

Weaving the Motifs and Tunes

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Annotation: *The essay explores the arias of cross-cultural studies: literature and performing arts. It presents multicultural analyses of the ballet Up & Down by Boris Eifman based on Scott Fitzgerald's novel Tender is the Night.*

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“Already with thee! Tender is the night,”
John Keats. Ode to a Nightingale

While holding a book which title and epigraph are borrowed from the *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats, one might almost physically sense how it vibrates with music. It sounds from every page of the novel, where *sad tunes of the orchestra, melancholy as a flute start sobbing and coughing with jazz*, or give place to a *Strauss waltz, high and confusing*. Fierce mechanical pianos and phonograph records constantly sound near and far as well as the songs, *loud and faintly sang* “like rising smoke, like a hymn, very remote in time and far away”. The thin tunes, holding lost times and future hopes never cease. And it seems that life itself is just a musical improvisation, which involuntary movement sometimes goes up and sometimes down. ... “Up & Down” is the title of a ballet by Boris Eifman who most likely has composed a one more, chorographical tune of the novel.

Addressing himself to Fitzgerald's *Tender Night*, Eifman followed the main plot. A young doctor and psychoanalyst, Dick Diver marries his patient Nicole, the daughter of a millionaire Warren who turns to be the reason of her psychiatric trauma. The marriage ends up with a crack: Diver gradually descends into alcoholism, becomes increasingly infatuated with Rosemary, a successful Hollywood star, and Nicole, recovering of her illness, divorces him and marries another man. Creating this story Fitzgerald took a lot from his private life, at times secretly borrowing from the diary of one of the first flappers in America and the icon of style of the 1920s, his wife Zelda who became the prototype of Nicole.

But what is this Fitzgerald's novel about? The novel, of which Ernst Hemingway had to say: “A strange thing is that in retrospect his *Tender is the Night* gets better and better”¹? In one of his late essays with a conceptual title *The Crack-Up*, Fitzgerald wrote: “Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside ... don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.”² It is most likely that in this very thought Eifman found the super plot of the *Night* and the most important task of his performance.

Consequently, Eifman leaves behind all side issues and reduces to minimum the number of characters, which allows him to concentrate on the question of a major importance – the true reasons and roots of the personality *crack up*. With a scrutinized attention of a psychoanalytic, the choreographer explores the process of Diver's gradual *break down*, happening almost without his knowing *until it's too late to do anything about it*. Fitzgerald encodes the theme, disguising it in a poetic formula of John Keats. In fact, the *Ode to a Nightingale* is a leitmotif of the whole novel, beginning with the title and the epigraph, up to the final chapters, when Diver, closing the circuit of his life's *crack up*, finds himself in Rome, and exactly in the place where Keats died³.

In his essay entitled, *The Nightingale of Keats* Jorge Luis Borges assumes that hearing the eternal nightingale of Ovid and of Shakespeare, Keats opposes his own sense of doom to a tender and everlasting warble of the invisible bird. Keats's nightingale faithfully serves the elevated and the eternal. Fitzgerald's hero is doomed as he betrays these values, when entering the world of the “very rich” and actually selling out his talent.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
*In ancient days by emperor and clown...*⁴

In a kind of Chekhov's manner Fitzgerald places this motif of the *Ode* somewhere in the subtext of the novel. This is why it is not an easy task to discover the main issue of a not absolutely perfect plot, and to see the innate connection between its core and the title and epigraph. Still a far more challenging task would be a building up the authorized dramaturgy based on these revelations.

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Tender is the Night*. Introduction by Malcolm Cowley London, 1977, p. 8

² F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Crack Up*. Esquire, February 1936

³ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Tender is the Night*. Introduction by Malcolm Cowley London, 1977, p. 241

⁴ John Keats. *Ode to a Nightingale*

As a psychoanalytic *Diver*, Eifman *dived* deeply into the dark waters of the undercurrent to create his own chorographical text, which involved not only the vast space of various allusions, but also the intimate spiritual world of the novel's prototypes – Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda. The ballet leaves an impression, that mystically it embodies their suppressed thoughts and unrealized desires.

