balanchine, then Balanchine had to be the greatest genius since Petipa, the true spiritual heir of the Maryinsky tradition in the twentieth century" (170). Again, religious imagery is incorporated both to mock these powerful men, but also to convey their standing and influence in ballet.

The relationship between the pseudo-religious construct of authority in ballet and the Western Christian tradition is subtly highlighted from the beginning in the novel *A Dance of Sisters*. When Delia first enters the Elanova School, she immediately makes the

following observations: “A statue of Mary looked down from a tiny altar in the corner of the lobby. Here, at the Elanova School, the sense of purpose was for the dance, and the overriding presence, the being looking down from on high, was Madame Alicia Elanova” (14). The proximity of the photo of Elanova to the statue of Mary underscores the religious devotion tied to ballet and the rhetoric of perfection. Delia further describes the relics of Elanova’s career that are ever-present in the studio:

Above was a large portrait of Madame Elanova, a photograph taken shortly after she was named ballerina with Les Ballets Russes. She was only seventeen, but already she donned a regal, aloof expression. Her shoulders were bare. Around her neck she wore the ruby necklace a member of the Russian royal family had given her after seeing her dance the role of Giselle. Delia always glanced at the portrait on her way to the dressing room. (16)

The proximity of the religious icons and the photos of Elanova’s early career signal the potential for devotion inherent in both. Students see the statues of Mary, they see the photos of Elanova, and the implicit connection is that both women are objects of emulation and worship in Madame Elanova’s studio.

The Ballet Mom

No discussion of the rhetoric of perfection and how it operates in ballet would be complete without the inclusion of the figure of the “ballet mom” or “dance mom.”⁷ In *The Thinnest Girl Alive*, Celia narrates, “I know that Mom understands how important my dancing is to me, but sometimes I get the feeling that actually it’s even more

⁷ The mother also figures prominently in accounts of women with eating disorders, both dancers and non-dancers.

important to her. She's a ballet mom, all ballet moms are like that" (34). This statement essentially defines the "ballet mom": she is someone who goes beyond encouraging her daughter's dancing and turns it into her own vocation, usually because she wanted to be a dancer, or was a dancer herself, often having failed to achieve her own goals in ballet. The ballet mom is a key proponent of the rhetoric of perfection because she usually puts success in ballet above the health and safety of her own child. It is difficult to locate a book or film about ballet that does not include this figure. Fictional examples of this figure can be located in the films *Black Swan*, *Center Stage*, and *The Turning Point*, and in the novels *The Thinnest Girl Alive*, *A Dance of Sisters*, and *Ballerina*, just to name a few.

The trope of the ballet mom articulates the insidious transmission of the rhetoric of perfection along generational lines. Claire's mother in *A Dance of Sisters* provides a fictional representation of this stock character. Her mother "studied with Madame for twelve years and was a dance major at Bennington" until "She broke her ankle sophomore year and had to give up pointe. She switched to modern for a while, but she didn't like it. Mommy says ballet broke her heart. Then she met my father. He's an ornithologist at the Smithsonian" (37). Claire's mom encourages her weight loss much to Delia's surprise because she is already so thin, making comments like, "Remember, Claire, the best way to stay thin is to always go to bed a little hungry" (80).

However, Susan Lee explains some of the very practical reasons for mother-daughter enmeshment in ballet:

One of the key struggles for the young woman is the beginning of psychological separation from mother and establishing a clearer picture of her gender identity as her own woman. Emerging sexuality and body consciousness are part of this struggle. For the novice dancer, this process can be jeopardized significantly by mother's continued role in early career training. Hundreds of mothers relocate to housing in New York, leaving husband and family behind, to nurture the aspiring ballerina's career. This model supports enmeshment, not differentiation. (34)

This explanation suggests that the often confusing and unhealthy relationship between mother and daughter in ballet is actually a natural outgrowth of ballet's career requirements. While some mothers do excessively push their daughters and over-invest in their careers for their own personal agendas, some are simply just being supportive parents, and making the sacrifices many mothers make on a daily basis for their children. In this case, it is the career itself that causes an unhealthy enmeshment that may not have existed otherwise or previously.

The rhetoric of perfection also serves to define what "success" and "failure" looks like for dancers, and for the figure of the dance mom, this plays out in the mother-daughter dynamic. In *Black Swan*, Nina's mother is representative of a "failed dancer" (which is a misnomer in and of itself because there is actually no such thing) who is living out her own dreams and aspirations through her daughter. When the mother mentions her own ballet career, Nina responds, "what career?" and the mother says, "the one I gave up to have you." We later find out that Nina's mother never made it past the corps de ballet and was already 28 years old when she became pregnant. This would suggest that Nina's birth was in no way responsible for the fact that her mother did not realize her ultimate goals as a dancer, but it is easier for her to blame Nina for simply

being born than to face the almost certain fact that she never would have been promoted up the company ranks even if Nina had not been born.

Again, these are things that should not define the failure or success of a ballerina, but in the dance world, they do. Erin, in *The Thinnest Girl Alive*, quotes her mother as similarly blaming her for becoming less than perfect:

She flashed her coldest snarl and said, “And you know what really tops it off? She loves to tell me how badly I wrecked her body. How carrying me and getting stretch marks and, God forbid, breast feeding just *ruined* her body. Once she came home drunk and told me how an abortion would have spared her all the plastic surgery she’s been ‘forced’ to have because of me. So how’s that for the perfect mom?” (146)

However, Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight* cites Susie Orbach who attempts to take the blame off of the mother figure, much maligned in the literature on eating disorders and many other disorders of young adult women, by pointing out that she is also a product of a distorted culture (47). The same can be said for the ballet mom: she is a product of the rhetoric of perfection and is simply passing these dictates along to her daughter. She did not invent the rhetoric, nor is she even aware of its insidiousness. The character of Erin in Hall’s novel has a mother who is characterized as the victim of an overall culture of perfection. When Celia comments that Erin’s mother is “incredible” and “so pretty” and a “cool mom,” Erin responds,

“Oh please!” she said, and instantly her face changed. Suddenly, her jaws were clenched, when a moment before she had been relaxed and laughing. Erin snorted, “You’d look good too if you had as much plastic surgery as she’s had. Everything on her body has been fixed, her boobs, her butt, liposuction, tummy tuck, facelift, nose job. You name it and she’s had it” (134).

Erin is describing a woman who is a victim of the rhetoric of perfection that exists in the mass culture, and that keeps women spending their time, energy, livelihoods, and life force to meet its incessant demands. Although it is not exactly the same as ballet's rhetoric, the two are closely linked, further elucidating the connection between the culture that surrounds the ballerina's body and the culture that surrounds the bodies of all women.

Kim Chernin poses an explanation for women who develop disordered eating, as many ballet dancers do, that, while connecting the disorder with the mother, still ultimately places agency with the daughter, or the sufferer of the disorder. Chernin posits that women develop complicated relationships with food in response to their discomfort with leaving their mothers behind and following and fulfilling their dreams and desires in life. This would certainly apply for the young woman who experiences success in ballet with a mother whose career was cut short, especially if it was cut short because of motherhood. Chernin writes, "If we are to understand the contemporary struggle for female identity, we must place it in relation to this fateful encounter between a mother whose life has not been fulfilled and a daughter now presented with the opportunity for fulfillment" (*Hungry* 43). Combined with the rhetoric of thinness that surrounds ballet, such a relationship dynamic is nearly a guarantee for a serious eating disorder. While starvation might prove advantageous to a dancer in her beginning stages, it will ultimately end a dancer's career if it becomes full-blown anorexia, in which the loss of weight becomes even more important than the building and maintaining of a ballet career.

Negative Student-Teacher Relationships

The very gendered way of asserting and maintaining authority that is commonplace in the ballet world is not necessarily a style of dictatorship limited to men. Most women who have power in the ballet world come to such power through adopting the same style of rule, often to an exaggerated extent. In *A Dance of Sisters*, Delia describes the moment when she first encounters the ballet mistress of the Elanova School:

Suddenly, there was a collective intake of breath. Girls halted their chatting and removed legs from the barre. Delia turned to see Madame Elanova herself sweep into the studio. She had never seen her in real life, but she recognized her from the portrait and her faded photos in the hall. She embodied the authority of a queen and was dressed in a long flowing skirt, leotard top, and a pastel print scarf about the throat. She smiled gaily at the crumpled Mr. Guest, and, by her mere presence alone, commanded the girls to a dignified attention. Automatically, all twenty-five of them stepped into first position at the barre and awaited her instruction. Even Mr. Guest took note. He put down his tea and sat taller in his chair. Impressed by the air of seriousness in the room, Delia imitated what she saw. (21-22)

While Madame Elanova might embody “the authority of a queen” in her studio, this is the only sphere in her life in which she maintains such ultimate power. A fate much worse than job loss awaits those who succumb to the rhetoric of perfection and remain in the ballet world to pass along its tenants to the next generation. Emma and Dee Dee in *The Turning Point* laugh about one of their former dance teachers, an elderly former principal of American Ballet Company who lived out her later years in a room in Carnegie Hall surrounded by pictures of herself in her prime. This sort of living situation brings to mind a nun in a convent, spending her time alone and in prayer and absolute devotion, the

only decoration a cross on the wall. For it is not her younger self this aging ballerina is worshipping—it is ballet itself.

Even though dance teachers hold considerable power in the studio, the company director eventually has ultimate authority over a dancer's career, and the misappropriation of worship is also a factor that contributes to the dancer's silence in terms of having an active role in decisions that determine the trajectory of her career. Flack also connects this to the perfectionism of the ballerina: "We all want bigger and better parts. It's ingrained in us—the drive to succeed is as natural to us as breathing" (22). These "bigger and better parts" are ballet's reward; this is how the ballerina knows that she is achieving, in some measure, the degree of perfection that ballet requires. However, this is assuming that these roles are filled solely based on merit, and as with any job, that is not always the case. The ballet master makes these decisions; the company is his world and he is the god and king of that world. There are no depictions of ballet that do not extensively cover the role of the company director and his influence and complete control over his domain. Flack's company director is Otto, and of him she writes, "Otto does kind of reign over us. Like, his word pretty much determines the course of our lives. And we can never question him—I hardly know anyone who's even *talked* to him" (117). This absolute authority leaves no room for the dancer's agency. To assert agency, whether in speech or movement, is to lose her job and everything she has worked for over the course of her lifetime.

Conclusion

The holistic perfection expected of the ballerina is ultimately tied to her ethos as both a dancer and as a person. For Aristotle, the ethos is constructed in the *text*; your audience sees your construction, not all of you. In the reality show *Breaking Pointe*, Prima Ballerina Christina notes that she needs to be perfect on stage and in life, suggesting that ballerinas operate in the Isocrates realm of ethos where the past actions and character of the speaker are what constructs ethos. The ballerina's *ethos* is not authored by her but by others, so it's hardly an ethos at all. There can be "bad boys" of ballet, but there can be no "bad girls." If she is bad, her ethos as a dancer is already lost.

In striving to embody an all-encompassing idea of perfection, the ballerina must split mind and body and become divided from her self. The preoriginary impulse toward the authoritative discourse of the rhetoric of perfection resides in the mind and therefore dictates to the body how to enact this rhetoric. However, the body is likely asking for comfort and survival, and therefore must be silenced and placed in the service of the rhetoric of perfection. All physical impulses to the contrary must be ignored.

Ballet is not an anomaly. It is a magnification of what is expected of all women everywhere. Kirkland writes, "The men were still cavaliers; the women were slender 'pinheads,' either ethereal or sensual. Mr. B was famous for describing ballet as 'Woman'" (47). Therefore, if ballet is perfection and ballet is woman, then woman is also perfection. This explains the link between the cultural dictates for *all* women to be perfect. Marion Rudin Frank writes:

. . . ballet has mirrored the culture's ambiguity toward sexual expression and gender patterns. The ballerina is at once artist, idealization of virgin-like femininity, and sex object. Her body is the instrument of dance and thus the tool of the choreographer. Dance shares with other disciplines and career paths a gender-related prestige hierarchy. The well-recognized choreographers and managers are disproportionately male and the dancers are disproportionately female. In the studio or on the stage, male choreographers unintentionally may treat dancers like children; there is an expectation that they will be obedient and deferential. Ballet teachers still refer to female dancers as "girls" and male dancers as "boys." (243)

This essentially summarizes the problematic conflation of gender and the rhetoric of perfection that exists in ballet. These gender dynamics are an exaggerated microcosm of the larger world, not an anomaly in the ballet studio.

CHAPTER III

DOCILE BODIES, TOTAL INSTITUTIONS, AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

One of the ways in which agency is removed from individuals and thus from bodies is by first making those bodies docile and therefore compliant to authority. Enforcing a uniformity of the body is a key strategy often employed towards this ends. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* outlines the purposes of the uniformity of the body of the soldier. One such purpose is to make their bodies easily identifiable, and a body that can be recognized and labeled is more subject to conformity and therefore discipline: "To begin with, the soldier was someone who could be recognized from afar; he bore certain signs: the natural signs of his strength and his courage, the marks, too, of his pride; his body was the blazon of his strength and valour . . ." (135). With this initial recognition, the soldier became identifiable as such, and from there, his body could be further molded and disciplined so that while he gained a false look of strength in his new identity as "soldier" he was actually becoming more docile and more easily controlled by those in positions of authority. As his individuality was further stripped, he became a total soldier.

The process of becoming a total ballerina is similar to that of becoming a total soldier. Part three of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* provides an interesting framework of the body of the soldier that in many ways parallels the creation of a ballerina. Foucault refers to bodies that can be molded as "docile bodies," which he

defines as bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136).

Foucault quotes training manuals for soldiers, excerpting dictates such as, “The signs for recognizing those most suited to this profession are a lively, alert manner, an erect head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, a small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet, because a man of such a figure could not fail to be agile and strong” (135). The ballet manual *Both Sides of the Mirror: The Art and Science of Ballet* describes the “ideal dancer’s body” as “long-limbed” with a “strong metatarsal arch” and a pelvis that is “neither too narrow, which will affect the potential for turn-out, nor too wide, although this is a purely esthetic consideration” (Paskevskaja 9). The description continues, indicating even the preferred appearance of the head, which should be “well shaped and not too large in relation to the rest of the body” (Paskevskaja 10). This physical imperative is repeated throughout the literature: the ballerina must have long legs, arms, and neck, a short torso, and a small head. For Foucault, such requirements had little to do with which physical characteristics would make one an effective or ineffective soldier. The ends to which these manuals sought was control of the body, which was a “subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body” (137). Foucault may as well be writing about the corps de ballet: his statements could literally be transposed into any text about the necessity for uniformity of ballet bodies and they would make perfect and parallel sense. Even Misty Copeland makes the comparison between ballet and the military in her autobiography when she writes, “In some ways, ballet companies are like the military, hierarchical and rigid, with long grueling days

spent exerting yourself physically” (156). The connection with ballet and militarization is further underscored in *Off Balance* when Suzanne Gordon quotes former ABT dancer Solange MacArthur in saying, “You know when kids don’t know what to do with their lives, they join the army and somebody tells them what to do all the time. That’s what it’s like in a ballet company; you never have to think, you always follow orders. It’s funny, because people think dancers are so disciplined, so self-motivated. But so are soldiers, and that’s what we’re like” (112-113). Therefore, the dancer’s body is regimented, not because the physical demands of the art form require all ballet bodies to look the same, but as a method of control, of achieving docility in both the mind and body of the dancer, so that she becomes an instrument for the choreographer instead of a thinking, moving dancer with her own agency over her movements and interpretation of the choreography.

Achieving discipline through docility requires both stated and unstated rules and codes of conformity to which a body must adhere. Although all aspects of the concept of discipline are certainly not tied to the idea of docility, the external discipline (meaning one with an external dictatorial locus of control) required of the military is one that requires the body to be docile in order to become disciplined, or for that discipline to become fully entrenched into one’s physical being. Therefore, the first step in creating a disciplined body is to create a docile body, and a docile body naturally transitions into a disciplined body. This discipline and docility in ballet as in the military is partially achieved through regimentation and conformity. In the novel *A Dance of Sisters*, Delia,

the protagonist, notes the aspect of unwritten rules and the code of conformity on her first day at the Elanova School:

Slowly but surely, she was learning the Elanova School's unspoken rules of manners and decorum by watching the better dancers in the advanced class. One could glimpse them as they lingered in the studio after class, practicing pirouettes or shuffling back to the dressing room, pointe shoes off to air their blistered feet, back curved with the weight of an over-stuffed ballet bag. Only the strongest dancers adorned themselves with plain black or pink chiffon skirts. Delia wondered how these girls knew they were allowed to wear leg warmers and skirts. Did Madame tell them, or did they figure it out all on their own? (20)

Non-conformity within ballet would suggest a lack of discipline to those in power because it suggests an engagement with the mores of the ballet classroom by a non-passive or non-docile dancer, and this is a dancer who is unlikely to thrive in an environment that requires uniformity. The point is to conform. And this conformity is engineered through docility.

One word that constantly recurs in the rhetoric of perfection is the word "discipline" and its necessity. However, the docility and the uniformity of the body must be achieved before discipline is even possible. Once the physical attributes are met, the body is made docile and discipline becomes possible. At this point, "What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour" (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). The discipline of the body, the "calculated manipulation of its elements, gestures, its behaviour" is embodied knowledge, which Abby Knoblauch defines as "knowledge that is very clearly connected to the body" (54). This embodied knowledge is shaped through imitation: "Early training establishes neuromuscular patterns of response to stimuli. Initially this

training is a matter of imitation. The teacher demonstrates, the pupil mimics. Through repetition, neural pathways are created, facilitated by the role of the synapses” (Paskevskaja 12). Thus, the body is made docile through these patterns of repetition and imitation, at the same time, creating a store of embodied knowledge necessary to continue to progress through the practice and training of classical ballet technique in order to master its steps, shapes, and style.

Foucault also connects this discipline of the body to a “mechanics of power” that defines how authority figures, and authoritative discourse, come to have a hold over others’ bodies. The purpose of this mechanics of power is not only so that these bodies might carry out the wishes of the authorities, but so that they may operate with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that determined by those in power, and the very power structure itself. Suzanne Gordon describes the mechanics of power inherent in the ballet company:

Balanchine, and other choreographers of his stature, molds the lives of his dancers, both onstage and off. He decides how they are to look, feel, act, and think. He influences their decision whether to marry, whether to have children. He even determines what will become of the dancers when they retire. The burden of the choreographer’s sorcery falls mainly on female dancers, but for men and women alike, the result of his hegemony is their own powerlessness. Even as full-grown adults, they are emotionally trapped in an unending childhood. (111)

For Foucault, the mechanics of power are more micro and unconscious, whereas what Gordon describes is an example of straightforward domination. However, at the micro and unconscious level, a dancer who might not be subjected to such displays of domination might still be affected by living and working in an environment where

conformity is rewarded. She might see the dancers who remain thin and single and obedient being promoted, and thus behave accordingly. Then, as this mechanics of power is transferred through modeling docility, subsequent generations of dancers continue to conform, even after the “Balanchine” of the company has long retired. The difference in these two displays of authority is that Foucault’s mechanics of power is something that takes root in the mind of the subject. Domination is more easily identifiable: it is an overt display of power and requires an immediate response to either comply or resist. Both are ways in which power is conferred and agency is limited. The discipline of the dancer’s body, under both of these rubrics, extends well beyond the stage into her personal life. Her body must be disciplined and made docile in every area of her life; this docility becomes something that she cannot simply turn on and off whether she is on stage, in the studio, or at home. Thus discipline is connected to authority and produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies: “it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). Gordon writes, “Much to their dismay, these dancers are judged as racehorses rather than as artists. Their physical characteristics often determine their future” (49). Therefore, dancers take the notion of discipline into themselves in many forms, the most extreme being anorexia, in order to ensure that they will not be passed over for roles or promotions when such decisions are made.

This notion of discipline and its reverence is also ever-present in narratives about anorexia, which often overlap with writings about ballet. Anorexia is the point at which discipline and docility becomes pathology; it is the extreme end of the spectrum, but it is an extreme that is reached far too often by ballerinas. Deirdre Kelly, in *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, writes that “the identity of the ballerina in the twentieth century was predicated on a deep-rooted notion of self-sacrifice” (136). This self-sacrifice permeates every area of the ballerina’s life, especially when it comes to her own literal care and feeding, which further removes voice and agency from dancers through extreme methods of bodily disavowal that are really just continuations of a process that began as soon as the dancer entered the ballet career path. The removal of voice and the explicit relationship between ballet and anorexia is fictionally depicted in *A Dance of Sisters*, which contains the literally voiceless characters of the “two anorexic girls” who never speak. Delia describes her initial encounter with these figures: “In the far corner near the showers two anorexic girls whispered together between sips of coffee. They dressed identically in gray rubber sweat pants and pale pink long-sleeved leotards” (15). The fact that there are two anonymous anorexics and not just one suggests several things about the function of these symbolic characters: 1. that negative community is built through the starvation imperative of the rhetoric of perfection, and 2. they demonstrate the uniformity that comes with the docility resulting from the starving body. These “two anorexic girls” also serve to demonstrate that the discipline resulting in these states of uniformity and docility are rewarded in the ballet world:

Delia asked Claire how Madame could dare to put them on stage. Both looked like they might collapse from starvation at any moment. The outline of their sternums were visible through their leotards. Their back muscles rippled like taut strings when they raised their arms.

