

# PETER MILTON



## Notes on: *Daylilies* and *Points of Departure II: Nijinsky Variations*

IN MUSIC, I seem perversely to prefer my *Parsifal* without a libretto. So I find myself in total rapport with those who might prefer their Milton without a map. Besides, it's humbling enough for an artist to see museum-goers spending more time reading the curatorial captions next to an image than looking at the image itself; do I really want to add to their literary burden?

It would appear I do. The cloud of facts which float around a piece—the sources, references, thematic directions—provides the charged mass necessary to cook up the creative storm. In my case the cloud can become pretty dense. And picking through the layers when I revisit an image's formulation, I can relive the sense of adventure I felt originally when the haphazard and diverse elements slowly fell into coherence and emotional sense. There is a certain satisfaction in retracing the path where things came from. Where they go to—the wholeness of the piece and a feeling for its total equilibrium—I am happy to say is entirely the province of the viewer.

For me, annotation also serves one other purpose. Even the hard facts that surround my images now and then seem to change in significance during the course of time: and their change in turn may be reflected in the meaning of the immutable image itself. The documentation then can become a benchmark against which to measure the ebb and flow of taste. In 1976, for instance, in the first catalog raisonné of my prints, I described rather fully the development of one of my images, *Daylilies*. Now, twenty years later, it is poignant to look at that essay and see how much the developments I describe in it have continued to evolve—and how no interpretation, no inventory of ingredients, ever agrees to be final.

*Daylilies* began as a drawing (*The Theft*) for a show in Yugoslavia. I was working from a 1909 photograph of a holiday crowd watching a Zeppelin dirigible—which, however, since it seemed so quaintly nostalgic, I left out. Unfortunately, with nothing to watch, the crowd no longer had any purpose and seemed to be simply, bleakly, drifting away.

To bring back some focus to the piece and develop the drawings's middle spaces, I turned to photographs from the twenties and thirties by the Hungarian André Kertész. But by now the feeling that everyone was isolated and waiting aimlessly was not easily cured. I thought that perhaps suggesting the space of a picture gallery might work: with its different pictorial planes it seemed a good metaphor for memory and one that evoked not only European culture but commented on both Kertész's occupation and my own. In homage to this concept, I added the shadow of Kertész taking a photograph.

Suddenly the image came alive as the boy, who is one of its central figures, seems now to turn as if startled by the photographer recording him. Other shadows have joined Kertész, and the crowd has found its *raison d'être* by becoming a painting.

What brought the drawing to life for me was that it now incorporated a variety of planes—both literal pictorial planes and metaphorical temporal ones in which events are happening in time as well as space. These planes could be made to refer one to another, even to conduct a sort of dialogue. In my own work, the only images that interest me are those where the fact of surface, the illusion of space, and the poignancy of time coexist, intersect, and are of equal importance.

Since I sent the drawing off to Yugoslavia with a sense that I would never see it

again, I had photographed it. At this point it occurred to me that enlarging the photograph onto high-contrast film could be the basis for a further development of the imagery. My usual method of preparing an image was to draw with ink on Mylar. And when I made an enlargement of the photograph onto a sheet of transparent Kodalith, the granular character of the enlargement was so like that of the ink-on-Mylar drawings that I saw it would be natural to make a collage of the two. I set the Kodalith onto a clear Mylar sheet and began to draw both over and around them to see what might evolve.

Soon the suggestion of pictures-within-pictures already present in the original image began to suggest pictures-outside-pictures, and I found myself led to a much deeper dimension. The image had become—literally—darker, and this led me into a more somber metaphorical landscape. Among other things, I had added the images of my own children, a reference to Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), and a quotation from Eadweard Muybridge. This image of affliction, a child walking on all fours, had also been used by Francis Bacon, and I felt it strongly enough to give it its own space, away from the complexity of the rest of the plate.

The picture gallery of holiday crowd, startled boy and Kertesz shadows had all become subordinate to a man, a cat and a few daylilies in the foreground. The cat and the man were borrowed from photographs by Thomas Eakins. On the wall next to them is a portrait of a girl. I had no idea who she was, but caught by her delicacy and remoteness, I had clipped her image from an advertisement in the *New York Times*. The windows behind her contain the hint of a darkening sky.