First of all, when the novel was already published in 1934, its author started seriously thinking about the change of the composition. Instead of the spiral movement from the middle to the beginning, and then continuingly to the finale, he now wanted to arrange everything in the chronological order. Fitzgerald did not manage to realize this idea. The revised version, based on the notes left by the writer was first published posthumously in 1948. Within the revised structure, something gets lost, and the intrigue of Nicole's mystery disappears. But Eifman chooses this desired and not fully realized by Fitzgerald version as he does not stick to the spectacular composition centered round the storyline mystery. He focuses on a different kind of mystery – the inner drama of the leading character. Thus, as if realizing Fitzgerald's vision, the ballet master arranges the dramaturgy in a way which highlights the background of the spiritual rise and fall of Dick Diver, so to say, his *Up & Down*.

The ballet opens with the scene in a mental clinic, where the patients stand still as if in a state of a *mournful insensibility*⁵. They are brought back to life as if by a magic hand of a psychoanalyst Dick Diver, who works with them as a skillful sculptor. In chorographical miniatures, they run through their personal secret tragedies. Amidst the revived statues of the marble-white "studio" there appears a new richly dressed couple: a pale beauty in elegant blue and a man in a solid suit and a hat. The man hands his young companion to a doctor together with the sum of money. And here appears the first duet of Diver and Nicole which strikes not only by the broken unbalanced movements of the heroine, but also by the unusual score of lifts, which produce an impression that Diver supports not the partner, but her fragile, unstable psyche. And the slower is the rhythm of their dance to music, heard as if from beneath of the water depth, the clearer becomes the process of the doctor's sinking into the profundity of the subconsciousness and the secret flows of Nicole's thoughts. A recollection hidden at the very bottom of her soul revives and in the backdrop appears, like a visualized image of her *idée fixe*, the increasing in number silhouette of a solid man in a hat. In a dark space, like in a black box theater, a dream-like drama is displayed, where a man, having lost his wife, switches his tenderness over to his orphaned daughter but in a way, which leads them both to some dark scary abyss. With a great deal of trouble Dick manages to literally, help Nicole out of these reminiscences to reality.

The intimacy of Nicole's secret which the doctor uncovers adds new closeness and lyrical motifs to their duets. Eifman conveys Diver's inner duality, his inner struggle between the doctor who feels compassion for the diseased and a man who is already almost in love. The dynamics of these feelings becomes physically visible in his virtuoso monologues to jazz music. Nicole also goes through a complicated process of a self-knowledge. Eifman visualizes the splitting of her personality by bringing on stage two "Nicoles". Two ballerinas who look perfectly identical as twins embody the morbidness of Nicole's psychological state, mirroring each other's movements in the inconceivable *pas de deux* of Nicole with her own self. Hospital attendants calm down her violent dance with a strait-jacket and we almost literally see how Dick's heart is wrung with the pain of love for the suffering creature.

*My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...*⁶

It seems like only Diver and his love are capable of saving her and this message is expressed in an incomparably tender duet of a doctor and his patient. A part of her white gown covers his arms, which lift her lying horizontally, and it produces an impression that she is hovering over him as a white angel. In the dark space of the stage there swiftly wafts a feeling that this *night* is truly *tender*.

*But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! Tender is the night ...*⁷

Boris Eifman displays a subtle perception of the novel and its connection with the inner drama of its hero. Using his chorographical language he manages to show and quite transparently, that the Romantic tenderness of the night is a dream which disappears at the first light of a non romantic reality. With several light traits he shows Dick and Nicole's wedding, the aerial feast, which takes the doctor and his former patient away from the world of the mental hospital into the realm of Charleston percussions and hot-jazz. They almost fly on the decorative balloons, reminding of some pictures by Marc Chagall. Their new life begins among the free, extravagant, and rolling in luxury flappers. In subtle nuances the dancer portrays how having changed the white doctor's smock for the white suit of a *very rich man*, the talented psychiatrist is moving further and further away from himself, from his gift and destination.

It's not that he doesn't love Nicole, but having married the millionaire's daughter with a slightly Mephistopheles look – and this is how Eifman sees Warren - he almost mortgages his soul. The difference between average people and the very rich had always been Fitzgerald's concern. The choreographer unfolds this theme in a certain foreshortening – what price one has to pay for this richness. It is not by chance that creating the image of the father, Eifman gives a hint to the Faust theme. In his interpretation, the father who had seduced his own daughter, little by little "seduces" Diver purchasing his soul, his talent. Apropos, the name of Goethe, to whose Mephistopheles the choreographer draws a parallel, is mentioned in the novel⁸