"Madame is rewarding them for their discipline," Claire said. 'Besides, they won't look that skinny on stage. Stage lights add at least ten pounds.'" (117-118)

Delia "looked again at the anorexics and thought perhaps they weren't too thin after all. In a different place in the world they would look ill, but in the ballet world, their emaciation won them both Madame's attention and immunity from the public humiliations she inflicted upon girls like Cynthia" (118-119). Later in the novel, as Delia chooses starvation as a way to win Madame's attention, she also gets noticed by the anorexics as they welcome her into their society: "They greeted her with slightly raised eyebrows when she wore the vinyl pants in pointe class" (227). The only gesture the two anorexics even have the strength to make towards Delia is a raised eyebrow. They have been rendered thoroughly docile and voiceless through the starvation imperative of ballet's rhetoric of perfection and at that point in the novel, Delia has too.

Competition and Community in a Total Institution

Ballet companies, and especially their feeder schools, which are almost always boarding schools, can be considered, in a term coined by sociologist Erving Goffman in 1961, as "total institutions." Goffman defines a total institution as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (xiii). Certainly this term applies to the training grounds for

the most prestigious ballet companies, and though most professional company members do not live in the same quarters in large numbers, much of his definitions and analyses of total institutions apply to the companies for which young ballet students train. This is why Suzanne Gordon also used Goffman's monograph *Asylums* as a primary tool for the analysis of ballet companies in her 1983 expose *Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet*. Goffman acknowledges that, "Every institution captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a world for them" (4), but he differentiates the typical institution from the total institution in that the total institution erects a "barrier to social intercourse with the outside" (4). Often, in the case of the primary subjects of Goffman's exploration, mental hospitals and prisons, this isolation is structural, as the members are confined by walls and fences, but I would argue that the social and ideological barriers constructed by *chosen* total institutions like a ballet company do not need physical barriers to maintain control over their "inmates." The social pressures established from within serve as enough of a barrier to maintain a similar degree of control and conformity that might be found in an institution whose membership is not voluntary.

Membership in a ballet company requires significant social separation from the outside world, and the hours at the studio and on stage also separate members physically from the outside world and its social norms, roles and expectations. In this way, the member of the company loses perspective and identity of herself as an individual outside of the institution and begins only to conceive of herself as a ballerina. Goffman writes that, "A basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep,

play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life” (5-6). The social and psychological consequences of such isolation can be damaging and can ultimately remove rhetorical agency from a dancer because it becomes difficult to remember one’s identity outside of the dance world, when one’s life becomes reduced to a single institution. According to Goffman, “authority in total institutions is directed to a multitude of items of conduct—dress, deportment, manners—that constantly occur and constantly come up for judgment. The inmate cannot easily escape from the press of judgmental officials and from the enveloping tissue of constraint” (41). This statement would indicate that once an “inmate” (or a ballerina) enters a total institution, she ceases to have agency over any aspect of her being. Her appearance, conduct, and very identity become monitored and controlled by the institution. Gordon applies this specifically to ballet, elaborating the removal of agency that occurs when one enters a ballet school or company: “What we fail to realize is that no choice was made. From the very moment they enter the career of ballet, dancers are programmed in diffidence. For ballet is more than art, more than business; it is a closed world where those in authority have almost total control over every aspect of the dancer’s life” (15). This removal of agency becomes especially problematic should the dancer ever leave ballet, either by choice, by dismissal, or through the breakdown of the body, because the dancer cannot function outside of the authority structures under which she has lived, and thus often has

a very difficult time claiming agency in any area of her life as she tries to discover what it is to live outside of these strictures.

There are many scenes in both fictional and nonfictional texts that describe the way militaristic authority is established in ballet. Authors of these texts also often describe how displays of authority are effective in producing a docile body. According to Gordon, “Ballet training is not only a long and painful discipline of the body; it is a discipline of the spirit as well. Dancers are deliberately schooled in obedience and deference” (14). This is also depicted fictionally in *A Dance of Sisters* when Delia describes the atmosphere in the dance studio after one of her classmates is publicly humiliated and sent home for chewing gum in class:

The girl’s dismissal was strangely motivating. Delia felt herself and the class work harder. No one wanted to displease Madame again. Extensions were higher, balances longer. Girls left the floor after completing a combination as if they were exiting into the wings of an opera house. Delia left with her arms in first arabesque, her gaze skimming the line of her arm and peering into the distance. (24)

The girl’s dismissal made the class docile: after witnessing the results of rebellion, they became motivated not to repeat such gestures towards agency and became energized by the rewards of being allowed to remain in the class as a result of their conformity to the total institution. Therefore, the more the ballet body is disciplined, the more it increases its aptitude, the less power and agency it actually has because at this point, the dancer is merely a body, an object of the dance, of the discipline, and not a rhetor, until and unless she embodies and transforms the rhetoric of the dance and makes it her own.

The world of ballet strips dancers of agency by removing from dancers a sense of self and an identity outside of the institution of ballet. Goffman employs the term “disculturation” to describe this phenomenon, a term he borrowed from a fellow sociologist, Robert Sommer, writing in 1959 also about long-term patients of mental hospitals. Goffman defines disculturation as “an ‘untraining’ which renders him [the patient] temporarily incapable of managing certain features of daily life on the outside, if and when he gets back to it” (13). Disculturation is certainly something that happens in ballet: dancers leave ballet either voluntarily or not, and then, for a period of time at least, actually cannot function in a world which they have never inhabited as adults, or at all. In some cases, the dancer has been socialized as such from an early age and thus has no concept of a world outside of ballet. Gordon writes that “they feel as inexperienced as a girl going through puberty” (180-181). Gordon quotes Gelsey Kirkland as saying, “The ballet world doesn’t help you make real-life decisions, not because it is glamorous but because it is such hard work. You put those decisions off; you think only about the next class, the next year” (Gordon 183). The dancer’s immersion in the total institution of the ballet school or company has facilitated a kind of community-building within the institution, but often it is a community that has its basis in competition, not friendship or camaraderie, as demonstrated by Delia’s attitude towards her classmates in *A Dance of Sisters*. The dancer is therefore likely to experience the outside world in a similarly hostile manner, which can exacerbate her sense of disculturation, alienation, and isolation when she leaves the institution in which she has learned to survive through methods that may not serve her well in the outside world.

Lack of knowledge and experience with the outside world can normalize the abnormal and sometimes destructive behaviors in which many ballerinas engage in order to meet the bodily ideal set forth by the rhetoric of perfection. L.M. Vincent writes:

A fifteen-year-old girl seeking a dance career may be entering a world in which the image conceived for woman is a distortion of the usual standards. If she lives in a dormitory where a significant number of her friends vomit before a weigh-in, one might not label her participation in that practice as 'abnormal behavior.' It is therefore much easier for me to conclude that the environment is unhealthy than to comment on the psyche of the adolescent girl. (84)

Not only do young dancers learn how to destroy their bodies from one another, but they also learn that they cannot trust each other because each girl in their class is a rival, a competitor, for coveted roles and company positions. When Allegra gets hurt in *A Dance of Sisters*, the other dancers are speculating that she might not be able to dance the lead in the upcoming ballet. Delia's reaction is to feel "a sharp pang of hope. If Allegra was out for several weeks, she would have a good chance of being cast in *Adagio Classique*. If Allegra were out for longer, months even, perhaps Madame would forget her and turn more of her attention to Delia. *I can be mean*, Delia thought. *Ballet is making me mean*" (180-181). The rhetoric of perfection is actually what makes these young dancers "mean" and competitive. Delia further notices that, "She could feel herself turning into someone she didn't know, someone who was competitive and unfeeling" (181).

Obtaining lead roles in ballets means not simply getting the opportunity to dance; the conferring of these roles means that the dancer is successfully operating within the strictures of the rhetoric of perfection: her body is acceptable and so is her dancing to those who make such decisions and thus act as the mouthpiece for this rhetoric. Once

Allegra is officially out of contention, the competition for Allegra's role in the ballet starts to come between Claire and Delia: "Delia's determination scared her, for she knew she was willing to sacrifice her friendship with Claire to get the part. She thought of her secret satisfaction when Allegra fell. But when she worried that she was not the same person that she used to be, she cast the thought away. It was how a dancer had to be, she told herself" (204). With Kirkland, it was her sister who was the fellow dancer and the one she needed to work against: "In the shadow of her natural beauty and poise, my jealousy drove me to find competitive areas of self-expression. Eventually, ballet would become the center ring in the arena of our sisterly warfare" (12).

This type of competition is endemic to a total institution and is a different form of competition from that which exists in other communities. The competition between dancers certainly has many distinctions from that in an institution such as an asylum or a prison, where jobs and roles aren't at stake, but there are certainly some similarities between the competition that exists in a ballet school and that which exists in a total institution where belonging is not a choice. Dancers not only compete for roles, but they compete for the favor of those in power, just like a prisoner or an inmate would, because such favor carries with it certain privileges. This form of competition keeps dancers subjugated, because they are so busy trying to undermine each other, that they are unable to question those making the rules, and beyond that, why these rules exist in the first place. In other words, they are not able to question the rhetoric of perfection when they are using its tenets to make sure that they are more closely conforming to its dictates than their fellow dancers. The total institution perpetuates this conformity by encompassing

dancers, creating a tunnel vision that the outside world is not able to penetrate because the outside world either does not exist, or is irrelevant to the immediate concerns of the dancer.

Goffman also defines surveillance as a distinct feature of ensuring discipline and conformity within a total institution, as does Foucault in his notion of the panopticon. Goffman defines surveillance in this context as “a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been clearly told is required of him, under conditions where one person’s infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the others” (7). In a ballet company, such infractions can have dire career implications: not being cast in lead roles, not being promoted, or even dismissal. In *Dancing on My Grave*, Gelsey Kirkland writes, “As the actress delivers the line of the playwright, so the ballerina dances the steps of the choreographer. I pushed the limits of interpretation as far as they would go. Yet my personal statement had to fit into an imposed vision of the world. No matter where I turned, I found myself inside a pretty picture that someone else had rendered” (216). Only a docile body can accurately render someone else’s vision of embodiment. Ballet is an exaggerated case of what Foucault diagnoses: the docility and discipline emblemized by the military is practiced by everyone to varying degrees. According to Deirdre Kelly in *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, the Paris Opera Ballet demonstrated an authoritative discourse that required thorough physical and mental compliance. This is documented from as early as the 19th century when “Dancers were routinely scrutinized from a medical point of view to ensure that they had the right physique” (57). Thus the scopic regime in ballet was formed, and

from that point forward became a terministic screen through which all bodies in ballet are judged. However, even those who did possess the “right physique” were not immune to certain grueling physical exercises designed to further mold their bodies into the unnatural shapes required by ballet. Kelly quotes a 19th-century French writer named Paul Mahalin who documented some of these exercises in which an aspiring ballerina “imprisons her feet in one of those grooved boxes. There, her heels back-to-back and her knees turned out, she accustoms her poor martyred feet to remaining, by themselves, in a straight line’ (57-58). Kelly also notes that young dancers had to be incredibly disciplined in their behavior as well as their physicality. Missing class was not an option and dancers who could not make it to class “face[d] stiff fines or dismissal” (58). Paula Kelso also writes of the compliant ballet body: “Compliant dancers are also not as likely to be verbally abused by management, since directors require that dancers silently obey demands. If a dancer were to actively speak out against a requirement, she would surely be punished in some way, possibly by losing her position or by not being selected for a role” (n.p.). Therefore, for the ballerina, compliance equals job security and survival in the world of ballet. Rebellion is not an option and docility is rewarded in the total institution that is the ballet world.

Silence is another characteristic of a total institution. The compliance demanded of ballerinas requires silence on multiple levels, including self-censorship in spoken and written communication, especially of a public nature. Kirkland describes this dilemma when she writes that she could never be publicly truthful about her experiences with powerful men in ballet: “What would the audience and critics think of a ballerina who did

not worship the idols at the New York City Ballet?” (215-16). But even while she was publicly positive about her experiences with these men, she stopped short of the overt hero worship that seemed to be expected, partially because this would have even further stripped her agency and created an image of her dancing as something wholly crafted by Balanchine: “I recoiled at the thought of being considered one of his creations, and later refused to take part in an interview for a book devoted to his ballerinas” (216). Instead, she created her memoir as a way of speaking her truth. However, the fact that she could not speak at the time demonstrates that it was not only her body but her words as well that were made docile through the total institution of the New York City Ballet.

The Gaze

The concept of “the gaze” has been broadly applied in scholarship to everything from postcolonial literary criticism to art history. Essentially, the “gaze” is a way of being observed that not only signals to the object that she is being viewed as an object, rather than a subject, but also creates and defines her as such. When the gaze is a temporary phenomenon, it is just that – a gaze. However, when the gaze is employed by those in power, and over a protracted period of time, the gaze becomes surveillance. The gaze can be employed to interpret a work of art, or it can be used against someone who is seen as “other” as a method of surveillance. When applying the gaze to the study of the ballet, the ballerina is viewed as both a work of art, and as the “other” in a sense. In thinking of the ballerina as a work of art, or as the paintbrush conveying the choreography as the artifact, we can apply Jennifer Reinhardt’s analysis that “A gaze can

be used to confer meaning upon a piece, whether the gaze emanates from the viewer or the work of art” (n.p.). This becomes even more relevant when considering that in ballet, the dancer is an actual person with a mind and a body and one who is actually capable of gazing in ways that a static, inanimate work of art would not be. In other words, regardless of the meaning placed on the ballerina by those gazing upon her, she is also making and conveying her own meaning as a living body imbued with consciousness and agency, regardless of whether or not she is fully claiming and embodying her agency. In this sense, the ballerina is like Laura Mulvey’s analysis of Clara Bow in the 1927 film *IT* in that her “looks lead outwards, beyond the screen and away from the cinema itself to the social and economic conditions that created the flapper and the discourse of sexuality associated with her” (215). This is Mulvey’s description of the object staring back; when an object of scopophilic pleasure and surveillance turns the gaze onto the audience, whether or not the audience interprets it as such, she is also creating meaning and gazing back. She can reverse the gaze with simply the awareness and intention to do so; in this way she can claim agency and resist her surveillance.

Reinhardt further cites Foucault’s essay “Las Meninas” as being instrumental in the examination of the subject/object reversal that occurs with the gaze when applied to art. She describes the moment when the observer of a painting suddenly becomes aware of becoming an active participant in relationship with the work of art. Simply by gazing deeply at the work of art, the spectator also becomes captured by the work and thus also becomes an object of the gaze until “The interplay (or communication) between the two gazes thus blurs the boundaries between the two roles until it becomes unclear who

exactly is gazing at whom; the gaze becomes a mode of interaction between spectator and the work of art” (Reinhardt n.p.). Since the ballerina functions in similar ways to both an actress in a film and a work of visual art, the gaze can be reversed in a similar manner, or at least the spectator can become a part of the gaze, thus breaking the subject/object binary inherent in the gaze. In ballet, when the dancer reverses the gaze, claiming her agency as a conscious body rather than simply as a work of art, she is able to thus invite scrutiny and criticism into the role of the spectator, whether that spectator be the audience, critics, ballet master, or even the mirror itself. Thus, the reversal of the gaze becomes a crucial act in subverting the paradigm of the docile body and becoming a fully realized rhetorical agent.⁸

Sexuality, Docility, and Surveillance

The gaze removes the ballerina’s sexual power from herself and gives it to the person who is doing the gazing, thus contributing to rendering her docile. Much of the work in both the appearance and the reality of this docility lies in removing the sexuality of the ballerina. Ensuring the asexuality of the ballerina requires a certain level of surveillance, and ensures that ballerinas will remain compliant within the strictures of the total institution. L.M. Vincent, in *Competing with the Sylph*, offers a quote from Agnes de Mille’s memoir *And Promenade Home* in which she discusses the sublimation of sexuality that occurs in ballet:

⁸ More about this in Chapter 4.

Very few dancers develop the bodies of mature women; they keep lean in the hips and flat-breasted, a phenomenon remarked on by all costume designers. It is also a fact that the greatest performers, the women best capable of communicating sensuous satisfaction, are in their bodies the least sensual. In effect they have sacrificed all organs of personal fulfillment and maintain and cherish only the means for public satisfaction, the system of bones and sinews for levitation and propulsion. (134)

This statement indicates that the asexual adolescent body maintained by ballerinas is the ideal body type in ballet; this body is not simply the preference of one company or choreographer, though some may emphasize this preference more than others. De Mille also frames appearance of the ballerina's body as simply an instrument of her art, and her words could be read as interpreting the maintenance of an unnatural shape as something that is required to dance. Arguments can and have been made in support of the necessity of this body type in ballet, but whether it is an unintentional side effect or an intended consequence, the fact remains that in maintaining this type of body, in removing the sexuality of the ballerina, one part of the ballerina's power as a person and as a woman is removed. Vincent goes on to say:

Indeed, the major channel through which sexual drive is directed in the aspiring ballerina may be a musculoskeletal one. The need to achieve control over one's body in dance may not just include repression of hunger; it may also include repression of sexual desires and fantasies. Not surprisingly, the serious ballet student may not view herself as a particularly 'physical' or 'huggy' person. Those who aspire to and achieve an asexual body configuration cannot help but desexualize and defeminize themselves as well. (152)

Here Vincent makes the connection between the boyish body and the literal hunger of the body. A starving body craves nothing but food, and this is another way in which sexuality is removed, or sublimated. Not only that, but through the rigors of maintaining

an asexual dancer's body, ballerinas are freed from the responsibility that accompanies intimate relationships:

Dancing represents sex in its least costly form, free from imprisonment and free to a great extent from the emotional responsibility and, above all, as a sure thing, independent of someone else's pleasure. In other words, it means freedom from sex. The forces which impelled women to the austerity of the church operate to form the great dancer. In a strange transmutation dancing is a form of asceticism -- almost a form of celibacy. (Vincent 150)

This asceticism and celibacy further isolates ballerinas from the outside world, entrenching them in the total institution of ballet. In essence, ballet functions as a dictatorial spouse who isolates and controls the ballerina, thus removing her agency and ensuring that she remains docile, disciplined, and controllable. Gordon writes, "In the world of ballet, dancers are often discouraged from engaging in any activity that might draw their attention away from dance. Romantic attachments, friends, and family indicate a diminishing ardor" (45) for dance itself. Balanchine went even further in controlling the sexuality of his ballerinas. Kelly writes that "behind the scenes, he subtly and systematically degraded them, denying them sex (unless it was with him) and sustenance, both in the form of food and domestic fulfillment. If his ballerinas married or had babies, he grew angry and was known to shun them. If they did not capitulate to his sexual advances, he was known to have them banished from ballet" (129-30). This statement ties the removal of sexual agency from the ballerina to the negation of her physical being as well, through the denial of food.

This removal of sexuality is also to some degree voluntary and is both a motivation for and a result of starvation and intense physical discipline and control. In a 1979 study of ballet dancers, Druss and Silverman found:

There seemed to be a great need to control their bodies and to deny themselves sensuous pleasure. Eating, the most elementary bodily pleasure, was self-prohibited and kept in a constant state of control. Sexual pleasures and their derivatives—dating, romance, fantasies of children—were repressed. Skin contact was rigidly restricted and permitted only in the ballet class. Intellectual sublimation of libidinal drives was limited as well: Thoughts were dangerous, and reading and going to movies and plays for enjoyment were self-prohibited. (119)

This study reveals that sexuality is one aspect in an entire network of desires that a ballerina must not explore. The ballerina entrenched in the total institution must refrain from even reading novels or watching movies because these activities would reveal the pleasures of the outside world, pleasures which could threaten a ballerina's compliance within the institution. Sheltering herself from such activities ensures that she will remain docile. The necessity for ballerinas to constrain their own lives reveals the difficulties inherent in maintaining total allegiance to ballet, in both body and mind, at all times.