“The daylilies come from a garden at the side of my studio,” I wrote at the end of my essay. “They are late summer flowers, and seem to grow wild.”

In the course of time, however, I discovered that the particular eponymous flower that I had chosen to draw was in fact not a daylily at all. Also, most daylilies do not bloom in late summer, but in June and July. They do still grow, at least, and in greater profusion than ever, outside my studio.

Meanwhile, Yugoslavia is no more, my children are grown; the unknown, delicately remote young woman of the portrait wrote to me after having recognized herself in my print and appeared, still beautiful, at a show in Los Angeles. And by now I

am beginning to look upon *Daylilies* as a phantom from the past.



PERHAPS THIS SORT OF RUNNING COMMENTARY—a linear sequence of events—suggest that a piece like *Daylilies* is a narrative. I should emphasize that though the record of how an image progresses does constitute a sort of story, the image itself is narrative only in a different sense. Unlike music and literature that must move through time, art can be instantaneous. And one could say that a truly successful visual work provides something of an instant epiphany, where all its paramount information is experienced simultaneously—in a moment seemingly outside time. It is analogous to that instant of startled satisfaction one feels looking at computer-derived 3-D imagery when random patterns on a flat surface suddenly snap into place as a fully articulated spatial field. Though I suppose what I am really working toward is a four-dimensional articulation—where images juggle with the time continuum as part of the enigma. Narrative is only incidental to my imagery, which I recognize more and more often comes looking for me when I am out looking for something else. The generation of a coherent thematic structure very often begins—with a series of sheer coincidences.

Though my prints may appear carefully thought out and controlled, they are in fact also examples of a sort of esthetic chaos theory—the seemingly orderly organization of actually random elements. I share in the contemporary fascination with randomness—and in an almost mystical feeling that the very lack of pattern is a pattern in itself.

*Nijinsky Variations* is a case in point of this skein of coincidence. When I began it, I thought it would be the second of three prints about the circle of Mary Cassatt and Edgar Degas and that it would focus on Ludovic Halévy. He is the third billiard player with Cassatt and Degas in *Mary's Turn*, the librettist for both Offenbach and Bizet—and it was he who led me to the opera boxes of La Scala. But the image refused to strike fire; and Halévy departed.

That left Cassatt and Degas—who had in common not only their decade of working together, but also the fact that each of them lived into a rather lonely, poignant old age. Nearly blind, Cassatt was the *grand dame*, fond of great feathery hats, outspokenly contemptuous of artistic mediocrity. Degas, also nearly blind, took to following funerals. His friend Albert Bartholomé described him at eighty-three as “more beautiful than ever, like an old Homer with his eyes looking into eternity.”

Aging was obviously a possible subject; perhaps the aging Cassatt and Degas accompanied both by their earlier selves and by other venerable companions, should I find any.

I did find a most lively 1976 photograph of a Dame Marie Rambert. At ninety-five, she is seated in the studio of the London ballet school she founded. Because of her ballet connections, which tied her to the Degas theme, I had already determined to include her: then I found out that she was the young woman Diaghilev hired in 1912 to help Nijinsky with the choreography for *The Rite of Spring*—which of course, turned into one of the great opening night scandals of the theater, with the audience breaking into pandemonium.

I had accidentally found Nijinsky once before. In 1991 Edith and I were in the Montmartre cemetery, searching for Degas's grave, which we found in the middle of the business aristocracy that was the Degas clan. As we were turning back, I saw a flat, slightly raised stone on which someone had left a bouquet and a pair of satin dancing slippers. It had rained the night before and the sodden still life was extraordinarily

touching. I called Edith to tell her—she had been mulling over the converted Heinrich Heine's being buried in Christian ground instead of the sadly vandalized Jewish section where she felt he belonged. The grave was Nijinsky's.

As Halévy, leading me to La Scala, had taken his leave, so Marie Rambert, leading me to Nijinsky, took hers: I was unable to secure permission to use that image. What is left of her now is buried in the divided twosome and shadow under the raised arms of the group of four on the right. They throw up their hands in alarm, which was often the way audiences reacted to later Nijinsky.

I am bemused that the possibility of putting Rambert and Nijinsky together was thwarted in my image as it was in reality, when Romola de Pulski spirited Nijinsky away from Diaghilev, who was absolutely livid—and from Rambert, who was surprised by her own deep grief. Awkward, shy, and inarticulate when he was not dancing, Nijinsky was touchingly innocent about steering his own life. He seems to have left that to others, like Diaghilev and Romola.