⁵ Anaesthesia Psychica Dolorosa, a psychological illness

⁶ John Keats. Ode to a Nightingale

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald. Tender is the Night. London, 1977, p. 21

The motif of *Faust*, interlacing with *some melodious plot*⁹ of the *Ode* increase the conceptual message of the ballet and suggest a one more, almost mystical tune. Shortly before the publication of the *Night*, Fitzgerald's wife printed her only (and maybe the only one in its kind) novel. Zelda, the tragic prototype of Nicole, started writing it in a mental hospital, where later she would burn down alive during an accidental fire. She possessed not only a talent of a writer but also of an artist and besides she dreamed of becoming a ballet dancer. At some point she zealously went into choreography. In her novel she describes a couple whose family name is Knight, being consonant to *night*, it hints at some dialogue with the book, which her famous husband had been writing at that time. Knight is an artist and his wife dreams of becoming a ballerina. She enters a Russian ballet school in Paris, wears herself out with endless trains and rehearsals and by the end of the novel she manages finally to dance only once – the waltz party in a grand opera *Faust* by Charles Gounod. The novel is called “Save Me the Waltz.” It is amazing how the unfulfilled dream of Zelda and her heroine comes true in Eifman's performance – she finds herself on the Russian Ballet stage, where at one point she dances a slow duet with Dick in a *waltz* time, as if specially *saved* for her.

Eifman unfolds the motif of the bargain with the man's soul in yet a one more interesting aspect. His interpretation, not going far beyond the context, suggests an allusion to Gogol's short story “The Portrait”, in which a gifted artist, having got some big money from a demonic looking old man on the portrait, finally loses all his talent. The allusion is not at all far-fetched. In his letters to Zelda Fitzgerald advised her to read Gogol, particularly his short stories¹⁰. This parallel with “The Portrait” is noticeable in the character of Diver who in Eifman's interpretation is rather an artist or a sculptor than just a doctor. In his duets with Warren, the old man constantly attempts to hand him over the money. Gradually a bitter sense of disillusion is pouring out over the stage. Something breaks down in Diver's soul. Evidently, he wants to throw off his rich suit, and run back stage, where like in the back of his mind, appear the figures of the suffering, longing for his help diseased.

Structuring his choreographic narration chronologically, as Fitzgerald had wanted to after he published the novel; Eifman arranges the appearance of Rosemary on a luxurious beach at a moment, when the inner world of Diver undergoes a serious discord. Rosemary Hoyt is a young actress, bright, charming, and sensual. Her vibrating healthy sexuality is exact antithesis to Nicole. All her movements embody temptation both too powerful for Dick to resist it and too illusive to make up for wearisome emptiness. The title of the movie *Daddy's Girl*, in which Rosemary stars, echoes the drama of Nicole. There is bitter irony in the fact, that being the “daddy's girl”, Nicole finds herself in a mental hospital whereas the heroine of a sentimental melodrama, “so young and innocent ... embodying all the immaturity of the race”¹¹ finally unites with her parent in a perfectly happy end.

The sensual, inviting dance of a film star in her blazing red is also an illusion. Diver still tries to grasp at a new love, but this does not stop him from falling down. He starts drinking, as if trying to sooth his thirst for something that has gone. But the tenderness of the night dries up, leaving only the bare emptiness of the day. Nicole steals away in a light dance with some other man. Her father appears on stage again and tries to give Diver the money, and although Dick throws it away, the notes fly in the air and slowly stick to his body. He stumbles and falls down amidst the scattered paper-money, thus visibly embodying the inner process of his decay. The corps men appear to drag him along somewhere backwards, into the darkness of backstage.

This Eifman's final turn may be interpreted as the return of Diver to the mental hospital, but this time as a patient. With this powerful allusion to the famous *Ward Number Six* by Anton Chekhov (the writer whom Fitzgerald knew and valued highly¹²), Eifman closes the circuit of his character's fate. His crack up happens to a jazz improvisation which sounds faster and faster. But when he finally leaves the stage the music stops abruptly and it seems like the gramophone record of his life breaks, and those strange combinations of motifs and tunes, now running up, now turning down, shall sound no more.

⁹ John Keats. Ode to a Nightingale

¹⁰ The Letters of Scott Fitzgerald. UK, 1968, p. 133

¹¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald. Tender is the Night. London, 1977, p. 137

¹² The Letters of Scott Fitzgerald. UK, 1968, p. 221