A sexual woman is a powerful woman, a woman who is visible and who possesses agency. Such a woman is not a ballerina. A ballerina is a slip of a woman, ethereal, light, barely there. In 1935, dance critic Adrian Stokes wrote:

The ballerina's body is etherealized. She seems to scarcely rest upon the ground. She is, as it were, suspended just slightly above the earth so that we may see her better. She seems cut off from the sources of her being, or rather, those dark internal sources are shown by her as something light and white, brittle as are all baubles, all playthings that we can utterly examine; yet, at the same time, so perfect is her geometry that we can feel this plaything which our minds may utterly possess, to be as well the veriest essence. (qtd. in Chazin-Bennahum 223)

The body of the ballerina is poised, and posed, in such a way that she may better be observed – surveyed. She is “suspended just slightly above the earth” not to facilitate a fuller expression in her dancing, but “so that we may see her better.” This statement calls to mind Foucault’s notion of the panopticon and of surveillance. The ballerina is poised in a space, both literally and figuratively, where her body can always be monitored and thus controlled, for this very act of surveillance of the ballerina by the audience and the choreographer serves as a method to remove agency and assert control. Of course, ballet is intended for the audience, so it is not simply the act of watching the ballerina that makes this a form of surveillance; it is the specifically male gaze employed and described in the above example that connects this type of gendered gaze specifically with surveillance. Not only is this idealized ballerina held up for observation, but she is completely removed from her self, “cut off from all sources of her being,” and thus freed of all the imperfections of being human, which are also her very sources of agency. This ballerina is a mere “bauble,” an object to be possessed, which is the ultimate stripping of agency. Not only does the ballerina not own her body, but her very self, her soul, is also up for grabs, leaving her with less of her self.

The expectation that the ballerina will comply with the norms and dictates of the total institution becomes apparent when she has to negotiate with those in power over the physical limits of her body. Jenifer Ringer writes about a particularly grueling rehearsal in which she was forced by the ballet master, Balanchine’s successor Peter Martins, to push her body past its limits:

This was the first of many times I would have to grit my teeth and push my hurting, unresponsive body through a rehearsal or performance. It was my first inkling that in this career I would be sacrificing my body, willingly, for the approval of whoever happened to be watching, whether it be a ballet master or an audience. And pushing through pain or "sucking it up" and hiding feelings of tiredness or discomfort was expected and often rewarded. Showing pain or exhaustion was seen as a weakness, and there were plenty of other dancers to take your place if you were not strong enough to handle the workload. (80-81)

This describes the ballet body as being owned by both ballet master and audience, but never the dancer. Even in 2014, the ballerina is still a "bauble," a possession who is supposed to be without limits, or if she has limits, those imperfections should be well-masked as her body is offered up as a sacrifice to the ballet. As an object that is owned, her body is also an object that is carefully observed to ensure that it is compliant, docile, and functioning as it should within the confines of the total institution.

The self-abnegation required to maintain the thin wispy body type dictated by ballet further ensures ballerinas' compliance within the total institution and thus removal of personal and physical agency. This body type is actually enforced by the costumes and plots of many classic ballets, most of which are still in the repertory of major ballet companies. The ethereal ballet aesthetic took root during the Romantic Age of the 1830s, which is also the period when anorexia began to become a documented phenomenon. Judith Chazin-Bennahum writes, "There is a curious relationship between skinny women and the nineteenth-century literary craze for gothic melodrama" (233). Of course, this craze found the perfect conflagration in the form of the ballerina, for who better able to embody a ghost than a slight dancer wrapped in tulle, dancing on her toes? These images also call to mind women with a religious vocation, and many comparisons have been

drawn between both ballerinas and anorexics and nuns. These formulations were quite prominent in the nineteenth century when “A fascination for Medieval Christian thought, fueled by the writings of Chateaubriand and the worship of martyred women, was to some extent reflected in the Romantic ballet scenarios as well as in the image of the ballerina” (Chazin-Bennahum 233). This is the period when the ideals of Medieval Christian perfection took hold in the form of the ballerina, and in many ways, it is an association that has yet to be severed. L.M. Vincent writes,

More striking than the continued presence of the Romantic ballets in modern repertory is the influence Romanticism has on our current concept of the look of the ballerina. Certainly the era of the Romantic ballet must be seen in terms of the larger Romantic movement in art and literature, and it was these times that resurrected and nurtured the sylph. Representing lightness, ethereality, and spirituality, the sylph still connotes the ‘dreamy silhouette’ to which many a ballet dancer may aspire. (15)

Vincent here seems to be arguing that form and function are a bit too conflated in the bodies of the romantic ballerinas, and questions why ballet has not evolved beyond these bodies, either in repertory or in physicality. I argue that this lack of evolution has to do with making sure that the ballerina remains docile. A starving body is a docile body. A starving body cannot resist, cannot claim strength and agency. Surveillance is also a part of starvation: the dancer must constantly monitor her own physical condition to make sure that it aligns with the values and demands of the total institution. She will, in turn, also be constantly observed by those who hold power in the institution. The focus on thinness for the ballerina began to solidify the roots of her modern struggles for agency. Chazin-Bennahum writes that, “During this period it was thought that the dancer’s bony

structure held no need for a thoughtful brain because she was but a body doing intricate leaps and jumps. Unfortunately, she was too often an uneducated and pitiful creature, easily intimidated by the management of the Opéra” (234). Gone were the days of women such as Marie Salle and Marie-Madeleine Guimard who earlier in the century had exerted considerable influence and claimed agency within the Paris Opera Ballet. Ballerinas in the latter part of the 18th century were uneducated, overworked and underpaid, and exploited on every level, including sexually. In this setting and under these circumstances, the ballerina’s lack of agency was much more pronounced and blatant. This shift in agency corresponded with the increasing focus on the ethereality and slenderness of the ballerina, as a slender, weak body is one that can be more fully and readily exploited. As her body disappeared, so did her agency, and the new sylph was a more compliant, docile creature, one that would create the mold and furnish the expectations for the modern ballerina.

To some male viewers, the loss of sexual power on the part of the female dancer created an opportunity for the fantasy, and sometimes the reality, of her exploitation. Some male viewers experienced a heightened sense of arousal by the weak, available bodies of these dancing waifs. Laura Mulvey writes, “Masculine castration anxiety . . . inflects scopophilic⁹ pleasure towards misogyny. It activates the fetishistic aspect of voyeuristic pleasure, in which the female form has the allure and threat of Pandora” (xxxii). Thus the appearance of fragility and innocence has the potential to arouse the curiosity and the pleasure in gazing. Chazin-Bennahum writes that,

⁹ Pleasure from looking

The voyeur/Dandy enjoyed the ballerina's perfection and imagined what great charms were hidden beneath those skirts and tights. To him, she represented "loose morals and easy virtue." The ballerina's traditional role as a sexually available object persisted, but not because she lacked tight lacing. On the contrary, her corset enticed the eager viewer with her delicate neck and waist and tiny, fragile appearance. (225)

The Madonna/Whore complex very much functions in the ballet aesthetic and its corresponding rhetoric of perfection. The sexual desirability of the asexual ballerina underscores one of the central tenets of this complex: the virgin must only appear virginal, but she must be conquerable by man. The more unwilling the conquest, the more desirable. Her lure lies in the promise of breaking her, not in keeping her in a pristine state. The ballerina provided a perfect image for such a conquest, her desirability resting in her tiny ethereal body, a body that could not possibly possess the strength for resistance. Such a weak, fragile body is a docile body, and the gaze further hails this body into its desired state of docility. This body must be surveyed to ensure that it remains in its fragile state, but simply the act of observation also maintains the balletic body's docility.

When a body is constantly monitored, the gaze becomes surveillance – what was a temporary act of objectification becomes a more fixed method of control. The minimal attire that dancing necessitates also facilitates a closer surveillance of the ballerina's body. However, the ballerina's body must be partially, not fully, exposed, because she must also project the image of the virginal waif. The temptation of the body that is concealed just enough to invoke even further curiosity on the part of the viewer is explained thus by Freud: "The progressive concealment of the body which goes along

with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can, however, be diverted ('sublimated') in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole" (Freud 22). Therefore, as both a human body and as a medium of artistic expression, the ballet body is an ideal repository for sublimated desires.

The Docile Starving Body

The prevalence of anorexia and related eating disorders in ballet is certainly not unique to this particular career; instead, it is overdetermined by an overall shift towards excessively thin and thinner female bodies in society as a whole, which began in the 1960s and continues through the present. Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes that, "Women's bodies can be considered cultural artifacts, defined and redefined over time as a result of broad cultural/historical transformations aimed at physical and symbolic subordination" (174). Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the issue of starvation and docility that is occurring in female cultural generally, in order to better understand some of the causes and effects of this phenomena in ballet, and the effects on women's agency that results.

Eating disorders often develop in response to a life that feels out of control, which is why their onset is often during puberty, when hormones cause all sorts of changes in a girl's body and emotions that may feel terrifying to her. The type of girl likely to develop anorexia is one who has always been a "good girl" and thus maintained a degree of control over her presentation, if not her very self. Therefore, anorexia develops as a way

to maintain this persona, both internally and externally. Rudolph Bell describes a typical anorexic:

Raised to strive for perfection and to seek approval from narcissistic parents, she now is able to set for herself a daily, relentless, physically torturing challenge, one over which she alone has control. The immediate cause of her desperate choice may be a lower than expected grade at school or it may be the onset of bodily maturation, the uncontrollable fattiness of developing breasts and rounding hips, or it may be a disgusting sexual encounter, but it is the underlying psychological need to gain a sense of self that is the essence. (19)

Starvation induces a state of docility that ultimately leads to even less agency in life. Sometimes, dancers develop an eating disorder in reaction to a slight suggestion by a teacher about “losing a few pounds” but then that same person watches in horror as the young woman proceeds to shed half her body weight in a remarkably short period of time. Another scenario exists where the dancer is actually encouraged to reach a medically anorexic weight. George Balanchine was such an external force. Gelsey Kirkland writes about the “skeletal frame” he preferred and how his unfortunate preference has since been imitated by nearly every major ballet school and company in the U.S. Kirkland went so far as to refer to Balanchine’s physical preferences as “A ‘concentration camp’ aesthetic” (57). While it may seem in poor taste to compare self-imposed starvation to the horrors experienced at the hands of the Nazis during World War II, Kirkland is far from the only writer to invoke this imagery when trying to describe anorexia. Kim Chernin explains that these are the most salient images we have in our culture of what a starving body looks like and she thus further analyzes the emulation of these bodies by anorexic women:

It is through pictures of starving men and women and children, newly released from concentration camps by the Allies, that most of us first came to learn of the full horror of those camps. We became familiar with the protruding bones, the sunken faces, the enormous eyes and distended bellies that mean starvation, whether imposed or self-afflicted. Although anorectic women refuse to acknowledge the extent of the physical depletion they have taken upon themselves, it is surely of interest that they have afflicted themselves with the most tragic and dramatic imagery for human devastation our culture knows. It is as if they are trying to tell us, through this imagery of their own emaciation, exactly what kind of guilt it is they are suffering from on behalf of their mother, whose life they see through this same imagery of devastation. (61)

The link between anorexia and prisoners of war also connects the disease to the discipline imposed upon such prisoners, except in this case, it is the anorectic who imposes the discipline upon herself. Of this, Caroline Knapp writes in her memoir about her own struggles with anorexia, “With anorexia, I merely elevated to an art form what so many women do with their appetites all of the time, whether or not the behavior blossoms into a full-blown disorder. Weighing, measuring, calculating, monitoring” (12). In other words: discipline and surveillance. Ballerinas certainly discipline and self-survey in this manner where their bodies are concerned.

Surveillance, the gaze, starvation and bodily disavowal, and asexuality all work together to dramatically constrain the agency of the ballerina. The gaze can remove the ballerina’s agency simply with a look that tells her that she is an object, owned by someone else, or at least by the total institution to which she belongs. Surveillance is a more total method of monitoring the dancer that is not confined to just a look; it is a system of ensuring that she complies with the dictates of the institution. When this surveillance reveals that the dancer has committed an infraction of the spoken or unspoken norms of the total institution, she will incur penalties that—since her entire

identity is wrapped up in ballet—could mean not simply the loss of a role or a job, but the loss of her very self. Hence the starvation and bodily disavowal often practiced by dancers. Since extreme thinness is a requirement for most ballet companies, many dancers, especially those whose identities are completely wrapped up in ballet, will go to any lengths to maintain the balletic body type. In turn, the methods of weight control often employed further constrain the agency of the ballerina, compromising her strength and thus ensuring her docility and compliance. Finally, a ballerina has few physical desires, so this also works in the interest of removing the sexuality of the ballerina, and thus another possible source of her power. In this way, the ballerina becomes fully docile, fully compliant, and completely contained within the total institution at all levels: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

CHAPTER IV
THE IMPERFECTION OF MATERIALITY

Perfection is yet another terministic screen, another lens through which the world is seen, interpreted, and judged. Kenneth Burke writes that man is “rotten with perfection” (*Language* 16). He goes on to explain that:

The principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive. The mere desire to name something by its “proper” name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically “perfectionist.” What is more “perfectionist” in essence than the impulse, when one is in dire need of something, to so state this need that one in effect “defines” the situation? (*Language* 16)

Perfection as a concept is rooted in our very language, in our nature as symbol-using animals who employ that language to make sense of the world. This becomes further complicated when trying to apply an abstract principle like “perfection” to a material human body. Misty Copeland writes, “But what looks perfect is often just an illusion, like the dancer with a strained hamstring who wears a smile instead of a grimace when she lands as delicately as a butterfly despite her pain” (16). Even when it appears to be actually embodied, perfection is always an illusion; imperfection defines the material reality of the body, and of the world itself. L.M. Vincent, M.D. and former dancer, writes in *Competing with the Sylph*, “We might benefit by recognizing the arbitrariness, and even folly, of any ideal concept of beauty” (9). The arbitrary nature in establishing an

ideal rests on the fact that it is fallible, subjective human beings, collective or individual, who presume to establish these ideals.

Attempts to embody external definitions of perfection become especially problematic when the lines between onstage and offstage are blurred, when docility is modeled not just on stage, but in the world as well. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman writes that “the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances” (Goffman, “Self-Presentation” 21). Perfection is an abstract and subjective reality that is not available to perception, thus it is something that an individual must perform, and that performance rests wholly on the appearance of perfection. Goffman also posits that the self then becomes a product of her presentation:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (23-24)

Thus, docility arises from this presentation of self, this attempt at emulating perfection.

The performed character becomes the actual character, the on-stage ballerina becomes the total ballerina, the total soldier, and then the ballerina herself becomes part of the panopticon that is constantly surveying her own behavior, her own *self* to ensure that she is enacting the rhetoric of perfection at all times. It is thus up to the audience to credit or

discredit this presentation of self; this performance grants power to audience to accept the self as staged or not.

The instruments of surveillance in the rhetoric of perfection are many: the audience, other dancers, the choreographer, but most importantly, the dancer herself becomes an agent of surveillance, and it is this shift to self-surveillance that entrenches the rhetoric of perfection within the dancer's very being. Foucault writes that, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-203). In other words, the visible agent of surveillance eventually becomes internalized, and the dancer becomes her own surveyor. At this point, no audience, fellow dancers, or choreographer are necessary to ensure the docility of the dancer; she ensures that she remains docile even when no one else is watching.

Much of what drives the rhetoric of perfection in ballet is that the ballerina often conflates her skill with her personhood, a conflation that is frequently enforced by those in power. But as John Passmore points out, both the perfectibility of "man" and the perfectibility of any technical skill performed by fallible human beings is equally impossible. Thus perfection is a terministic screen, simultaneously shaping and deflecting attention; in particular, because the body is an imperfect vessel for all ideals, the concept of perfection focuses dancers' attention and self-scrutiny toward deviations from that impossible ideal. Furthermore, perfection is a subjective, contested term that,

when externally imposed, limits agency in dancers and confers power to others over their artistic expression, livelihood, and wellbeing. Perfection, as a terministic screen, creates the scopic regime to which ballet bodies, as well as the ballerina's very selves, are expected to conform.

Perfection and Plato

In Classical Greek philosophy, the body always comes last: for Plato, the soul was primary; for Aristotle, it was the mind. This established the roots of Cartesian dualism in which the mind and body were split. The body was simply a hindrance to perfection of the mind. Plato claimed that it is possible to perfect the soul, but that the body is the primary obstacle to be overcome for this to be achieved: "Since the unwillingness of the body to submit to its [the soul's] authority is the principal cause of the soul's imperfection, the path to perfection involves some measure of asceticism" (Passmore 40). This asceticism was not carried out in the classical philosophical tradition to the degree to which medieval saints interpreted it; the Greeks' asceticism involved more of a shift in focus than an extreme dedication to physical suffering. Plato saw the path to perfection as one in which the mind becomes more learned and therefore any asceticism of the body was simply in service of removing its desires, which stood as obstacles to the mind; the goal was to *decrease* physical sensation so that the mind could better function, and physical pain would not be in service to that goal (Passmore 41). Plato also conceived of perfection as a more communal rather than solitary experience because "no man can achieve perfection except by way of a perfect society, a society ruled by philosopher-

kings” (Passmore 43). Even if a man had achieved the perfect state of being through mental contemplation, he still would not be perfect if he lived in an imperfect society. Total perfection consisted of a combination of man and society: perfect men are needed to make a perfect society and a perfect society is needed to create a perfect man, and therefore “this approach to perfection requires that men should think of themselves as citizens, not as engaged in a solitary pursuit of perfection” (Passmore 43). In addition, men must exist in some sort of learned society in order for there to be any quality of education available, and for Plato, “Education, not prayer and self-mortification, is the path to perfection” (Passmore 44). One cannot become educated if there is no one available with the quality of mind needed to educate him. This makes the society to which a man belongs an imperative component in achieving perfection.

However, this also implies a distinction between perfection and perfectibility. Perfection is static, ideal, never possible in the real world, while perfectibility has a dynamic, inventive quality that is always moving *toward*. Perfectibility is what is possible in the here and now; because it exists only in the moment, and thus is only applicable to the situation or task at hand, it has a fluid quality that perfection, as a static conceptual entity, cannot have. The human impulse and the Western tradition, thanks to Christianity and language, together focus on static perfection rather than dynamic perfectibility. Jay Dolmage also expounds upon the Western Classical tradition’s emphasis on bodily perfection, which is more often than not the disavowal of the body entirely, in “Metis, Métis, Mestiza, Medusa.” He explains that “despite a close acquaintance with bodily difference, expression, and training, we have chosen to focus on

classical denials of the body, and we have erected a rhetorical tradition that also valorizes the split between the mental and the physical” (2). Dolmage argues that what we need is a shift towards the concept of *mêtis*, which, like perfectibility, is “timely, flexible, and practical” (6) and that “bodily difference [imperfection] fires rhetorical power” (8). Perfectibility, then, could also be called the rhetoric of excellence. In contrast, perfection as a static ideal must first be unpacked and dismantled in order to move from the stillness of perfection into the transformative realms of perfectibility and excellence.

The Spiritual and Religious Aspects of the Rhetoric of Perfection

Denial of all hungers and passions of the body was a crucial component for achieving spiritual perfection among medieval Christian ascetics. In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Walker Bynum writes:

...self-starvation, the deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to medieval people the most basic asceticism, requiring the kind of courage and holy foolishness that marked the saints. To repress eating and hunger was to control the body in a discipline far more basic than any achieved by shedding the less frequent and essential gratifications of sex or money. As Christ supposedly said in a vision granted to Margaret of Cortona (d. 1297): “In this life, Christians cannot be perfect unless they restrain their appetites from vices, for without abstinence from food and drink the war of the flesh will never end; and they feel and suffer most from the rebellion of the flesh who refuse this saving remedy.” (2)

Spiritual perfection in this ascetic tradition requires the denial of all physical appetites and passions, the primary being the need for food and sex. One “benefit” of starvation is that it becomes essentially a two-for-one deal when striving for these ideals: starvation eliminates the sex drive because when the body is physically dying, it no longer has the

urge to reproduce; it becomes solely focused on its own survival¹⁰. This makes starvation doubly useful in the quest for perfection. Starvation is also the ultimate discipline, as Bynum writes, “the most basic asceticism,” and discipline is tied to perfection¹¹. It is one thing to have the discipline to adhere to a daily routine: to get up at a certain time, work for certain hours, etc., but it is another thing entirely to have the discipline to completely ignore and control the body’s need for food. There is a continuum, however, between exercising discipline and control over oneself and carrying such restrictive practices all the way to the point of death.

These modes of control are highly gendered. Susan Bordo describes the disciplines that many women embody in order to achieve the Western ideal of womanhood:

Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough. At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death. (166)

Therefore, just like medieval saints such as St. Catherine were willing to take their physical, spiritual asceticism to the ultimate extremes in the name of spiritual purity, so is the modern woman at times willing to go to the same extreme in order to embody the perfect woman, although in this case, it is often the male gaze as perpetuated through

¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

¹¹ Ch. 2

mass media outlets that has become the god to whom she prays and from whom she seeks validation.