*Nijinsky Variations* plays with the coexistence of age and youth: the older self appears attended by the younger. The two Degases are spatially the closest to us; the two Cassatts are with the group of four on the right; the two Nijinskys are at the left. And as I was populating the balcony tiers, it seemed appropriate to fill them with a mixed audience of varying periods starting with an 1889 photograph of the boxes at the Conservatoire de Musique in Paris by Count Giuseppe Primoli. And I find out, as I am writing this, that Primoli took another photograph outside at this same concert, showing the backs of the entering audience. One of the backs is Degas! Repeated in the third and sixth tiers is a dashing André Gide at the same age as the young Degas and Nijinsky. At the bottom, Cocteau is disappearing into the Underworld. A young Cassatt paints her sister Lydia and gleefully sings to the music. At her right is a convivial, at first glance rather ordinary, group of five. Delving further, one finds that they were photographed after a performance of *Petrouchka*. Diaghilev had escorted Nijinsky, who was then thirty-nine, from the asylum to see whether he might respond to one of his great former roles. Nothing. The catatonic Nijinsky stands with Diaghilev and Tamara Karsavina in a world of his own, smiling that sweet angelic smile of his from a distance we can only guess at.

For the central floating figures I try to imagine a choreography derived from the

Nijinsky version of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faunne* and it turns into a Latin American tango. I don't recall when I learned that Nijinsky's last public dance was in South America and that it was the next day that Degas died.

On the fifth tier of *Nijinsky Variations*—the tier that predicates the architecture (entirely invented) of the central and right portions of the image—are dancers from *The Firebird* and *Le sacre du printemps*, ballets Stravinsky composed for Diaghilev. The Degas ballerinas are in urgent flight from all these impeding disturbances. My theme of aging has broadened, unplanned, to include its correlative: the old becoming the new.

Late in the image's generation I add the circling birds and at the same time put in the butterflies to tie the birds into the floating dancers. But their metamorphosis now reads in reverse and inadvertently I now have Goya's and Van Gogh's metaphor for madness. The leaping, central Nijinsky, who is becoming transparent, is scattering butterflies. They, in turn, darken, becoming black birds, and move out to circle into the audience.

I try not to think of the dancer suspended above the pit as a falling angel or to call the print *Milton's Paradise Lost*.

I see Nijinsky as a young man inevitably cut down in the full bloom of his power. It happened to be by schizophrenia: had he fought in World War I, it would have been in the trenches; had he lived in the age of AIDS, it might well have been in an ICU.

Originating from behind the *Firebird* figure and the corps of young men there is a repetition of a Dance of Death motif. It is a reference less to Holbein or Brueghel than to Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*. The procession disappears into the distance. Between this motif's repetition is a cadaver in a World War I uniform. I use a photographic self-portrait by the German Expressionist Ernst Kirchner posing in his uniform and holding a cigarette. Though he was among the lucky who survived the war, in the end he committed suicide.

Nijinsky gave a last private dance recital at the Suvretta House Hotel in St. Moritz in 1919. He arrived with Romola and sat down on a chair in front of the invited guests. When he continued just to sit, the piano accompanist started to prod him with a few pieces. Romola tried to encourage him, but he snapped at her and she left in embarrassment. By the time she returned, he had sprung out of his chair and was executing a spectacular display. Then he stopped and laid out a large cross of velvet

strips on the floor: standing at the head of it with outstretched arms, the told the increasingly alarmed gathering that he was about to dance their war. Romola commented that he was like a tiger “who at any moment could destroy us.” And when it was over, Nijinsky put his hands over his heart and said, “The little horse is tired.” He never danced again. He was thirty-one.

At the print’s center, at the bottom, are two roses and a pair of satin dancing slipper.

As I am writing this [1996], the edition of *Nijinsky Variations* is in flux, moving towards its final variation. Very slowly, returning to the plate after each sixty or so impressions, I make the three central, floating figures a little more transparent, as if they were gradually disappearing. The effect is very subtle. I am preparing the image for its final destination as a small new edition in which the dancing Nijinsky has totally left us, replaced by a flock of flapping crows and an ethereal white dove.

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