Women therefore often use the restriction of food to embody an ideal; however, men, at least in medieval spiritual autobiographies, view the sublimation of the sex drive as the ultimate discipline. St. Augustine is famous for his accounts in his *Confessions* of his attempts to thwart his sex drive and his descriptions of the evils of lust. His chapter describing his adolescence refers to that entire period of his life as one in which, “Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air” (24). He contrasts “love’s serenity and lust’s darkness” and the “precipitous rocks of desire” that threatened to sweep him into a “whirlpool of vice” (24). He refers to his budding sex drive as a “disorder” upon which someone needed to “impose restraint” (25). For women, the struggle seems to be against food more than sex: “Although fasting and restrictive eating was a widely noted characteristic of medieval spirituality, it did not engage both genders in the same manner or to the same degree. There are few cases of male saints who claimed or were claimed by others to be incapable of eating” (Brumberg 41). For women, perfection seemed to equal the denial of physical hunger to a much greater degree than it did for men. Women were expected, or expected themselves, to suffer in extreme ways, often with the goal of benefiting others, which in turn was thought to sharpen their spiritual senses. Bynum describes food as

a more important motif in women’s piety than in men’s. For certain late medieval women, fasting became an obsession so overwhelming that modern historians have sometimes thought their stories preserve the earliest documentable cases of anorexia nervosa. Women all over Europe served Christ by feeding others, donating to the poor the food that husbands and fathers felt proud to be able to

save and consume. The eucharist and related devotions, such as those to the body, wounds, heart, and blood of Christ, were at the very center of women's piety. (Bynum 4)

For women, spiritual perfection meant taking food that was meant for them and giving it to others. Food restriction was tied to an overall denial of the self and the literal giving of her life force to another. This passage highlights the fact that men generally did not feel the need to deny their physical bodies in this way. It also points out that the physical suffering of hunger was tied to a larger campaign for bodily mortification that included self-mutilation, another way of disciplining the flesh. Not only that, but starvation has the capacity to induce hallucinations and out-of-body experiences that may appear as mystical visions. Catherine of Siena, one of the most famous of the medieval ascetic mystics "ate only a handful of herbs each day and occasionally shoved twigs down her throat to bring up any other food that she was forced to eat" (Brumberg 41). Some would argue that St. Catherine's emaciated frame was merely a visible consequence of her extreme spiritual practices, but the fact remains that her body provided physical proof of her quest for perfection. This is not all that different than the body of the modern anorectic. Many would argue that the discipline is only in order to achieve the physical form, rather than the physicality being a result of the discipline.

In fact, such notions of discipline and punishment as connected to food can be traced all the way back to the Middle Ages, and records of the eating-disordered habits of nuns. When Catherine of Siena was forced to eat a meal in order to appear normal in the presence of others, she would immediately purge the food once she was alone. When her confessor urged her to stop this practice, she refused, citing that the purging process was

punishment for her sins (Lester 203-04). Her “sins” of course, consisted of the ways in which she was human, i.e., not perfect.

There is also evidence in the writings of medieval saints of the connection between language and body in terms of defining and attempting to emulate a subjective concept of perfection. In many ways, embodied religious rhetoric is akin to rhetorical embodiment in ballet, and no one demonstrates that more than St. Catherine of Siena. St. Catherine demonstrated rhetorical authority through what Kristie Fleckenstein calls “performative silences” in which she claims agency in two ways: “a rhetoric *on* the body (extreme asceticism) and a rhetoric *with* the body (charity)” (“Sweet Words” 38). But it was the combination of words and embodiment that truly gave her full rhetorical authority; the “interrelation between contemplation and action structured Catherine’s life and infused her words with rhetorical authority” (40). She could not have claimed the degree of authority that she did if she had only used her words or only her body to communicate; the fact that she infused her words with the completeness of the two-pronged embodied action that Fleckenstein describes is what allowed her to be heard.

Therefore, even though St. Catherine’s extreme asceticism and some would argue, anorexia, ultimately led to her death, she was also able to claim rhetorical agency through her bodily practices. Her goal was spiritual perfection, and according to the Catholic Church, she achieved that goal; however she had to literally kill her physical body in order to do so. This illustrates the limitless distance of perfection, its incapacity to be materialized, and when perfection is tied specifically to the body and a desired outcome with the body as it is in ballet, it does not make sense to kill the very thing one is

attempting to perfect. When the goal is purely spiritual, this might not be as important; St. Catherine believed she had a much better life to look forward to after the death of her physical body. However, for a dancer, the body and its capabilities is the primary object of attempted perfectibility and this certainly cannot be achieved with a corpse.

Anorexia as Modern Sainthood

Medieval asceticism and modern anorexia offer overlapping lessons related to the pursuit of perfection. The entire being of an anorectic is an attempt at embodying perfection. This is why anorexia is the most fatal mental illness. Perfection leads to death. While scholars such as Rudolph Bell have made direct connections between the fasting medieval saints and modern anorexics, others such as Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Caroline Walker Bynum contend that even if the physical resemblance and some of the behaviors appear to be the same, modern anorexia and the starvation of saints are two very different phenomena that must be interpreted in terms of their cultural and spiritual meanings, and not on the food behaviors and resulting physical consequences alone. Brumberg writes that “medieval culture promoted a specific form of appetite control in women, anorexia mirabilis, which symbolized the collective values of that age. Anorexia nervosa expresses the individualism of *our* time” (45-46). Both Bynum and Brumberg make the distinction between the anorexia mirabilis (the “miraculous” apparent loss of appetite and need for food) of the medieval period and the modern definition of anorexia nervosa, claiming that these are two separate conditions that must be spiritually and culturally interpreted in order to fully understand. Brumberg argues that in each case, the

form of perfection being sought is very different and the two must not be conflated, even if the same bodies are produced: "...through fasting, the medieval ascetic strove for perfection in the eyes of her God. In the modern period, female control of appetite is embedded in patterns of class, gender, and family relations established in the nineteenth century; the modern anorectic strives for perfection in terms of society's ideal of physical, rather than spiritual, beauty" (46). I would argue that this is a rather simplistic explanation of modern anorexia, and while I do not think that medieval asceticism and modern anorexia are one in the same, I also do not believe that the two are completely distinct. Both identified groups are attempting to enact perfection in service of a higher calling, and I do believe that there is a spiritual dimension to that calling, whether conscious or unconscious, even in modern anorexia. Matra Robertson, author of *Starving in the Silences*, takes the idea of worship and connects it to the physical body of an anorectic, arguing that thin bodies not only reflect a kind of discipline and devotion, but then become actual objects of devotion themselves: "The modern age demands that the human body not only be observed, gazed upon, but that it also be assessed. The body—especially the female body—is exhorted to conform to models in the way the soul once was: quite simply, some bodies are divine, objects of worship, thoroughly good and pure, and these are the bodies we must strive for" (ix). As the anorectic forces her body into stricter and more regimented patterns of discipline and control in her own quest for perfection, she becomes upheld by the culture as an object of pure beauty, thus further reinforcing her behaviors. Geneen Roth writes, "Dieting was like praying. It was a plaintive cry to whoever was listening: *I know I am fat. I know I am ugly. I know I am*

undisciplined, but see how hard I try. See how violently I restrict myself, deprive myself, punish myself. Surely there must be a reward for those who know how horrible they are” (23). This is the way in which our modern decrees about the appearances of women’s bodies perpetuate anorexia to a different degree than maybe would have been the case hundreds of years ago. However, the bodies are worshipped in both cases. The body of the medieval saint was and continues to be worshipped as an example of the embodiment of extreme piety while the body of the modern anorectic is worshipped in its complete and dedicated emulation of the idealized thin body. The justification might be different (secular vs. spiritual), but the rewards for the woman who is paring down her own flesh in the pursuit of perfection are the substantial, despite disparate, motivations.

Whether the quest of a starving woman is overtly tied to God or not, the goals of anorexia are often stated in terms that seem to parallel a spiritual search, and that yokes this search to the body and to perfection quite specifically. In describing a conversation with one of her patients, Hilde Bruch writes, “From contact with other anorexics she has learned that they all expect ‘something special’ as a reward for their starving, always something superhuman” (*Golden* 16). Bruch directly quotes another patient as saying, “I thought it was just wonderful—that I was molding myself into that wonderful ascetic pure image, and I told myself I was not hungry; but what I felt was entirely different” (*Golden* 17). Therefore, this “ascetic pure image” of perfection requires a complete override of biology. The body is imperfect, thus separation from its needs and desires is required. When the body is obeyed and the rhetoric of perfection is denied, retribution must occur. Therefore, just as eating disorders are often fueled by the voice of the

rhetoric of perfection, in some forms, they also demonstrate the body's rebellion against this rhetoric. When the body is hungry enough, it will force compliance with its needs. It will rebel against the voice of the rhetoric of perfection and insist to be fed.

Eating Disorders: The Body's Rebellion Against Perfection

While anorexia might neatly fit into the rhetoric of perfection, certain eating disorders, such as bulimia, compulsive overeating, and binge eating disorder, disrupt this narrative significantly.¹² Chapter 2 of L.M. Vincent's *Competing with the Sylph* is entitled "Metabolic Illusion versus Reality," a phrase that underscores the fact that for most people, maintaining an unnaturally low body weight is in fact an illusion in and of itself, because it is not a natural state of being and it is often maintained in ways that in essence "cheat" nature, such as through purging "excess" food consumed. Within Vincent's chapter is a section entitled "Pigging-Out" that describes the bingeing behavior of starving dancers—the body's rebellion against the voice of the rhetoric of perfection, that constant chatter that tells the sufferer that she is never good enough, that the limits of her denial are too soft, that she must restrict and push and deny. Hilde Bruch also describes what happens when the biological imperative to nourish the body overtakes the psychological imperative for starvation, thus beginning the binge-purge cycle:

In some, the hunger sensation becomes overpowering and they will eat—sometimes prodigious amounts, in spite of the urgent desire to stay slim, and then they throw up. It may start out with an occasional eating binge, about which they

¹² It should be noted that any of these disorders can occur simultaneously with anorexia, since one of the primary diagnostic criteria for anorexia is low body weight, so as long as the low weight is maintained, periods of non-restrictive eating may very well occur as a response to starvation.

feel secretive and guilty, but then a definite routine develops. Overeating, always followed by vomiting, becomes the rule; the whole behavior will depend on the opportunity for vomiting, almost always in secret. (10)

The ability of the sensation of hunger to override the will of a person is the body's rebellion against the rhetoric of perfection. The rhetoric of perfection dictates that hunger and thinness and transcending bodily needs are necessary to achieve "perfect." The body, however, has its own agenda. It wants one thing—survival—and in the face of a regimen of starvation, it will overtake the mind, with enough power that it may as well be an actual person, an outside force, taking the hand of the "perfect" girl and forcing nutrition into her malnourished body. Marya Hornbacher describes this phenomenon from the perspective of one suffering from anorexia:

This sounds very odd to people who haven't been malnourished, maybe even to those who have, but scientifically speaking, your body will actually override your brain and *make* you eat. You suddenly find yourself hanging up the phone after having ordered a pizza, with no way to hide either the pizza or the hunger it implies. You lock yourself in your bedroom and eat it and puke. Or, you find yourself alone in the cafeteria, filling plate after plate, and you're so bloody hungry that the smell of the food, the existence of all-you-can-eat buffets, the garish light and the laughter and hundreds of mouths opening wide and taking in food, take over and you eat and eat and eat and run into the bathroom and puke. Or, one day you find yourself walking along, and you impulsively stop in a restaurant, order an enormous dinner, and puke in the woods. (120-121)

In a sense, this is a description of the body itself claiming agency over the mind. This also illustrates the shame that is tied to both the sensation of hunger and the consumption of food for someone with an eating disorder. The rhetoric of perfection is ultimately a societal construct that is imported from the outside into the minds of women, and it is partially responsible for these cycles of starvation and bingeing. Therefore, when the

rhetoric of perfection attempts to override the body's physical needs, it is attempting to remove agency from the body as a viable, physical entity and locate the agency entirely in the mind, where the voice of the rhetoric of perfection resides, which seeks to dictate and disrupt the body's natural instincts for health and survival.

The Voice

Many eating disorder narratives give prominent attention to “the voice,” a voice that drives women to starve and binge and purge in search of the ever-elusive state of grace that equals thinness, which equals perfection. Within these narratives, the voice functions in the rhetorical triangle as both a rhetor and an audience member, one who speaks and issues commands as well as one who watches and waits to make sure that the body in which it resides fulfills its demands. I argue that this voice is the voice of the rhetoric of perfection. Writers of eating disorder narratives describe this voice as something separate from the body but one that dictates how the body should behave, especially in terms of what it should ingest, how it should appear, and how it should be moving and operating in the world. When those afflicted with eating disorders describe this voice, along with it comes the tension this voice perpetuates between the physical imperative to eat and the voice's demand that the person abstain. The voice represents the imperative towards perfection, but the body it attempts to drive into such a state will always reflect the imperfection of materiality. I claim that anorexia in dancer and nondancer alike is an attempted embodiment of the rhetoric of perfection; many case studies and autobiographies concerning this disorder devote considerable text to the role

of the voice as the active disorder in maintaining the rhetoric of perfection. The very first page of Portia de Rossi's memoir *Unbearable Lightness* is devoted to describing the presence of the voice and its constant lifelong chatter, thus framing the most active years of her disorder as a final submission to its demands:

Since we first met when I was twelve he's been with me, at me, barking orders. A drill sergeant of a voice that is pushing me forward, marching ahead, keeping time. When the voice isn't giving orders, it's counting. Like a metronome, it is predictable. I can hear the tick of another missed beat and in the silence between beats I anxiously await the next tick; like the constant noise of an intermittently dripping faucet, it keeps counting in the silences when I want to be still. It tells me to never miss a beat. It tells me that I will get fat again if I do. (3)

The fact that the voice is coded as male underscores the gendered nature of the rhetoric of perfection. Hilde Bruch's research confirms that in most of her patients, not only does this voice exist and control their lives, but it is almost always male. Bruch writes:

Usually this secret but powerful part of the self is experienced as a personification of everything that they have tried to hide or deny as not approved by themselves and others. When they define this separate aspect, this different person seems always to be a male. Though few express it openly, they had felt throughout their lives that being a female was an unjust disadvantage, and they dreamed of doing well in areas considered more respected and worthwhile because they were "masculine." Their overslim appearance, their remarkable athletic performances, with perseverance to the point of exhaustion, give them the proud conviction of being as good as a man, and keep the "little man," "evil spirit," or some other magic force from tormenting them with guilt and shame. (*Golden* 58-59)

Another prominent clinician in the field of eating disorders, Peggy Claude-Pierre, calls the voice "The Negative Mind," and her entire treatment approach as outlined in *The Secret Language of Eating Disorders* is based on countering the voice/negative mind. Claude-Pierre first encountered this negative mind when she began trying to help her

daughter Kristen who was suffering from anorexia. She writes, “I slowly came to realize that she was driven by two minds, one positive, one negative. Intuitively, I felt that for her to survive, I had to feed the positive mind and starve the negative” (5-6). The “negative mind” is the voice of the rhetoric of perfection that has to be starved, silenced, killed in order to achieve survival, recovery, and healing. It is the constant, incessant voice in the mind of the anorexic that drives her to eat less, exercise more, push herself harder, further, faster, and to completely ignore the body’s pleas for rest, nourishment, care. The voice is the rhetor with all the agency, whose agency must be eliminated. That agency must instead be transferred to the positive mind, the true self, the part of the mind that is still connected to the body that is clinging to survival. The positive mind wants to eat, to live, to rest, and to have a quality of life, while the negative mind only wants perfection. Perfection has its own logic; it requires destroying all physical needs. These goals are unattainable; so must the means to meet these goals be illogical. Claude-Pierre says of her daughter that, “She told me that there seemed to be some other louder thought pattern in her head that made no logical sense” (13). Therefore, Claude-Pierre’s tactics focused on feeding the positive, logical part of her patients’ minds that sought survival and health rather than to combat the voice, which could not be countered because it did not present itself in a way that could be reached through argument or reason.

The rhetoric of perfection feeds on negativity as its context. For the voice, any perceived flaw becomes the rhetorical situation to which it must respond. Claude-Pierre writes, “A person’s negative mindset becomes increasingly pessimistic and subjective so that it searches out any issue to turn into another negative to feed itself. On its hunt for

confirmation, it perverts any issue wherever it can because it is so hungry for negativity” (19). Therefore, the only possible way to silence such a voice, to remove its agency, is to redirect the audience. If there is no audience, the message goes unheard, the rhetor loses ethos and therefore agency, and the context will eventually cease to exist. The audience of the voice is the woman with the eating disorder, so if she heals and no longer subscribes to the rhetoric of perfection, the voice will no longer have an audience and the context, i.e. the disorder, will dissipate as well.

The voice is certainly present in ballet novels or memoirs in which the protagonist suffers from an eating disorder. Celia in *The Thinnest Girl Alive* describes this as “the voice in my head that drives me insane with its impossible demands” (143). For her, these demands encompass both the rigors and discipline of ballet and the denial of the body, because at this point the two are conflated. The voice tells her to dance perfectly, to look perfect, and to be perfect in every aspect of her life. It drives both her dancing and her eating disorder until the two become almost inseparable, for a time:

I probably should've only ate half that yoghurt. Or even better just skipped it altogether. Now that I know I've lost some weight I don't want to ruin it all and get fat again. So to make up for it, I skipped lunch, and then I skipped dinner too. It's the only way I know to get my evil twin to stop beating me up inside. When I eat, I have to make up for it by doing more sit-ups, or working harder in class. It's that, or go and get rid of it. Nothing else makes the voice stop . . . for a while anyhow. (132-33)

This is the voice of the rhetoric of perfection, and for many women, dancers and non-dancers, this voice can be deadly.¹³

The voice also lends a spiritual good vs. evil struggle to the depiction of eating disorders. The character of the voice in many eating disorder narratives starkly resembles the character of the devil or Satan in Christian spiritual autobiographies, especially those dating back to the Middle Ages or the Medieval period. The Devil is often described as having physical but not spiritual power over the aspiring saint. This also seems to be a particularly gendered way of locating evil as something that lives internally rather than something that is externally imposed. Rudolph Bell writes, “For women evil was internal and the Devil a domestic parasitic force, whereas for men sin was an impure response to an external stimulus, one that left the body inviolate” (16). This explains a particular aspect of the anorectic’s struggle: in order for the evil inside to be excised, the body must literally be purged of it, through starvation, or actual purging, or a combination of both. If these means are not productive, then the body must die in order to kill the evil inside, to kill the voice. This, then, is the ultimate end of an eating disorder. In fact, the sufferer may be more concerned with killing the voice than killing the self, but of course, the two are housed in the same body, so in order for the voice to die, the body must die. For a woman deeply entrenched in the depths of an eating disorder, death can seem like a small price to pay to ensure that the voice dies too.

¹³ *Black Swan* demonstrates this because overwhelmingly this film is about the ultimate ends of the rhetoric of perfection. It is death.

Actual depictions of the life of a dancer and her craft often demonstrate the imperfection of materiality. L.M. Vincent writes of the material and bodily concerns of the ballerina that lie behind the beauty the audience sees on stage:

What is evoked on stage may be elusive, but the sweat, dedication, denial, and pain are very real. There is nothing the least mystical about not having enough weeks of performing to be eligible for unemployment. There is nothing mystical about an injury that threatens a career for which a twenty-three year old has strived for as long as she can remember. There is nothing the least mystical about continually having to confront one's failures. The life of a dancer may or may not be rewarding, but most assuredly, it will not be easy. (xiii-xiv)

This passage categorizes these bodily and material concerns as issues surrounding actual physical labor, physical pain and injury, monetary concerns, and the mental and emotional challenges all of these factors entail, as well as the issue of confronting failure, which is the umbrella under which all of these concerns exist. In fact, Vincent's entire monograph, which is a description of the constant war ballerinas wage against their bodies compiled through observation, interviews, and Vincent's own analysis as a medical doctor, is about the imperfection of materiality: the way in which flesh betrays the ballerina, and the war with her body that becomes as much a part of her job as the daily classes and rehearsals.

One such representation of the imperfection of reality/materiality is Robert Altman's 2003 film *The Company*, which represents an effort to value the imperfect, material nature of dance by moving the audience behind the scenes. The film is produced, written, and conceived by star Neve Campbell, herself a former professional ballet dancer. Both Altman and Campbell together wanted to depict the real world of the

professional ballet dancer, without the contrived drama and box-office-guaranteed plotlines and fairy tale endings of films like *Center Stage*. The film largely demonstrates the immense physical and emotional sacrifice required to be a professional dancer, the expendability of individual dancers, as well as the joy of dance and the close bonds and camaraderie of company life, something that the reality show *Breaking Pointe* also depicts. The close-up shots of specific body parts demonstrate the sheer skill and physical strain required to execute even the seemingly simplest of movements in ballet. These filmic techniques support the implicit argument that while the finished product of the ballet, viewed from the distance afforded the audience, is beautiful, much of that beauty is an illusion. Alissa Hall's novel *The Thinnest Girl Alive* also supports this claim:

Ballet is all about illusion, about tricking the audience into making it look easy. . . . What would Rebecca have thought if she did know the truth, that we do more powder than we probably should to stay up and dance well, that the only reason I'm skinny is because I'm starving all the time and when I'm not starving I'm eating everything in sight and sticking my fingers down my throat and puking up the food I went crazy with. (165)

While this passage highlights the destructive behaviors dancers sometimes engage in in order to maintain the ultra-thin ballet body, *The Company* also argues through highlighting the sheer physical strain required of ballet, that maybe it is okay that ballet isn't always "pretty"; maybe part of the beauty of the ballet is in its moments of apparent ugliness, of imperfection. Even the director barks statements during rehearsal such as, "you're all so *pretty*. You know how I HATE *pretty*." Although all of the dancers are thin and fit, there is absolutely no mention of weight or eating disorders. However, this

film does demonstrate the expendability of the body of the dancer. One corps member is fired and immediately replaced in the middle of a rehearsal. When a dancer is called to demonstrate a petit allegro series over and over until her tendon literally snaps, she is immediately replaced and shown watching the dance from the wings on crutches. And during the last dance sequence, Ry falls and becomes injured and we see the process of quickly replacing someone mid-ballet. The film's focus on injuries underscores the limits of the body.

Dance is material, and the body is limiting, corruptible. The ballet is beautiful, but the body is not; its beauty is an illusion masking the pain and the sacrifice required to create the illusion of beauty. This claim has broader implications for the sacrifices many women, both dancers and non-dancers, make in the name of "beauty." When the makeup comes off, when the body is stripped bare, when the dancer limps off stage, and removes the pointe shoes from her deformed and swollen feet, the illusion vanishes. But isn't this also beautiful? Therefore, the subjectivity of the term perfect and the actual physical imperfections of materiality demonstrate that perfection as a construct only exists at the level of language and cannot be materially constructed by the physical body. The following chapter will detail the ways in which dancers are reclaiming the concept of perfection and moving it from the rhetoric of perfection into the sphere of the rhetoric of performance, thus creating works of art that are fully embodied and through which the dancer is able to express her agency and her very self.

CHAPTER V

CLAIMING AGENCY AND EMBODYING A RHETORIC OF PERFORMANCE

The original title of this chapter was “Reclaiming Agency for Women’s Bodies,” but as I delved further into my research, I was confronted with the fact that for most professional ballerinas, there was nothing to reclaim. Agency was something to be discovered for the first time, because it had never existed previously. Suzanne Gordon writes that “what makes ballet special is the fact that abuses of power are institutionalized. They are built onto the very structure of a ballet career, because most dancers have never had any experience of autonomy” (111). Therefore, regardless of the age and stage of their career in which the process begins, agency is, for many, a process of claiming, not re-claiming. Part of this process lies in discovering what it means to have agency at all, and why such an unfamiliar thing might be desirable. I argue that agency is a central component to creating a fully embodied rhetoric of performance. After having established that a rhetoric of perfection exists in ballet, examining the tropes of docility and surveillance that accompany and enforce that rhetoric, and uncovering the consequences of striving for the elusive concept of perfection on an imperfect body, I now turn to demonstrating what a fully embodied rhetoric of performance might look like, in which dancers are actively working to achieve full agency and change the scopic regimes in the world of ballet.

Kristie Fleckenstein defines a scopic regime as that which “constitutes a dominant way of seeing that shapes one’s sense of reality *and* defines a culturally appropriate relationship to that reality” (*Vision* 10). This is also applicable to Burke’s concept of terministic screens, which “direct[s] the attention into some channels rather than others” (Burke, *Language* 45). An embodied rhetoric of performance is enacted both physically and linguistically as it operates discursively and dialogically to demonstrate agency, thus transforming the scopic regime in the field in which it operates. Neither body nor language alone can do this, for the physical performance does not and cannot reveal its impulse. Just as Cheryl Glenn explains about a rhetoric of silence, the audience cannot know if the rhetor is embodying her agency or is being manipulated and controlled. Glenn writes that “silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (2), yet silence CAN be deployed strategically. Only through her words *about* the performance can the rhetor verify her limited agency, her impulse to perfection, her agency or lack of it. This dialogic doubling of performance—its physical acts/movements and the performer’s linguistic articulation about that rhetorical event—situates the dancer’s integration of body and self. Through this rhetoric of performance that integrates action and word and body and self, the culture of perfection can be changed, thus opening the way for new norms of practice in movement and in language.

Central to understanding this integration is the term and concept of “rhetorical agency.” In her 2004 essay, “How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical

Agency?”, Cheryl Geisler summarizes the findings of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies on the topic of agency as follows:

Many scholars at the ARS suggested that the question of conditions of agency should also be extended to questions of means or resources—a description of conditions under which the rhetor is able to act. A traditional approach finds the constraints on rhetorical action in the audience and in the rhetorical situation. If the rhetor is seen as efficacious, rhetorical action comes through managing these constraints or resources. Most acknowledge that these constraints and resources are historically situated: that is, that tradition forms and/or limits agency (Leff). (Geisler 13-14)

Thus, assessing the rhetor’s relationship with the audience is crucial in establishing the quantity or quality of agency possessed by that rhetor. In a rhetoric of perfection, the agency of the dancer travels in a unidirectional line between dancer and routine. The choreographer transmits knowledge to the dancer, much like Freire’s banking model of education; then the dancer executes the steps, thus enacting the vision and rhetoric of the choreographer, operating monologically. However, in an embodied rhetoric of performance, the agency of each player in the rhetorical triangle operates dialogically. In other words, agency flows mutually among the dancer, the choreographer¹⁴, and the dance¹⁵. This is a system of cultural pressures tied to expectations of the ballet tradition, ballet company, other dancers, and the viewing audience. While the choreographer has as many pressures as the dancer, he still holds the authority and power in the situation.

¹⁴ Many other words and titles can be substituted here for “choreographer” such as ballet master, teacher, etc. This position is held by anyone who holds authority over the dancer, her performance, and therefore her body.

¹⁵ These types of pressures are also at work in theatre, opera, and gymnastics.

These two models of agency do not necessarily pose an either/or situation because both of these models of agency operate within the culture of perfection that surrounds ballet. However, in the actual performance, the audience, the people who are watching the performance and who have mostly not been involved in its creation or presentation, cannot tell whether what they are looking at is a performance of the rhetoric of perfection or the embodied rhetoric of performance—and, indeed, this question is unlikely to enter into the experience of most audience members, whose attention is likely to be focused on the artistic event they are witnessing and the dancer’s apparent mastery of her art form. Therefore, the dancer’s spoken or written words, the linguistic elements of the rhetoric of performance, are required to make this distinction for the audience. This linguistic component in an embodied rhetoric of performance makes visible the following components of a dancer’s agency: 1) self-determination over the shape and size of her body; 2) an awareness of the integration of body and self through the embodiment of a performance; 3) fulfillment through spiritual embodiment; and 4) the dancer voicing her decisions in order to change the scopic regime. This two-fold demonstration of agency—through dance and through words—provides the space to change the culture of perfection’s scopic regime. This chapter examines each aspect of this embodied rhetoric and provides examples of dancers who exemplify either these components in their work, both written and performed, and sometimes spoken and enacted in other ways, such as media appearances. I also provide examples in literature where these sorts of embodied rhetorics are described through fictional characters, thus providing a blueprint for readers to recognize and/or embody this type of rhetorical agency themselves.

Self-determination Over the Shape and Size of Their Bodies

A crucial element needed for an embodied rhetoric of performance is that dancers must have agency over the size and shape of their bodies. This is something that, early in the history of ballet, did not seem to be an issue. Given the power held by the dancers in the early Paris Opera Ballet, that they would have had agency over the shape and size of their bodies went without saying. However, sometimes claims to agency are made in unhealthy ways. Gelsey Kirkland describes her brief flirtation with Hollywood, or more accurately, Hollywood's aggressive pursuit of her, when she was cast in the film *The Turning Point* to star alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov. Not only did Kirkland not want the part, but she describes how loath she was to participate in a film that she felt completely distorted the ballet world. Therefore, her method of rebellion was to literally starve herself out of the role. When her weight reached 80 pounds, she was finally replaced, thus ending her ordeal (Kirkland 201-204). Of this particular method of resistance, Kirkland writes, "I clung irrationally to the idea that my body had been the cause of all my problems" (205). This sentiment is not uncommon among ballerinas, and would seem to make perfect sense, considering their entire world and livelihoods center around the body, so when something needs to be changed in that world, it makes logical sense to change the body. Not only that, but as Rudolph Bell writes in *Holy Anorexia*, "anorexia involves a need to establish a sense of oneself, a contest of wills, a quest for autonomy" (8). Kirkland felt that her autonomy was in even greater jeopardy in Hollywood than it had been in the New York City Ballet. Therefore, her way out of the role was to become so emaciated that even the general public would not have been able to

accept her as a representation of a healthy ballerina, as the character of Amelia in the film was not supposed to be anorexic. Kirkland literally starved herself out of the role, speaking the only way she knew how: through the rhetoric of her body.

When words are absent, the body still speaks. Kirkland did not at the time have the language to speak back, so her emaciated body was the only way she could claim agency. Her body was being commodified through a representation she did not endorse; the boundaries of her physical being were in effect being violated. This violation was, of course, only metaphorical; she did technically choose to be a part of the film, even if she was not quite aware of what exactly she was signing up for. Eating disorders are often a way of re-establishing bodily boundaries for women who feel they cannot use their words to communicate their needs and desires. In this sense, anorexia operates both as complicity with and resistance to the rhetoric of perfection. Rebecca Lester, in “Embodied Voices: Women’s Food Asceticism and the Negotiation of Identity,” writes, “The use of food to renegotiate the boundaries of the body may then become a means for the woman who is experiencing conflict in these areas to reclaim her own agency” (190). Thus, Kirkland uses food and the destructive effects of starvation on her body to negotiate agency in a realm where she could not speak. Kirkland’s goal is met, but with devastating effects for her body and her rhetorical agency: she is fired from the job, but her voice is still never really heard. She forces the producers of the film to accept her boundaries, but without being able to speak, they would never understand why she needed to leave. Therefore, through her seeming liberation, Kirkland only further trapped herself, driving her mind deeper into its disorder and her body into a weakened

state, damaging her health and dancing overall. Of the paradox of the duality of enslavement and liberation achieved by losing weight, Lester writes, “. . . thinness, the very path of a woman’s liberation (at an individual level), is that which further enslaves her (at the societal level), as the arena of struggle for the eating disordered woman is located *within* the framework from which she is attempting to escape” (191). Therefore, achieving liberation through starvation only further ensconces women into that framework and until language can be combined with the rhetoric of the body, she will remain trapped and voiceless.

Kirkland describes a brief moment of awareness after her experience with the film ended, which echoes the primary thesis of NYCB principal Jenifer Ringer’s memoir: “Brute force and willpower enabled me to improve my physical condition. I rationalized a plan to turn my own internal scars into a source of strength. I would conduct an exploratory operation through my art. I would heal myself through the dance” (Kirkland 214). In contrast, Ringer describes the necessity of first healing *away* from dance before returning to ballet as a healthy and whole person, ready to assert true rhetorical agency regardless of the potential consequences. Kirkland’s plan to heal solely through her art ultimately backfired because she had not yet built the reserves within herself to handle the pressures to conform, to be docile, to stay small and thin and quiet: “I was afraid to take a public stand within the ballet world. I was afraid to challenge the prevailing aesthetic as well as the popular authority figures. Rage festered inside me. Returning to the stage was like renewing my contract with a familiar devil. I was selling my soul on an installment plan” (214). The “prevailing aesthetic” of course was the waif-thin sylph

and the “prevailing authority figures” were the powerful men who perpetuated this ideal, especially Balanchine. It would take 40 more years for even a few ballerinas to successfully challenge these ideals and prevail.

When dancers do begin speaking out and challenging the rhetoric of perfection, it becomes crucial that they find support in this project; otherwise, the consequences can be overwhelming when faced alone. Kirkland writes of the loneliness and isolation she felt as a result of her commitment to the ideas of agency and embodiment, but without the support she would need to carry forth these ideals and remain in the world of classical ballet:

Had I been able to speak as well as dance, I might have won the support of those who, like me, longed for a dance that portrayed the human drama with more depth and diversity. Such a dance was a seemingly impossible dream. I never uttered such ambitious words about my art, even to myself, without feelings of absolute loneliness and derangement. The fanatical extremes of my commitment isolated me. I had not yet reached back far enough in time to know that I was not alone. With few exceptions, I had no intimate or intellectual allies. My audience and critics surely sensed my vulnerability, if not my disenchantment. (220)

Kirkland does, however, eventually speak through her autobiography, but it is not until much later that she is heard. Kirkland did not find a way to use her words in the moments when she needed them, to garner support and build community with other like-minded dancers. Kirkland did not reach out to others who might have been her contemporaries, also struggling and trying to find a voice to speak back against the rhetoric of perfection. Ringer learns how to speak through her body and through ballet even before she puts her journey into print. When Ringer initially begins to contemplate returning to dance, it comes with the realization that not all cultures of dance exist in the

same way: “Since I was no longer part of a company, I didn’t have to worry about my appearance. My body was now my own, and I could enjoy dancing without being anxious about what I looked like as I danced. Lots of people took dance for fun. Why couldn’t I?” (118). Ringer’s realization that her body was now her own is the beginning of her journey into full embodied agency, which, for her, had to occur away from ballet, especially New York City Ballet, before she could fully return to dancing professionally. This statement is also indicative of the fact that when dancing with NYCB, her body was *not* her own, not in her mind and not in a material sense either. Once she claimed her body as a dancer, however, she never gave it back to the company, even when she was once again in its employ.

A culture of perfection that focuses on shape and size reinscribes Foucault’s “docile bodies,” with all involved trying to meet this impossible embodiment. This environment makes it difficult for dancers to embrace their bodies and their agency. Eating disorders are a usual pattern because of this privileging of thinness. Unfortunately, when an eating disorder takes hold, another type of agency operates; nothing and no one else can compete with “the voice” of the disorder¹⁶. Recovering from an eating disorder entails teaching the body what it feels like to dance when the body is healthy and nourished. Once the dancer has the embodied memory of dancing healthy versus dancing malnourished, then her body begins to build a catalogue of healthy embodied knowledge that can replace the knowledge she may have used to force her body to dance while malnourished or injured. In “Somatic Metaphors: Embodied Recognition of Rhetorical

¹⁶ See Chapter 3 for a thorough discussion of the voice.

Opportunities,” Jennifer Lin LeMesurier writes, “dancers rely on embodied memory in order to recognize and respond to potential and actual kairotic opportunities” (376). Therefore, dancers need the embodied memory of how to transform an unhealthy body into a healthy body, and what it feels like to dance with a healthy body. It is only from this place of wholeness that a dancer can begin to further claim agency in all aspects of her dancing or sport.

Ringer’s memoir *Dancing Through It* details what this process looks like. Ringer was fired by the New York City Ballet for gaining weight due to an active eating disorder.¹⁷ By the time Ringer asked for her job back, she had lost the weight, but in doing so she also was able to claim and retain an agency that she never had before, not only arresting the progress of her eating disorder, but allowing her to dance as a fully embodied, balanced dancer with rhetorical agency.

This struggle between the agency of the rhetoric of performance and the culture of perfection adds to the difficulties in a dancer accepting her body with or without the approval of those who control the culture. When Gelsey Kirkland returned to ballet in 1986 to perform the role of Juliet alongside Anthony McDowell in the Royal Ballet’s *Romeo and Juliet*, she told McDowell, “You know, Anthony, now that I’m healthy, I’m likely to be more difficult than ever. I hope you weren’t expecting an angel in the studio” (Kirkland, *Shape* 10). This sentiment speaks to the agency that comes with age, but also the voice that dancers gain when they prioritize their health and safety over blind

¹⁷ It is often assumed that eating disorders always cause weight loss, which is only the case with anorexia nervosa. All of the other range of eating disorders are just as likely to cause significant weight gain as they are to contribute to weight loss.

adherence to an imposed aesthetic. This is also a dancer who would best know how age and agency work together in the ballet world, as a former Balanchine ballerina. When Balanchine formed his new company, he specifically wanted to build it with teenage ballerinas: “To her astonishment, the 27-year-old Danilova was informed by Balanchine that she was ‘much too old’ for the kind of company he had in mind” (Vincent 21). It should be noted also that Kirkland was just as thin in this role as she ever had been; she had just learned how to maintain her weight in a healthier way. This also raises the issue of how it is essentially impossible for an outside spectator to determine the level of a dancer’s physical health. A dancer can be quite thin, and very healthy, or she can present with a more “normal” body weight but be suffering tremendously from bulimia, compulsive overeating, or binge eating disorder. The visual presentation of the body actually conveys little information as to the health and agency of the dancer. This is why the dancer’s own words are crucial in determining her level of agency in her art and life, for that is essentially something that only she is able to decipher and convey. Misty Copeland also describes her process of coming into health and agency. After struggling with a reactionary bout of binge eating disorder, Copeland finally started to eat for health and energy, “not about attempting to please (or defy) anyone else” (Bried). She ceases attempting to claim agency through unhealthy means, as Kirkland had done also, and begins claiming agency by choosing to maintain health and strength, allowing that to be her embodied message.

Both Ringer and Copeland describe the experience of learning to accept their bodies as dancers without needing the approval of the top companies for whom they

danced. For Ringer, taking jobs outside of the New York City Ballet allowed her to fully claim her body as her own, well before she even thought of returning to City Ballet.

When she returned, she did so with a completely changed perspective about the role of the company directors in her life. She recognized their authority on a professional level, but chose to remove any agency they had previously held over her on a personal level.

She describes this shift in the meeting they held with her about the possibility of returning to City Ballet:

I was sitting across from two regular people who happened to be experts at what they did, and were therefore in high positions, but if I chose to put myself back under their authority, they would be my bosses and nothing more. They would not determine how I felt about myself—not anymore. (155)

Ringer's language here moves the directors of New York City Ballet into more mundane positions of authority. By referring to them as "regular people" and by using the phrase "happened to be experts," she, through language, claims agency and makes it clear that they no longer represent the last word in terms of her life, her work, her body, or her spirit. She had danced on other stages in the interim and proven to herself that she could perform, and she could love dancing, whether or not her body was sanctioned by NYCB. She would find work, regardless. And at this point, to her, all she had gained during her time away from City Ballet was not worth relinquishing for a job.

Many years after her successful return to City Ballet, Ringer's empowerment and embodiment faced the biggest challenge and threat at the hands of a dance critic for the *New York Times*. Alastair Macaulay was a new critic at the *Times* and he had a reputation for being quite harsh on the dancers themselves. Ringer's body became the

object of his criticism and disdain, as he wrote that Ringer, “as the Sugar Plum Fairy, looked as if she’d eaten one Sugar Plum too many” (qtd. in Ringer 212). Ringer comments that, “In all my years of weight problems, not one critic had called me heavy, and now, ten long years after my recovery, this review appears” (212). Ringer certainly demonstrates that she is, in fact, in full recovery from her disorder and not willing to allow anyone to have the power and authority to lead her back to it when she writes, “But I was definitely not heavy and was at a good performance weight, which Macaulay had seen me at many times before. So obviously this was *his* problem and *his* opinion, not my problem, and certainly not an opinion I had to agree with and take into myself” (213). This refusal to take his opinion “into herself” is Ringer essentially saying that she will no longer embody the role of the dancer who allows others to dictate what her body should look like.

The fact that attention is called to Ringer’s body through written language, Macaulay’s review, adds another rhetorical layer into Ringer’s relationship with her audience, and her own agency and embodiment. Ringer chooses to respond, both with her body and with her words. By taking the stage in a healthy body, at a weight that Ringer herself has determined to be her ideal dancing weight, she is embodying rhetorical agency. However, it was not until Macaulay presented the rhetorical situation of his review that Ringer was able to tell her audience that what they were seeing was in fact a healthy woman and not someone in the throes of body hatred and the accompanying abusive weight-control practices. In addition, Ringer responded further with her body by appearing publicly on talk shows, blending her body and her words as she continued to

exemplify embodied agency. Then, Ringer furthers her rhetoric by continuing to take the stage, in the same healthy body that was criticized for being too large, and then again in her autobiography when she describes her struggles and triumphs during this period and throughout this process in detail, using written language.

As this is a discussion of the rhetorics of performance, the exploration of the intersection of vision and rhetoric becomes paramount to understanding the ways in which the rhetoric of perfection is displayed. However, this study also relies heavily on textual representations of these rhetorics, and therefore it becomes crucial to examine the interplay between vision and rhetoric, between image and text, and how visual and written texts can serve to either support or undermine their stated, implicit, and actual purposes and ends. In *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom*, Kristie Fleckenstein argues that “Our realities are a complex amalgam of vision and language; therefore, acting on and in those realities require a similarly complex amalgam of vision and language” (2). Many of the autobiographies examined here carry with them the implicit or explicit call for social change within their respective disciplines. Therefore, while dancers as a whole can hardly be considered a “marginalized community,” the women and girls functioning in these patriarchal power structures are often silenced and marginalized by these structures, thus creating the motivation to speak back through autobiographical acts.

Sometimes speaking back is accomplished through reversing the gaze and in so doing, calling out those who might disapprove of a healthy body and claim it is unfit for the stage. Ringer claims agency for her body when she defines for herself what a “good

performance weight” is; if Macaulay does not agree with her assessment, she determines this to be his problem and his alone. In this way, Ringer reverses the gaze by calling attention to Macaulay’s inappropriate words, reclaiming her body from his critical gaze. It is often the presence of this gaze that actually renders the person as an object; the gaze can remove subjectivity and convey object status simply based on its presence. In terms of rhetoric, the gaze is unidirectional; the object is the spectacle, an audience of the gaze that she actually inspired. Her subjectivity is removed when she sees her object status communicated in the spectator.

However, when the gaze is reversed, there is a disruption in the removal of agency; the object stares back, and brings the very fact of the gaze to the attention of the spectator. This is exactly what Ringer does in her response to Macaulay’s review. Her response turns Macaulay’s text into the site of spectacle, instead of her body, and as Laura Mulvey writes in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, “The spectacle isn’t prepared for anything other than passive spectators” (5). In rendering Ringer’s body as spectacle, the expectation thus would be that Ringer’s voice would be obstructed by the gaze. In turning the gaze back onto Macaulay and thus making his review the object and the spectacle, Ringer reverses the gaze, and so demonstrates to other dancers and women a way to reclaim voice and agency when an attempt has been made to publicly strip them of both.

Ringer shows fellow ballerinas, and fellow women, that we do not have to embrace the standards dictated to us externally to dance, or to be visible, empowered, and fully embodied women. We can, in fact, set our own standards, and inhabit and dance in

bodies that are healthy and strong and use those bodies to convey that message to the audience, many of whom may be women and dancers still struggling to claim such agency for themselves. Of this phenomenon, Ringer writes, “And how amazing to think that God might be using my experiences to encourage other young women who might be having problems with their own weight and self-image. I could actually use what I went through to help other women on a much bigger scale than just the few dancers with whom I came in contact in New York” (222). She goes on to write, “I really wanted my situation to be used to help women who might be feeling shame or self-hatred because of their weight or food issues, and I didn’t want to waste this opportunity to be honest about myself if it would in turn help start the healing process in others” (225). These statements reveal that much of Ringer’s motivation for writing and speaking is to not only claim agency for herself, but to empower other women to do so, which if carried to its full extent, could potentially reverse the gaze onto the whole culture, and thus truly alter the scopic regime.

Copeland also works to reverse the gaze and alter this regime. She talks extensively both in her autobiography and in subsequent media interviews about how her journey began with working towards a healthy acceptance of her body. She now uses her body to make a statement: her popular presence challenges the strictures of the “ballet body” and actively re-defines its look. She tells a reporter for *Self* magazine about how it was actually her self-acceptance that forced American Ballet Theatre to change. She was asked repeatedly to “lengthen” and “improve her line,” which were legal ways of telling her to lose weight. By refusing to do so, Copeland is changing the “scopic regime” of the

ballet world. An example of this occurs when Copeland both viewed herself and was viewed by the public as the Firebird:

I remember walking out of rehearsal in jeans and sandals to get my hair done for the premiere. When I turned onto the sidewalk, I saw it: a huge billboard on the front of the Metropolitan Opera House with my picture on it. I was in profile, wearing a red leotard, with my chest and back arched so you could see my full, feminine breasts and my round butt. It was everything that people don't expect in a ballerina. I stood completely still for five minutes, just crying. It was beauty. It was power. It was a woman. It was me. (Bried)

Changing both the ballet hierarchy and the public's perception of the ballerina effects social change, and not just for dancers, but for all women and the overall cultural standards for feminine beauty. In this way, changing vision is a social action, as Fleckenstein argues:

The second way that vision affects social action is through visual habits: systems of perception that, through an array of habituated conventions, organize reality in particular ways leading us to discern some images and not others, to relate those images in characteristic ways to each other and to ourselves, and to link those images to language in a uniform dynamic. Just as rhetorical habits are implicit within rhetoric, so are visual habits implicit within images, and those visual habits are integral to social action. (Fleckenstein, *Vision* 10)

The "uniform dynamic" in this case is the typical ballet body, which has been described in detail in Chapter 1 as one that conforms to Balanchine's requirements: small head, long neck, long arms and legs, short torso, and most importantly, very thin, and white. Simply through her physical presence, by the very fact of her body, Copeland is changing the uniform dynamic of ballet, using the image of her body to create new norms.

An Awareness of the Integration of Body and Self

Another method for claiming agency, specifically within ballet, is through embodying a role fully. This is a method Kirkland describes extensively, especially when she was performing a classic Romantic ballet such as *Giselle*:

I had to have the final choice about every aspect of Giselle's outward image, which was, after all, an essential reflection of her inward being—each facet of her psychology had to be forged from a real quality in my own personality. That was the only way I could translate her character into my body. No details were minor in the physicalization of such a role. It was always a case of life or death. (188)

In embodying *Giselle*, Kirkland claims artistic and rhetorical agency within and through her own body—this is why she describes the stakes as “life or death.” For Kirkland, a lack of agency as a dancer equals death, and her primary method of communicating and claiming agency is by fully embodying her roles on every level. She fights to do this as if she were fighting for her life, the life of *Giselle*, which she has made one in the same.

Kirkland is also able to claim agency in this fashion with one of her most fraught colleagues: Baryshnikov. She dances the role of Clara in a version of *The Nutcracker* that he choreographs and imbues her Clara with a decided agency and optimism that not only runs counter to Baryshnikov's dark cynical vision, but that also allows her to reclaim some of these qualities for herself:

The light of my character created shades of meaning at odds with that sort of cold, cruel fatalism. My Clara was still looking for the Prince in the last scene, even when the curtain came down. She may have lost him, but she would never lose her dreams, her ideals, most especially her ideal of love. She would grow into a woman of imagination. She would be wise enough to defend her place in the world. No man would ever strip away her love of virtue and perfection. I gave her the benefit of the lesson that I had learned in working on the ballet: I let

Clara's world become alive for me—her reality and her terrific fantasy. In a way it felt like a childhood I was able to go through, that I never had. I think it taught me to trust my imagination. (233)

This provides a very deliberate example of ways in which Kirkland truly was able to heal parts of herself through dancing and through her meticulous embodiment of the characters she portrayed. At this point in her life and career, it was not only Baryshnikov who was pushing a “cold, cruel fatalism” into her psyche, but the rhetoric of perfection, parts of which were represented by Baryshnikov and Balanchine. Kirkland's Clara was a young woman who approached the world in a way that had long ago been lost to Kirkland herself. Through allowing Clara to hang on to her imagination and her belief in love, especially her “love of virtue and perfection,” Kirkland was, at least for the duration of the role, reclaiming these qualities in herself—and exercising agency through dance and through her writing about those choices, thus highlighting for her readers the power of an embodied rhetoric of performance.

Again, we as a reading audience know all of this through Kirkland's textual representation. Her viewing audience would have no way of perceiving in her performance the hours of research, emotional preparation, and attention to each meticulous detail of her characterization, both inward and outward. However, it is likely that they would notice if these elements were *not* in place. They would notice if Kirkland's embodiment of Giselle was lacking specificity, if her costume was not appropriate for the character, if her emotional expression was incongruent with the content of the scene. Sometimes full embodiment is just as notable for its absence as it is for its presence.

Embodiment involves conveying a sense of self, and the word “self” is certainly a contested term. Sometimes, the “self” refers to the mind, sometimes the soul, and other times, to the entire being of a person. The introduction of Renee D’Aoust’s memoir describes how, for a dancer, the body and the self are same, which is the opposite of Cartesian dualism. Arguably, music and dance are inextricably linked, and Aristotle refers to a sophist named Damon, “a legendary music teacher” (Hawhee, *Bodily* 139) whose interpretation of the effects of music on the self is that music can actually shape and *produce* a self, making it a “productive art.” Hence, if dance is in response to and in union with music, dance can also be seen as an art that is not only intended to integrate the soul and the body of the dancer, but to actually *produce* the soul of the dancer. Debra Hawhee concludes that, for both Plato and Aristotle, “music’s capacity to transmit dispositions falls outside the category of reasoned, conscious learning, as rhythms and modes invade the soul and, at times, excite the body to movement” (139). The phrase “transmit dispositions” can be read as a commentary on the ability of music and dance to call into being the very soul of the musician or the dancer. Therefore, what is being transmitted if a dancer has split her body and her self as a consequence of the rhetoric of perfection? Can a dancer re-discover the self she has lost *through* the dance, or must the self be recovered before the dance can even connect with this intrinsic, abstract part of her being?

Returning to *Pointe Magazine*’s December 2013/January 2014 issue entitled “Reinventing the Ballerina,” though much of this issue re-inscribes the culture of perfection out of which the ballerina is created, this issue also details how some

ballerinas are in fact re-defining this culture and creating ways to locate agency within it. NYCB principal Wendy Whelan graces the cover of this issue, and she is highlighted as one such dancer who has been instrumental in “reinventing the ballerina.” Whelan is 47 years old and has been with City Ballet for over 30 years. This fact in itself is striking in terms of the youth culture that surrounds the rhetoric of perfection. Therefore, her body itself, its presence in this youth culture of ballet, communicates that she is defying norms and expectations for what a ballerina should look like. However, Whelan is even more active in her embodiment than just simply “sticking around” and becoming an example that ballerinas do not, in fact, have an expiration date. Whelan documented the surgery she underwent to have a labral tear in her hip repaired and the subsequent healing process through social media. Whelan writes, “Through my photos and updates, I took ownership of the process and the progress of my recovery. Each image became a statement of where I had been and the positive direction in which I was heading. It became my healing diary” (Whelan n.p.). This is noteworthy due to the culture of shame and secrecy that so often accompanies injury in the ballet world, because injury is proof that one is fallible, mortal and not, in fact, perfect. Ringer provides further testimony to Whelan’s agency and authority as a dancer:

One ballerina whom I’ve always admired for her stage presence is Wendy Whelan. In rehearsals, she works immaculately, fixating on small details as she strives to understand and conquer whatever role she is dancing at the moment. She addresses minute technical issues as well as broad motivations and themes, and at the final stage rehearsal it appears that the part has never been danced better. But then the performance comes, and Wendy somehow takes everything to another level, transporting herself into the role, inhabiting it as only a creature of the stage could. Her way of working yields amazing results and has made her

one of the most memorable artists of this generation; I've held her up as an example to follow ever since I first saw her perform. (174-175)

This example also speaks to the collective power of rhetorical embodiment: if a dancer seeks to emulate another who is fully realized, then the culture of perfection in ballet can be transformed into one of a positive striving to be the best, as defined by the dancer herself, and away from seeking the external standards of the ballet master. In this way, women are able to help each other claim embodiment and agency through leading by example and thus re-shaping ballet according to their own rules and standards.

Many ballerinas who are not able to find a comfortable level of agency within ballet shift to modern dance. D'Aoust's memoir *The Body of a Dancer* is an exquisite journey through one dancer's quest for rhetorical embodiment in dance. She begins by describing ballet, body, and identity: "I did not have the biology. My extension was not high enough. I had breasts. I would never be a ballet dancer. I was nothing" (9). However, D'Aoust quickly moves into a discussion of reclaiming her body, and how that was inextricably linked to reclaiming her place in the world of dance, this time as a modern dancer: "I was home. In my body. In the body of a dancer" (9). In *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, Kathy Davis writes, "Bodies no longer represent how we fit into the social order, but are the means of self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be. In an era where the individual has become responsible for his or her own fate, the body is just one more feature in a person's 'identity project'" (2). For dancers, the body produces the identity of "dancer." While Davis somewhat trivializes a focus on the body as just a small part of an overall identity

project, my analysis reveals that if it is in fact a piece of a larger project, it is the lynchpin of the entire project. Hawhee asserts that the self was actually produced through the body in ancient Greece: “It is the body, not the soul, that sees and is seen” (*Bodily* 173). My analysis suggests that this ancient method of self-production is still very much relevant, especially for those whose lives exist within cultures of the body, and cannot be reduced or encapsulated as one small piece that composes a person’s identity. For dancers, the body of a dancer equals the soul of a dancer: body puts flesh on identity, on the very self.

Ringer also describes coming into full rhetorical embodiment and claiming the body and soul of a dancer: the process of taking agency from an external agent and claiming that agency for herself. In doing so, she is claiming her role as speaker and is placing the company director in the role of audience, instead of being willing to relinquish the speaking role to him as soon as he requests it. Her message is simple: *I want to dance*, which for a dancer means, *I want to be*. But not under any circumstances or conditions. Here is when we begin to understand the role of language in the relationship between ballet master and ballerina. The ballerina must speak back to the ballet master using her words, and she must speak back with her body by taking care of herself and dancing in ways that work for her, regardless of what she is told. If she is verbally defiant, yet abuses herself physically, then she is still missing a crucial necessary piece for rhetorical embodiment. If she is able to maintain her health, but still allows the ballet master to speak to her in ways that are counterproductive, then her mental health will suffer, which will ultimately lead to a deterioration of her physical body as well.

Thus, both language and body must be equally involved for ballerinas to claim full agency within their jobs as dancers.

Working towards a fully realized embodied rhetoric of performance occurs when a dancer is able to fully embrace the dance itself, without allowing concerns over perfection of technique to hinder her experience of performance. When this occurs, the dancer is able to simply trust her body, trust that it knows, and then allow herself to exist completely in the moment, with the movement, the music, and the audience. Copeland describes an experience while performing with Prince after overcoming her own struggles with weight and body image that exemplifies this concept:

After Prince's band and background singers made their way onto the stage, I was next. I walked out, not really knowing what I was going to do since I hadn't rehearsed. But I wasn't worried. I was in the zone. I was about to perform, which I loved to do, but far away from ABT, so I didn't have to worry about executing the perfect forward leap, or *jeté en avant*, with all eyes critiquing my form. I could dance freely and introduce some newcomers to my love, ballet. (217-218)

When freed from the gaze of the company, Copeland was able to fully embody her dancing in a way that she could not under ABT's strictures. However, her viewing audience, especially the average Prince concert-goer, would not have been privy to the fact that her mind was less consumed with perfect execution than it would have been if she was on the stage with ABT. To this audience, her steps probably did look perfect and in fact may have been "perfect;" the shift could very well have occurred in her mind and not her body. The only way the audience possibly could have known that she was experiencing this level of freedom is through reading her autobiography, where she

describes these moments to her readers, most of whom were probably not present during the moments she is describing.

Ringer demonstrates that rhetorical embodiment offers untold joys that accolades within the confines of the perfect ballet body cannot match. In her memoir, Ringer describes several performances she gave as a freelance artist before she was thin enough to rejoin the New York City Ballet; therefore, she was able to claim joy and embodiment with dance while she was still not permitted to take the stage with her former company due to her weight. “Joy” is an abstract concept that can certainly be conveyed onstage, through dance, with the body. The audience can see and experience joy, but only language can tell an audience if that joy is authentic, if it extends beyond the stage, or if it is something confined only to that moment. True joy can certainly exist in moments, even if the rhetoric of perfection is in charge. Joy can also be fabricated in a competent actress, although a complete pretense is often obvious to an audience. But a fully embodied joy that is an expression of the dancer’s being, an expression of her embodiment, and her love of performing, of dancing, of living, needs both body and language to fully convey. It is only through reading Ringer’s autobiography that the audience can be made fully aware of what she was feeling and experiencing in those moments, and if she wrote that she was joyful, but her body conveyed misery, then the rhetorical act would be incomplete. Therefore, as Fleckenstein has pointed out, it is the combination of vision and action that fully completes the rhetorical act—vision of both body and language acting in congruence to convey genuine experience.

Fulfillment through Spiritual Embodiment

Several of my primary texts, both fictional and nonfictional, incorporate spirituality as a significant component in achieving rhetorical embodiment and thus enacting a rhetoric of performance. In many of these representations, faith in an actual higher power is a necessary requirement, but I would argue that belief in some sort of God is not completely necessary to achieve rhetorical embodiment, but it does seem important to connect to something greater than the self and to have a sense of transmitting this higher quality through embodiment. The latter third of Ringer's memoir is a testament to her continued ability to maintain rhetorical embodiment as she returned to, and then rose through the ranks of, the New York City Ballet. The organization of Ringer's memoir in this way differentiates it from a typical eating-disorder memoir where the end is "recovery," without describing that agonizing process or how long it lasts (because "recovery" from any addiction is typically a short-lived phenomenon). Ringer devotes the entire second half of her memoir to her life with the ballet after she has completely recovered from her eating disorder and learned how to dance, first on her own, and then with City Ballet, on her terms. She describes the ways, large and small, that she claimed agency during this process. Ringer had learned during her hiatus from ballet that in order to dance at all, she had to care for all aspects of her self and spirit, and make sure that her life encompassed all those things that made her whole, outside of ballet.

Ringer was able to achieve full embodiment largely through her faith and religious practice, which is only evident to readers of her autobiography. Her

descriptions of embodiment almost sound like Biblical battles of Good vs. Evil, God vs. the Voice (which is highly appropriate because many post-eating-disordered writers such as Alissa Hall refer to the Voice as the Demon¹⁸). Ringer writes:

The second act began, and it was time for me to go onstage for my first entrance, a solo. Somewhere in the middle of that solo, I felt those old, negative thoughts falling away from me. *You are disgusting.* I dropped the thought on the stage. *Everyone watching you is horrified by your appearance.* I let that thought fall off too. I felt beautiful. I was dancing for God, and I knew He was pleased. God had given me a gift, and I was using it. I felt joyful and free. I was really dancing, really performing, and really living it in a purer way than I had in a long time. (144)

Because of her faith, and her belief that she was now “dancing for God,” Ringer is able to hold on to her agency even in the face of the people to whom she had bequeathed that authority for years. She describes the process of going into the offices of the directors of NYCB to ask for another chance in the company:

I took a breath and thought back on all I’d been through in the year since I’d been fired. I looked at these two people who’d had so much control over how I thought and felt about myself. I’d given them the power over whether I loved or hated myself, but I realized that now I was free. I was no longer under their control but instead empowered as a Daughter of the Lord to use the gifts He had given me in whatever way He saw fit. (154-55)

Ringer is describing an ancient concept in dance and movement: that of worshipping with the body. This is a concept that mystics such as G.I. Gurdjieff explored both on the stage and in writing. Hawhee’s monograph *Moving Bodies* contains a chapter that fully explores Kenneth Burke’s writings about Gurdjieff and the influence Gurdjieff’s music,

¹⁸ See Alissa Hall’s *Exposing the Demon: The True Nature of an Eating Disorder and What You Can Do to Defeat It*.

performances, and writings had on Burke and his work. Gurdjieff approached dance “as a sacred art of communication” (38) and the dance performances he choreographed and staged were meant explicitly to demonstrate the link between movement and the sacred. Hawhee quotes Gorham Munson, who writes about A.R. Orage, one of Gurdjieff’s primary influences upon his theory and practice of sacred dance: “The ancient sacred dance is not only a medium for aesthetic experience, but a book, as it were, or script, containing a definite piece of knowledge” (39). This idea, in a sense, actually argues *against* the necessity for language in communicating the sacred. This is certainly a valid argument: the audience can absolutely absorb and witness a sense of the divine through movement without knowing linguistically exactly what is being communicated. However, to know precisely how those specific movements connect to the process of embodiment for that specific dancer requires language. A dancer who is still attempting to embody the rhetoric of perfection more than the embodied rhetoric of performance can still quite effectively communicate an experience of the sacred through movement and successfully share that experience with the audience. But the audience cannot know whether or not that dancer is experiencing full embodiment and agency as a person and as a dancer as well as communicating that sense of embodiment through her performance unless she uses language to communicate that this is happening.

Embodiment in dance through religion and faith is also depicted in fictional novels about ballet. Claiming agency in this way is a key theme in the novel *A Dance of Sisters* by Tracey Porter. In this novel, subtle references tie ballet to ascetic Christian religious practice, and the novel proposes that full embodiment can only be found by

leaving ballet and fully embracing dance as an act of worship, outside of the specifically Christian rhetoric of perfection, which the novel connects to ballet. A statue of Mary placed in close proximity to the photo of ballet teacher Madame Elanova makes this link from the very beginning of the novel (14). The introduction of the Brazilian Dance teacher, Meia Noite, provides the contrast to Madame Elanova's rhetoric of perfection. The two characters overtly clash when Elanova casts Meia Noite in *The Nutcracker* and his biography for the program reads:

MEIA NOITE began dancing in Candomble rituals in his native Bahia, Brazil, before he could talk. At sixteen he became his village's priest of Ochumare, god of life and change. A year later, he began his professional career by dancing with Brazil's leading folklore company, Ballet Nacional do Brasil. He has toured extensively in Europe, and has performed and choreographed major works in Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. (133)

Madame's response is, "Vhy [sic] can't he just say he danced with [sic] Ballet Nacional do Brasil? Why must he include he is priest in ignorant religion?" (132). Delia, the protagonist, has a much different reaction to reading Meia Noite's bio, one that foreshadows how she will eventually find her own embodiment and empowerment through dance:

She was intrigued, for it seemed an odd thing that dance was part of his religion. How did he learn the steps? Did a priest teach him? Did he make it up himself the way you make up a prayer? Maybe his religion was what she saw when she watched him dance, for he had something that she could not put into words. She saw it when he took class and rehearsed. He did not have a lot of ballet technique. But he had energy and boldness, and his port de bras seemed to come straight up out of the floor and through his body. And there was something else, something liquid and mysterious in the way he moved. Delia loved watching him do something as simple as walk across the floor. She stuffed two of the discarded

programs into her ballet bag, planning to mail one to Pearl with her next letter. She thought her sister would find Meia Noite interesting. (133-34)

In this novel Meia Noite symbolizes embodied rhetorical agency in dance and Madame represents ballet's rhetoric of perfection. Even though generally the rhetoric of perfection is thought of as something male ballet masters impose upon female ballerinas, in this novel a woman is imposing this standard on other women and a man gives Delia freedom to become an embodied dancer with agency. Although the rhetoric of perfection is a highly gendered rhetoric, the sex of the speaker does not have to be male in order to transmit this standard, and in turn, the sex of the person conveying embodied empowerment can certainly be male. The rhetoric itself is gendered, and can be transmitted by either sex.

Meia Noite provides a complicated and interesting portrait of gender and embodiment possibly indicating that this sort of embodiment in dance is without gender, or possibly in order to supplant the parody of femininity that is present in ballet: "Meia Noite was there, stretching a leg on the barre and reaching toward his foot in a long arch. He was supple and strong, both masculine and feminine" (151). Delia's initial encounter with Meia Noite includes references to his gender non-conformity as well as the contrast he posed with Elanova:

The teacher was tall and toffee-colored, with shoulder-length braids and long feline muscles. He was listening to a smiling young woman with a tattoo of a sunburst on her shoulder. It was only when he laughed that Delia could determine he was a man. It was a deep, husky laugh that rolled and bounced down the hallway. The girl with the tattoo joined in loudly. Delia had never heard anyone laugh like that in the Elanova school before, not even in the dressing room. Miss

Dairy stomped out of her office and shushed them. A few moments after she left, the teacher and the girl broke up again, this time into silent giggles. (49-50)

Meia Noite is also described in a way that exemplifies fully embodied rhetorical agency in dance outside of the gendered rhetoric of perfection:

When the men's group, traditionally the last group to dance a combination, took the floor, Delia was surprised to see the Brazilian teacher. He danced barefoot in loose batik pants and an orange sleeveless tank top. His dreds were pulled into a long, thick ponytail. His turnout was poor and his feet weren't fully pointed, but his jumps were buoyant and exact, nailing the music. He sliced the air, making even the more technical dancers seem like plodders. Between groups he remained in the back of the studio stretching his Achilles at the barre, talking to no one. Delia couldn't imagine what he was doing there. Clearly he was a dancer, but not a ballet dancer. (99)

In addition to Meia Noite, Pearl, Delia's sister, is also instrumental in leading Delia to find her rhetorical agency. Pearl is also connected to Earth-centered pagan spirituality, and in Chapter 11 (entitled "Charms"), Pearl begins to infuse Delia's dancing with earth spirituality, which seems to be the first symbolic step toward Delia claiming agency in her dancing; before her performance, Pearl has her soak in a bath of witch hazel and herbs and smudges her with sage (148). Pearl makes an amulet for Delia and leaves it for her with this note:

This is the amulet I promised you. Inside are dried flowers and a little mirror pushed into a bit of beeswax. The mirror will deflect any bad thoughts Madame what's-her-face sends your way and bounce them back to her. I've been saving these ingredients for myself, but you need them more than I do. The amulet will help you keep your own strength and purity when Madame tries to make you doubt yourself. Wear it whenever you're around her, and stop thinking of her as your mother. I'm serious—that woman is a bad witch. (199-200)

In a sense, this is not a condemnation of a character, a person, or even an archetype: this is a warning against the dangers of adhering solely to the rhetoric of perfection—she is the “bad witch” in Porter’s novel. If we read Madame Elanova as representing the rhetoric of perfection and Meia Noite as representing the embodied rhetoric of performance, then the entire novel can be read as a cautionary tale against the dangers of adhering to the rhetoric of perfection, and the joy and possibility that lies in the embodied rhetoric of performance.

Both of these examples, Ringer’s memoir and Porter’s novel, however, are textual. Ringer’s audience would not have known that she was embodying her faith, and Pearl, Delia, and Meia Noite are fictional characters and thus the entirety of their beings exist in text alone. However, if Ringer’s audience were to read her autobiography and then watch her dance, perhaps they could see a faith onstage and in her body that they would not be able to by looking at her physical expression alone. While much of Judeo-Christian language enforces many aspects of the rhetoric of perfection, as mentioned in Chapter II, when a dancer is able to claim her faith and use it as a means for embodiment and a vehicle through which to communicate her self and soul to the audience, then it becomes a tool for empowerment and agency. Both Ringer’s and Porter’s texts provide examples of how various forms of spiritual practice can contribute to this level of embodiment and how faith can actually counter the rhetoric of perfection instead of feeding its negative aspects.

The Dancer Voicing Her Decisions

The ballet master has the power to bestow or remove a job, but Ringer returns to ballet with the understanding that this is where his authority begins and ends. He cannot take away her self-worth any longer, once she has claimed it and rooted it within her very being. At the point when she asks to come back to the company, her self-worth does not rely upon the answer she receives. Her self-worth and her love of dance are there, readily intact.

The way that Ringer chose to handle Macaulay's review, and the very prominent spotlight it placed on her body, demonstrates a dancer who took the gaze and turned it around so that the critic, Macaulay, was the one now in the spotlight for his sexist and limited views about dance and the ballet body¹⁹. The fact that she continued dancing and did not lose weight in response to his review demonstrated her claim to agency through her body. Her public response, both in her autobiography and her appearance on various talk shows and media outlets, demonstrated her claim to agency using words.

However, it must be a combination of both vision and action that effects change. Ballerinas can speak out against unrealistic and dangerous physical ideals ad nauseam, but if these very same ballerinas continue to starve themselves to maintain a dangerously low body weight, and if it is only these bodies that are deemed acceptable on stage, then nothing changes. Thus, as Fleckenstein writes, "Because modes of perceptions and images contribute to the joint creation of reality, action designed to transform those realities must always be bolstered by the twin dynamic of rhetoric and vision" (2).

¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that at no time was Macaulay's job in jeopardy over this or any of his other "unflattering" reviews, and he is still considered the top dance critic at the *Times*.

Therefore, it is not simply the way the bodies of dancers are discussed that needs to change; for any meaningful transformation to occur, the actual bodies themselves need to change, thus altering the perception and the vision of the way those bodies are “supposed to” look.

Ringer’s reasons for responding publicly to Macaulay’s derisive review are also a testament to the ethos she had come to embody as a woman and as a dancer: dance was no longer for herself alone. She writes:

It came to me that I’d been wrong in thinking, once again, that this issue was just about me. The review had touched a very sensitive spot for many people. It involved weight and body image and the right of society to have power over determining what was acceptable or valuable about an individual woman’s appearance, issues that are heightened in the ballet world but are very real in the nondancing world as well. People’s reactions to Macaulay’s review were so strong that it became clear they were responding to these issues of female beauty and worth not just in the dance world but in the world in general. (216-17)

This statement demonstrates one of the most positive outcomes of rhetorical embodiment: the strength it confers when dancers are able to be strong for other dancers and set an example for those who have not yet reached this stage. Ringer realizes that her embodied response is in fact a privileged position she occupies: there are few dancers, even the most seasoned, who would be able to respond as she does. Therefore, Ringer demonstrates that not only is it possible to reverse the gaze, but that real change can be effected in so doing.

Ringer seems to blame mass culture more than she does the ballet world.

Kirkland quite overtly criticizes Balanchine himself for creating the culture of anorexia in ballet. Copeland is quite pointed in her criticism of the racism that is still prevalent in the

ballet world, and tells the reader from the very first pages of her autobiography that she chose to tell her story for the “little brown girls” who might otherwise never have believed that there could be a place for them in ballet. Susan Stanford Friedman proposes that “Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech” (76). All of these women write to shatter these mirrors and break the silence imposed on them either for their entire careers or at least for a portion of it. They demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between the social and the individual. Through the agency expressed in their autobiographies, they empower artists to speak back if they see themselves in these experiences, to rewrite negative histories, to dismantle the rhetoric of perfection and replace it with a holistic embodied rhetorical agency that builds and perpetuates positive community in order to ensure that every dancer has a voice. Therefore, it is through their autobiographies that these women claim agency with their words, and through the very presence of their bodies, bodies that had been rejected by the ballet world, that they claim agency with their bodies.

The rhetoric of performance can also be demonstrated through a dancer’s choices over steps, costumes, and the direction of the company. Lack of agency was not always a problem for ballerinas. In fact, there is documentation of 18th-century French dancers having extraordinary control over their steps, costumes, and even political decisions within dance companies. Women such as Anne de Cupis de Camargo (1710-1770) and Marie Salle, both of the Paris Opera Ballet, regularly defied both choreography and convention to make the dances their own. Judith Chazin-Bennahum writes that Marie Salle was “known as fiercely defiant because she had the courage to completely abandon

the court costume and to put on the tunic that was appropriate to the Greek myth of the ballet” (44). Another Paris Opera dancer who appeared later in the century, Marie-Madeleine Guimard (1743-1818) “held one of the most powerful positions in the Paris Opéra, not only as principal dancer, but also as a political force—driving the politics of the administration and the direction of the ballet” (46). Therefore, the stripping of agency from the ballerina is in fact the removal of something that did exist at one time, and can exist again. Though many ballerinas have been forced out of ballet due to issues centering on this lack of agency, history proves that at one time there were dancers who were incredibly powerful forces within the ballet world—women who would not leave, and demanded to be taken seriously. Political control within ballet companies exemplifies agency at the level of both body and language, because the presence of their bodies in decision-making discussions and the use of their words in these processes was evidence of these women taking charge of their careers through both embodied and language-based means.

Today, the rhetoric of performance allows for control over career. Rather than being dictated to, the dancer, for better or worse, makes decisions about her work and its future. Later in her memoir, Ringer describes how her relationship with her employers continued to evolve as she held on to her agency:

While earlier in my career I’d been silent and subservient toward the ballet masters and Peter in particular, now I felt that I could have real conversations with them about the roles I was to dance and how I was to dance them. I felt assured in the decisions I had to make for myself, even in the rare occasions when they brought me into conflict with the artistic staff. One memory stands out for me: the moment when I realized that no one at the company, not even Peter, had the power to make me lose my sense of self-worth anymore. (197)

She goes on to describe standing up to the ballet master, Peter Martins, during a run of *Swan Lake* in which she was cast as the Swan Queen. She had to pull out mid-run due to an injury, something she was told to just “dance through.” But with her newfound agency, Ringer decided to listen to her body instead of her boss, possibly saving herself from a permanent ankle injury. Despite Martins’ anger, she held to her decision:

It was really an “aha” moment for me: Peter no longer had any power over me or my sense of self-worth. Because I’d come into the company so young, I had related to Peter as a child would relate to a parental figure. I’d desired to keep him happy and had relied on his positive opinion almost as if we were family members in a dysfunctional relationship. But in reality he was just my boss, and though I had to submit to him as I worked at my job, I could still keep my sense of identity safe from him and relate to him as one professional adult to another. The ballet world is a narcissistic world made up of circles of interlocking insecurities. I could break my own little circle, however, and refuse to feel insecure. I was my own woman, loved by God, and going forward the best I could with integrity and honor. In the past I would have assumed Peter was in the right, and would have taken all of the guilt and pain upon myself; this time I thought, Well, he was in a bad mood. And that was not something I needed to absorb into myself. (199)

Reclaiming this degree of agency from the ballet master is a crucial piece of achieving embodied rhetoric. Once the ballet master no longer has the power to dictate the self-worth of the ballerina, she is dancing for herself, sharing with the audience, fully embodying the dance and making it her own. While the ballet master is never completely removed from the role of audience in the rhetorical triangle, he becomes only slightly more important than any other audience member. He still has the power to give roles, take them away, and give and take away jobs, but if a dancer has the essence of herself intact, then these things (roles and jobs) can be replaced and found elsewhere. Her *self* cannot. Thus, while it is the rhetoric of the ballet world that all dancers are replaceable, it

is actually the jobs and the roles that are replaceable by the dancer, and once she realizes that she is not the one who is expendable, then she is well on her way to full and embodied rhetorical agency.

When Ringer describes her return to the Lincoln Center stage as a NYCB dancer, she includes a re-telling of her pre-performance routine and how she was able to use even this moment to claim her self and her faith right before she gave the gift of her dancing to the audience:

About twenty minutes before I'm due to go onstage, I return to my dressing room to get into costume. I tape my toes and add whatever padding I'll need in my pointe shoes that night. I check my hair and makeup and say a short prayer about the performance, which I added into my preperformance routine as I started incorporating my faith back into my life. This prayer helps remind me that the performance is about something larger than me, and that it points to God and not to myself. I thank God for letting me dance that night, for the opportunity to do something I love that also glorifies Him, and ask that things go well. Most of all, I ask that no matter how it goes, the ballet might move the audience and bring them some joy. I then put on some thick leg warmers, grab my pointe shoes, and head out the door. (168)

This also describes a method of rhetorical embodiment that may seem somewhat counter-intuitive: giving it away in order to keep it. In a sense, Ringer claims agency by making her dancing essentially “not about her.” The purpose of relinquishing agency for a dancer is actually for her own purposes, to achieve an end, which is a role, a job, an identity. The lengths to which she must go in order to make herself into someone else's vision and definition of an ideal ballerina actually make her quite focused on her self, usually at the expense of all else. Therefore, an essential component of Ringer's rhetorical agency is the giving away of that self she had so carefully molded for so long

into the balletic ideal, giving it to the audience, to God, to receive as they will. Ringer has shifted her rhetorical audience from the company director to God and the audience, and this shift has been a defining feature of her claims to rhetorical agency as a dancer.

Ringer's sense of performing as connecting to larger forces in the universe also connects with Isocrates' analysis of the purpose of performance that he outlines in *Panegyricus*. Hawhee concludes that this particular work "suggests that rhetorical performance emerged within a network of long-standing ritual practices and, perhaps more interesting, that these ritual practices produced a visible rendering of the abstract – in this case, of honor, glory, virtuosity, and respect" (*Bodily* 165). However, this "visible rendering of the abstract" was certainly construed to bring honor and glory to the individual performer, but in so doing, also brought recognition to those associated with the performer, especially to the teacher and fellow students. But more importantly, the performance itself was intended to communicate abstract concepts that needed to be conveyed through the body and not through words. Ringer tells us through her words that she was dancing to communicate such abstract concepts as the embodiment of her faith, and empowerment of other dancers, and while her audience may have felt that, if her embodied communication was successful, readers of her memoir do not know this because they are reading *her* words, not those of the audience. Therefore, her words, in addition to her performance, are required to communicate this abstract notion of embodiment and empowerment through performance. The rhetorical act of communication is not complete without the involvement of both body and language.

Reversing the Gaze through Language and Embodiment

William Banks suggests that “when we ignore the ‘embodied’ in discourse, we miss the ways in which liberation is always both social and individual, a truly symbiotic relationship” (22). All of the autobiographies included in this analysis have the overt aim of effecting a change in the culture of ballet.

Kirkland also has several moments in *Dancing on My Grave* where she addresses the audience regarding the abusive practices of ballet teachers, choreographers, and ballet masters: “Many of the excesses of American ballet seem to be a result of the slimness trend, turning the ideal of beauty into mere fashion. Mr. B pushed us in that direction, but he also popularized ballet. This offers the hope that the public may press for reform—as an increasing number of ballet parents become concerned for the welfare of their children” (57-58). Kirkland also uses the video of several of her performances with Baryshnikov as a platform to express her views on the cult of thinness in ballet:

It is my hope that the release of this performance tape from my early career will serve as a cautionary reminder of the dangers of anorexia and related eating disorders. Of course, the dancing can be appreciated for its own sake—but I would advise aspiring ballerinas to keep in mind the weight and muscular power that are absolutely crucial to hold the stage and measure up to a performance like the one given here by Mikhail Baryshnikov. Thin—in ballet—is definitely not in. (*Baryshnikov*)

Given the fact that viewers have just watched Kirkland deliver two of the signature performances of her career, this statement shows a tension in Kirkland’s self-representation and her active efforts to reframe her former self for her later viewing audience. This video captures performances that were staged in 1976 and the VHS

recording was released in 1992, eight years after Kirkland's autobiography. By the time this recording was released, Kirkland was probably aware of the fact that young dancers would look at her body as it appeared at the height of her career, and try to emulate its size and shape. Kirkland here provides an example of using language to counter the rhetoric of perfection that her body was communicating. She is speaking back to her own body and hoping to convey to her audience of young dancers that what they were viewing was not in fact a healthy body or a happy and empowered dancer. This use of language demonstrates Kirkland's project of not only trying to advocate for and empower future generations of young dancers, but to undo, using language, any damage that might be done by viewing a body "successfully" dancing when physically and psychologically in a quite desperate position.

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Not only do dancers need to articulate their constraints and agency, but they also need other players in the culture of perfection to embrace the dialogic exchange in the rhetoric of performance as well. The student-teacher relationship can be one of empowerment and embodiment rather than docility and submission. Hawhee's *Bodily Arts* describes the close relationship between teacher and student among the athletes and rhetors of ancient Greece and in this depiction, parallels can be drawn from my primary sources.

Not only can the relationship between teacher and student be one of reciprocity and empowerment, but often, even the act of chosen submission can be an experience that

leads to a fuller embodiment of one's work in the end. Hawhee describes the absolute allegiance some Greek teachers required of their students:

For Protagoras, active submission manifests itself in a choice to “join with” (*suneinai*) a particular teacher, as the itinerant sophist encourages youths to “drop their other connections, either with their families or with foreigners, both old and young, and to join one's own circle, with the promise of improving them by this connection with oneself” (316c-d). (*Bodily* 87-88)

Hawhee goes on to explain the reasoning behind this dictate as “a certain dynamic necessarily precedes the kind of transformation promised by sophistic *technai*” (*Bodily* 88). Out of all of the representative student-teacher relationships depicted in my primary sources, probably the most exemplary of this type of all-encompassing tutelage is that of Copeland by her first ballet teacher, Cindy. Copeland ends up living with Cindy and her family for an extended period of time in order to facilitate the kind of intensive instruction necessary for her to catch up to her peers and obtain a scholarship to an elite ballet school. Cindy also teaches Copeland to be a thinking dancer with agency from the very start. When Copeland was living with her, she constantly asked her what she was feeling, what she wanted, allowing her to make decisions in every aspect of her life. This probably set her up to be the embodied and empowered dancer that she is today (78-79). Copeland also talks about how from the beginning, Cindy taught her to combine steps, musicality, and performance, even at the barre. In other words, she taught her how to fully embody ballet, which is something many dancers have to learn once they become professionals. Usually, the emphasis is placed on technical mastery first, with things like acting and performing added on later, as if these things were an afterthought and not as

important as technical mastery; this is the dominant attitude in ballet, even though no one, not even those espousing such an attitude, would ever want to watch a dancer who was technically perfect but had no ability to actually perform a role (92). Therefore, Copeland's tutelage under Cindy was holistic: it developed her mind, body, and spirit as both a dancer and as a person. It is this sort of complete education that Hawhee describes as being a central defining feature of the ancient Greek rhetorical and athletic tradition.

Kirkland describes this sort of complete education of mind and body that she received from two of her most influential teachers: Maggie Black and David Howard. She also details why the latter relationship was sustainable while the former was not. Before even going into great detail about her training with Black, Kirkland tells her readers that, "Unfortunately, Maggie became overly possessive, too certain that she possessed complete knowledge with regard to ballet and my career. She warned that I would never achieve success without her, comparing me to one of the legendary Russian ballerinas: 'Gelsey, you could be as great as Ulanova, but not without me'" (78). Black and Kirkland's relationship certainly fits the all-encompassing criteria of the Greek tutelage outlined by Hawhee, but Kirkland's depiction of this relationship also reveals its limits, and the limits to agency it can pose. When a teacher begins to assume full credit for the success of her student, as well as demanding complete authority in her training, this limits the embodied agency a student is able to achieve within that relationship. Fortunately, after leaving Black, Kirkland meets her next teacher David Howard, and their initial conversation reveals the difference between Howard's and Black's pedagogical aims: "Before parting, I told him briefly about myself and asked him if he

would consider being my coach. David accepted on condition that I understood he would never offer me the kind of relationship that I had developed with Maggie. He would not allow me to depend on him as either a teacher or a surrogate parent. In stressing the point, he was firm and sympathetic” (118). From there, Kirkland describes a student-teacher relationship that is ideal for imbuing a dancer with her own agency – transferring knowledge without owning it. Kirkland writes, “Working at least four hours a day over a period of several months, we developed a Platonic relationship based on a constant dialogue of questions and answers. This was really the first time that I ever consciously associated dance with anything like the joy of spiritual fulfillment” (125). The end result of a true partnership between teacher and student should ultimately be spiritual and artistic fulfillment, for it is these qualities that truly allow a dancer to embody the rhetoric of performance and transfer that holistic experience to her audience and to fellow dancers still seeking full rhetorical embodiment.

CHAPTER VI
REDEFINING PERFECTION IN A RHETORIC OF EXCELLENCE

This discussion of the competing rhetorics in the culture of ballet assesses the rhetoric of perfection as a form of authoritative discourse that limits the agency of female ballet dancers. However, the competing rhetoric of performance provides the location for dancers to access and claim agency. These are not separate discourses but interlocking rhetorics within ballet's culture. The rhetoric of perfection relies on docility and conformity/uniformity and is enforced by surveillance, and that perfection is impossible at the level of materiality. To undo the rhetoric of perfection and move into the rhetoric of performance and eventually to the rhetoric of excellence, dancers must claim agency using both language and their bodies. Both language and embodiment are necessary to convey the dancer's employment of the rhetoric of performance, for it is impossible for a viewing audience to know whether any specific enactment is an embodiment of the rhetoric of perfection or the rhetoric of performance.

This argument highlights a binary of almost irreconcilable systems: the majority who follow the rhetoric of perfection and the few who are able to embrace the rhetoric of performance within ballet's culture of perfection, an unattainable ideal. Those who embrace the rhetoric of performance and move toward perfectibility, what I refer to as the rhetoric of excellence, are still few, but with highly public and visible examples of dancers such as Misty Copeland, who has become a pop culture icon, the scopic regime

can and will change, making room for the possibility of transforming the ballet culture from its focus on static perfection to one focused on dynamic perfectibility and excellence where the notion of the ballet body and possibly even ballet technique itself continues to adapt and expand.

This conclusion extends my argument on ballet's culture and rhetorics to maintain that other cultures of the body, such as gymnastics, exist where the rhetoric of perfection dominates, and still other cultures, such as aerial arts, offer an alternative, operating as counterpoints. These alternative artistic cultures and disciplines highlight perfectibility and excellence without the emphasis on a type of technical perfection that leaves no room for different bodies and different ways of moving. These alternative cultures provide the location for the rhetoric of excellence to thrive. The rhetoric of excellence joins the best of the rhetoric of perfection with the rhetoric of performance. Perfection is static, ideal, and never possible in reality, while perfectibility is dynamic, inventive, and always expanding; thus, a different rhetoric is necessary to transform an unhealthy culture into a healthy one. Since terministic screens are the filters that direct our attention and fine-tune our focus, the filter in the rhetoric of perfection needs to be changed, the lens needs to be adjusted, so that we are filtering our expectations through a rhetoric of excellence that is dynamic, shifting, and in-the-moment rather than through a stale, static rhetoric of perfection, allowing no room for the beauty that is inherent within the diversity of bodies, movement, and language. As Burke writes, "A given terminology contains various *implications*, and there is a corresponding 'perfectionist' tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications" (*Language* 19). In this way also, the scopic regime in

ballet and other cultures of perfection will change as the audience's expectations are re-shaped, for as Goffman writes, "The observer's need to rely on representations of things itself creates the possibility of misrepresentation" ("Self-Presentation" 22).

The contrast between the rhetoric of perfection and the rhetoric of excellence is similar to the difference between *athlios* and *agōn* in ancient Greece. Hawhee explains this distinction: "Whereas *athlios* emphasizes the prize and hence the victor, *agōn* emphasizes the event of the gathering itself – the contestive encounter rather than strictly the division between opposing sides" (*Bodily* 15-16). *Athlios* represents the static victory, while *agōn* represents the fluid nature of the process, the striving for excellence rather than the achievement itself. This is the aim of a rhetoric of excellence: the process, the attempt at perfectibility rather than a rigid focus on perfection. Through this striving not only are performances rendered excellent, but so are performers: "So the word *agōn* can suggest movement through struggle, a productive training practice where subject production takes place through the encounter itself" (*Bodily* 16). Engagement with this struggle ensures that training for excellence always produces excellence, regardless of the actual outcome, because it is in the process, and in the formation of character, where excellence is located. Gymnastics and aerial arts offer short illustrations of how these rhetorics of perfection and excellence operate in other cultures.

Gymnastics is another arena in which the rhetoric of perfection plays out in a nearly parallel sense to the way that it is enacted in ballet. Jennifer Sey's memoir *Chalked Up* and Dominique Moceanu's *Off Balance* read very much like Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave*, and Joan Ryan's *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* reads like Suzanne

Gordon's *Off Balance* and Deirdre Kelly's *Ballerina*. Sey writes of her experience joining the elite gym the Parkettes, whose "rigor when it came to weight was notorious" (143). One of the first athletes she meets, also named Jennifer, provides the model of anorexic docility and conformity to which Sey immediately begins to aspire:

Another Jennifer showed me to the locker room. I followed shyly, feeling inferior. She was so skinny, almost hollowed haunches where I had pudge. There was a flat plateau from her upper leg to her lower back. Above that, her ribs were visible, rippling beneath her bodysuit, starkly pronounced. From the back. I could see her ribs from the back. I resolved not to remove my running tights, usually just worn during warm-ups, for the entirety of practice. (145)

In this way, as depicted fictionally about ballet in *A Dance of Sisters*, the abnormal becomes normal becomes aspiration and ideal.

Gymnastics certainly shares ballet's obsession with maintaining a low bodyweight as a staple component of the rhetoric of perfection. Jennifer Sey describes the role the scale came to play in her life once she joined the Parkettes:

Each day, I would be required to step on the scale. I'd tiptoe cautiously toward it, treating it with the fear and reverence it demanded. I'd mount with trepidation, exhaling, praying lightness. Fingers euphemistically crossed, I'd wish a half pound less, even a quarter, just to meet with a wink of approval. Otherwise, there'd be punishment. Weight gain meant more workout, running and jumping swathed in a rubbery sweat suit designed to burn off unsightly pounds. And, of course, there was shame. At Parkettes, there was nothing more shameful than gaining weight. (143)

The religious imagery in such a description cannot be ignored, nor can the implications of that imagery in analyzing the role of food and weight in the rhetoric of perfection.

A study conducted by Vanderbilt University about eating disorder and gymnastics revealed that there was no actual correlation between body weight and athletic performance: the important factor was muscle mass, not the number on the scale. In fact, athletes with the lowest body weights tended to perform at lower levels than their peers because they could not sustain the amount of muscle mass necessary for optimum performance (Cintado). Or, as one of my most beloved dance teachers once asked me, “Do you want to *look* the part, or do you want to *be* the part?” While in some cases, the two are synonymous, in others, not so much. Some athletes and dancers are simply naturally small; they can consume the large number of calories necessary to sustain a rigorous training schedule and still remain very thin. However, for the majority of women and girls, this is not a reality. This is not, however, to say that the majority are naturally overweight, for there are just as few naturally heavy women as there are naturally thin women. What athletic performance requires is that the athlete or dancer consume the number of calories she needs in order to achieve optimum performance. Period. The number on the scale should not be of any consequence if this goal is achieved.

And ultimately, the imperfection of materiality is revealed when athletes or dancers have to leave their sport or their art because their eating disorders have taken over. Thus, the means surpasses the ends, sometimes to the point of death. Christy Henrich is one such example. She weighed 61 pounds when she died from multiple organ failure in 1994. This was up from her lowest weight of 47 pounds (Plummer). This seems to generally be the case: the height of an eating disorder rarely

corresponds with the height of success in one's field, even though every athlete or dancer who embarks on such a quest expects the opposite. History and biography prove otherwise. That said, the telling of these stories alone will not change things; a change in the actual physical bodies is necessary to effect true change.

One of the ways both ballerinas and gymnasts are stripped of their agency is by being told repeatedly by those in positions of authority that they have a very limited shelf-life and thus must push their bodies to their fullest extent within about five years for gymnasts and 15 for ballerinas. No one ever seems to mention the fact that this rhetoric is at least partially responsible for the limited careers. What if dancers and gymnasts trained differently, trained for longevity instead of risking having no career at all for the shot at one major competition, or one spot in a top company that could instantly disappear with a significant injury? One gymnast whose very presence calls the limitations of age into question is 39-year-old Oksana Chusovitina, who is currently training for her seventh Olympic Games. She will be 41 years old when she competes in Rio in 2016. The very presence of a body such as hers communicates agency because it signals that she will not accept the rhetoric of perfection's insistence on youth as a prerequisite for participation in ballet or gymnastics.

However, for Dominique Moceanu, her competitive gymnastics career was ended by her former coaches, the Karolyis, whose complete dominance of women's gymnastics was and is still sanctioned and supported by USA Gymnastics, the governing body of the sport:

The entire process was extremely subjective and contrary to the methods used to select athletes in other national sports. In the United States, a female gymnast's future, in large part, teetered on Marta's opinion of her skills, her physique, or her opinion of the gymnast in general. I didn't know of any other Olympic sport that was controlled so subjectively, and it seemed crazy that gymnastics' governing body allowed Elite women's gymnastics to fall under the control of one person: Marta [Karolyi]. In my opinion, there seemed to be very little oversight and no legitimate system of checks and balances. The governing body and Marta seemed to arbitrarily apply "official" criteria and standards on an ad hoc basis simply to justify their selections at the time. (221-222)

Moceanu was training for a comeback in 2005 at age 24, five years after she left competitive gymnastics (217). She trained in an open facility, and thus her workouts were open to spectators—and critics: "I remember two specific occasions when bystanding coaches made personal, derogatory comments as they stood there watching me train, as if I were a circus animal there for their viewing and criticizing pleasure" (219). Moceanu defied her critics with the presence of her body, and then further spoke back when she called them out in her memoir, using both body and language to claim her place in gymnastics.

Dance in any form is creation, articulation, and expression of argument, emotion, and the basic essence of the human experience with the body. Women dancers do accept and embrace their rhetorical agency in various ways. Thus, they are undercutting the negative masculine patriarchal system of the rhetoric of perfection for an alternative view of that "perfection." I am also interested in how these rhetorics and rhetorical agencies are changing, and where. Former ballerinas and gymnasts, frustrated with the constraints placed on them in those worlds, sometimes become aerial dancers, pole dancers, and burlesque performers, and these art forms are far more female-dominated and give more

artistic agency to women, as they are relatively new as recognized mainstream art forms, and do not carry the cultural and misogynistic baggage of gymnastics, and especially of ballet.

Ned Farr's 2006 film *The Gymnast* articulates this beautifully when the protagonist, Jane Hawkins, complains that she can no longer create anything with her "withered husk" of a body because she has been unable to get pregnant. What she ends up creating instead is in fact a form of new life that she makes with her body: she learns to make beautiful shapes in the air with fellow dancer Serena, and the story details her rebirth, both of her body and of her heart, as she and Serena fall in love through the art they make together.

The inclusion of aerial arts into this discussion also elucidates the fact that there *are* different cultures of movement where embodiment operates from a rhetorical lens. Modern and contemporary dance are the clearest and most vocal resisters of the rigid culture of ballet, but in the past couple of decades, aerial dance, which includes aerial silks, lyra, trapeze, and pole dance, has emerged as a powerful form of rhetorical embodiment for female dancers. These forms of dance articulate the work of reclaiming on multiple levels, because both the acrobatic circus arts and pole dancing have a history of stripping dancers of their credibility, and therefore agency, as rhetors. The fact that women are taking control of their bodies through these art forms is a significant act of rhetoric so I do not feel this study would be complete without the inclusion of the aerial arts.

Aerial arts can offer a space for former professional dancers and elite athletes to express themselves more freely and fully than they ever could in their previous careers. Corey Fox, a former Olympic-level diver and gymnast, tells *USA Today* the difference between performing with Cirque du Soleil and everything he had to unlearn in order to claim the air as an acrobat: "Competing is so robotic," Fox says. "You basically do what you're told. You're not really feeling it. You train so much that when you get into competition, you don't have to think about it. Here, you're constantly in a state where you show emotions and express yourself through body movement and facial expressions. It's exhausting but rewarding" (qtd. in DeSimone). Philippe Aubertin, the head coach for the Montreal Cirque show in 2005, described that he essentially has to make artists out of athletes, and teach them how to embody their performances fully, thus breaking with the rhetoric of perfection: "They have to shift from being an athlete who had to be strong and not show emotion to an artist who has to be vulnerable" (qtd. in DeSimone). He also tells them that "there is no perfect 10 in entertainment" (qtd. in DeSimone). The Cirque coaches use various methods to encourage embodied performances out of their athletes:

Movement coach Valerie Dean tries to break down the regimented way athletes often carry themselves by asking them to crawl like babies or breakdance with their backs on inflatable exercise balls. Guay has trainees run wildly around a pit filled with mulch or walk around a studio, randomly shout and fall backward, trusting classmates to catch them. (DeSimone)

Performers are also encouraged to keep journals during their training process to further solidify the connection between body, mind, and emotion (DeSimone).

While aerial arts provides an artistic culture that offers an alternative to cultures of perfection, the fact cannot be overlooked that the rhetoric of perfection often gets results. Bela Karolyi has produced more Olympic champions than any coach in U.S. gymnastics history, but he has also often been cited for his abusive coaching practices. George Balanchine revolutionized American ballet—some would argue that he created it—and his protégées are some of the greatest dancers of all time. But both of these men’s authoritative discourses have damaged countless women in the process. Pronouncing a bodily movement as perfect or flawed is a subjective judgment and critique made by the viewer. In other words, imperfect humans are not qualified to judge what is perfect and what is not, yet many coaches, trainers, teachers, and choreographers use the rhetoric of perfection as if they have the authority to judge. However, standards and technique matter, and traditions in performance are important contributions to society. A rhetoric of excellence values and supports the goals of the rhetoric of perfection while simultaneously embracing the uniqueness of each body and its movements.

As a dominant rhetoric, excellence incorporates a new definition of perfect that moves away from the static, singular ideal of one performance to the transformative, plural enactments by many bodies. My research and this project has informed and influenced my own dancing. I still use the word “perfect” as a regular part of my vocabulary and as something I constantly strive for, but I have a completely different understanding about what that word means now. I do want to execute my movements perfectly, but “perfect” for me will not look the same as “perfect” for someone like

Gelsey Kirkland or Natalia Makarova. For example, if I am doing an arabesque, my “perfect” arabesque would mean that my legs are completely straight, toes pointed, leg directly behind me, turned out to the degree my body will allow, and as high as my body will allow. My range of motion dictates my version of perfection, as does my body type. This understanding actually makes my dancing much better and cleaner because I am not (or at least I try not to) attempting to be someone I am not. My dance teacher now works with me in the same way. She does not try to teach me how to move like her, or like someone in Cirque du Soleil, or anyone else; she helps me to move as elegantly and cleanly as possible within my natural range of motion (while simultaneously trying to increase that range of motion through stretching, training, and conditioning, but not outside of the limits of what my body is or will ever be capable of). I have found that in those moments when I can enact that more expansive definition of perfection in my body and mind, it is immensely freeing to train in this way, rather than constantly fretting that my back will not bend more, or my leg refuses to extend higher. I have also learned that trying to outsmart nature only leads to injury; it does not lead to better dancing, and certainly not to longevity, which matters to me even more than trying to bend one more centimeter in a pose. So basically, trying to work outside of the rhetoric of perfection involves working inside and within the realms of the possible, and that opens up some pretty amazing avenues for excellence that are not possible for those attempting to emulate an impossible ideal of the perfect dancer.

This is a project about female rhetorical embodiment and empowerment, but I am not solely arguing that one must leave ballet and gymnastics in order to claim agency. As

Suzanne Gordon claims in her expose of the ballet world, *Off Balance*, it is not the fault of the art form, just those in power. It was Balanchine that made American ballet what it is today and Bela Karolyi that made women's gymnastics what it is today—two incredibly powerful and influential men that took ballet and gymnastics to another level of world-wide respect, but who left many, many female casualties in the process. The rhetoric of perfection operating in these respective cultures opened the way for both the casualties and the victories, and continues to perpetuate both in tandem. As counterpoints, women like Gelsey Kirkland for ballet and Dominique Moceanu for gymnastics have used language and the written word to expose both the cultures and rhetorics of perfection and to change them with their writing and with the embodied rhetoric they display in their work, sport, and art.

Turning ballet into an act of rhetorical embodiment is tantamount to introducing feminism into Christianity: it is so antithetical to the principles that are the bedrock of the institution that upon first glance it would seem that to do so would be to dismantle it in its entirety. Gordon explains that “ballet is more than art, more than business; it is a closed world where those in authority have almost total control over every aspect of the dancer's life” (15). Ballet as rhetorical embodiment asks the dancer to claim control of her body and her life and make decisions about both that seem dangerous, scary, and possibly career-ending. It asks the dancer to be inconceivably brave and to risk everything to make ballet something that can be safe and beautiful and authentic, for everyone. The aspect of perfection/perfectionism that drives art, which is not always negative, is the knowledge and awareness of some dancers that perfection isn't actually possible; it's

only an aim that motivates them. This is the difference between the *positive* definition of perfection in the rhetoric of excellence and the *negative* definition in the rhetoric of perfection. This positive definition provides inspiration and motivation within the context of reality. Perfection as multiple possible enactments by multiple bodies allows for all performers to forget that perfection is actually impossible. Onstage, perfect and imperfect cease to become distinctions and all that exists is movement, expression, creation, and communication of human emotion between artist and audience. The training process is when sanity requires the recognition of the impossibility of perfection. It is when a dancer can forgive herself for falling out of a pirouette for the fourth time and recognize that she is tired, hungry, and needs to go home. It is when she steps on the scale and realizes that her declining bodyweight is in fact causing her to lose strength and endurance and commits to a healthier plan of eating and self-care. It is when she can forgive herself when she has to prioritize her self, her family, and her spirit and take a break altogether. This is when perfection becomes an ideal, but the human being is the reality. The reality of perfect in a rhetoric of excellence highlights the beautifully imperfect human who creates compelling performances that connect with other similarly beautiful imperfect humans, thus fulfilling the purpose of art: to communicate and connect with and through and across language, movement, and bodies into that moment when the boundaries of human souls dissolve.

I embarked on this written project as a way to explore what it was exactly that caused me to leave ballet behind. A second objective was to demonstrate how this rhetoric of perfection plays out in various cultures of the body and thus explore these

rhetorics further with our students, in our writings, and in our academic relationships and collaborations. The rhetoric of perfection will likely always be there, but it is up to us to channel its positive aspects more than feeding its more destructive impulses and thus embody our feminist practices at the level of language and body, so that other women and girls may learn to do the same. In addition, this analysis and critique has the capability to enable us as teachers and scholars to better understand how rhetorics of perfection shape policy in academic institutions and writing programs and how those policies affect not only student agency but also teacher agency. Through examining the rhetoric of perfection as a terministic screen that can and is (unfortunately) applied in multiple areas of human achievement, we can locate how rhetorics of perfection shape performance expectations such as the ideal essay, academic discourse expectations, and grading standards.

My research and thinking have made me question my desire to do things perfectly in every aspect of my life, including my teaching. It has also caused me to question things like how I evaluate my students' performance and how I define *their* perfection, or lack thereof. Within the past few weeks, as I am concluding this process, I came across an editorial in *International Gymnast* magazine that addressed the surplus of "perfect 10s" and the ensuing criticism in recent collegiate gymnastics. The writer posited that if we re-define perfect as "as good as it can possibly be done" rather than "without flaw" then these 10s are fully justified. I have tried to think of "perfect" in my own life in that way, including in the classroom. Also, within this definition is much room for variation, as this definition allows room for subjectivity. "Perfect" for one student, or one teacher,

will therefore look much different from another. An A+ should mean that the student has completed the assignment as well as she could possibly have done, and this will look different from what that means from any other student. I have always been inclined to evaluate my students in this way, but spending so much time thinking and writing about perfection as a specific rhetoric has really given me a theoretical and solid ideological underpinning for this inherent choice.

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