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Ida Rubensteins ambitious 1934 ballet Perséphone brought together five of the most controversial artists of pre-World War II Europe. Rubensteins, a prominent and wealthy French ballerina, commissioned André Gide, Jacques Copeau, Igor Stravinsky, and Kurt Juss to bring the famous Homeric myth to the French stage. The result was a ballet that had moments of exquisite beauty, however ambiguous in its meaning. Tamara Levitzs Modernist Mysteries: Perséphone is a comprehensive microhistorical analysis of the conception and production of Perséphone. Personal notes such as letters and diary entries are effectively used as evidence of the meaning behind each artist’s work. Levitzs scholarly monograph opens a window into the psyches of these significant artistic thinkers, reading into their every thought and motive. The most fascinating character discussed in Modernist Mysteries is the influential pederast writer André Gide. Gide contemplated the myth of Perséphone for four decades, culminating in the 1934 production. The libretto contains hidden meaning, alluding to Gide’s core beliefs on faith, love and art. Gide’s interpretation conflicted with the other Catholic collaborators, and each artist twisted each other’s work to fit their own interpretation of Perséphone. Modernist Mysteries successfully adds to the scholarly conversation by presenting the thoughts of the production’s artistic collaborators during the conception and production of this ballet.

Before evaluating this text, one must understand what microhistory (also known as “non-event ordered history”) is. This approach is new, and scholarship

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has not decided on one encompassing definition for it. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen define the origin of microhistory as, “a research strategy in which a detailed study of one person, one village, one case of disorder is used to tell of much larger phenomena.”\(^1\) The new method has allowed for an increasing richness of our images of the past, and has brought a “revival of narrative” to history writing.\(^2\) According to historian Giovanni Levi, microhistory can be categorized under the following three subject heads:

1. “Any study of the local or small-scale that is undertaken in order to illuminate larger problems;
2. Micro-biography, that is, the biography of a relatively unimportant individual;
3. A narrative of a small-scale event that may or may not have wider repercussions.”\(^3\)

Levitz’s text can be categorized under the third definition of microhistory: the use of narrative form to describe an often-overlooked ballet, *Perséphone.*

*Modernist Mysteries* begins with an account of the night when Igor and Soulima Stravinsky performed the music of *Perséphone* for the first time. Levitz’s vivid imagery transports the reader into Ida Rubenstein’s home in pre-war France. Levitz writes, “From their cozy position in front of the fireplace, France’s literary lights took in this spectacle of Russian passion with reserved caution. Paul Valéry smiled politely, Paul Claudel ‘glared,’ and André Gide turned his head in disgust” (4). This introduction foreshadows the clash of ideas between collaborators and reviewers that was to come, while also showcasing the intimate nature of discourse found in *Modernist Mysteries.* Levitz then describes the political climate of early 1930’s Paris. She gives a sense of each collaborator’s mindset at this tumultuous time, describing a collective feeling of unsettledness contemporaneous to the writing of this production. The introduction’s final pages detail the format of *Modernist Mysteries.* The book is comprised of three parts, titled “Faith,” “Love,” and “Hope,” respectively. Each title symbolizes a central theme of the myth of *Perséphone.*

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\(^3\) Ibid., 122.

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Levitz begins “Faith” with a detailed description of Perséphone’s opening act. Levitz’s account is vivid and multifaceted, projecting the feeling of attending the ballet in 1930’s Paris. The description is incredibly engaging, grabbing the reader like a good novel. Levitz’s thorough approach to her subject is evidenced by the many footnotes citing both primary sources, including the artists’ personal diaries and notebooks, as well as contemporary reviews from critics. The result is a detailed and powerful account of Perséphone’s 1934 premiere.

“Faith” closely examines the writer André Gide, spanning from his first musings on the Homeric myth in 1891 to the creation of the 1934 ballet. His discovery of and obsession with the myth coincided with a sexual awakening for the author—Gide had his first same-sex experience in 1893 (4). Gide was deeply torn between his Christian upbringing and these homoerotic desires. In 1895 Gide married his first-cousin Madeleine, and they lived in chastity for forty-three years. He rationalized their non-sexual relationship by writing, “[I] did not want to disturb her purity… I abstained from the slightest caress in order not to worry her soul” (61). Madeleine represented the Christian ideal to Gide. Though he was bound to Madeleine and Christian faith, he desired and explored the forbidden temptation of same-sex relationships all the same.

Gide’s portrayal of Perséphone was an allegory for his own personal struggle. In Gide’s libretto, Perséphone is first described as a rebellious and innocent nymph who escaped society’s crushing laws. She rebelled against the faith of her mother, Demeter, by marrying Hades in the underworld. Demeter was distraught and wished her daughter to return. Perséphone matures and subsequently bows to the authority of her mother. Toward the end of his libretto, Gide shows Perséphone to be compassionate and closer to the faith that she was born into (116). She eventually goes back to the material world to appease Demeter, but before her return, Hades tricks Perséphone into eating pomegranate seeds that have the power to bind her to him. Therefore she must revisit the underworld every winter. Perséphone on earth represents Gide’s commitment to his wife and society’s ideals. Perséphone’s annual return to the underworld symbolizes Gide’s true homosexual identity.

The libretto for Perséphone was the result of more than forty years of literary contemplation and was profoundly personal for Gide. After completing the libretto, it was the duty of Stravinsky, Copeau, Rubenstein, and Juss—each a unique artist and freethinker, each coming from disparate backgrounds, each with a different take on the myth—to interpret Gide’s work. There were key philosophical differences between Gide, Stravinsky, and Copeau. Levitz contends that Stravinsky and Copeau both interpreted the myth as a traditional Christian allegory. Copeau went against Gide’s wishes and located the scenery in a church.
Stravinsky implied Christian beliefs by transforming the syllabic rhythms of Gide’s work to make them sound like the Latin Stravinsky preferred to use in his liturgical works. Levitz contends the syllabic structure proves Stravinsky’s commitment to the divine, writing that words imply concepts and appeal to the cognitive mind. Syllables, on the other hand, function as raw material itself, pulsating with “divine energy” (151). By the end of Stravinsky’s process of rearranging the syllabic structure of the verse, the libretto was nearly incomprehensible. Gide’s voice was almost entirely erased (622). He was furious, and cut off all ties to the production after hearing Stravinsky’s music, refusing to attend the premiere. Levitz’s treatment of this issue is remarkably convincing because the content of Faith works to set up this pivotal split between Gide and the rest of the collaborators. Her information is consistent with the information from the diaries and letters of Gide, Stravinsky, and other relevant figures.

In part two, Love, the focus shifts from the genesis of the production to a semiotic analysis of the performance. Perséphone’s collaborators attempted to reinstate romantic (rather than neoclassical) symbolism in the work as a means of expressing belief through art. Ida Rubenstein’s Sapphic portrayal of Perséphone is thoroughly explored, and her performance is certainly influenced by the same ideals she featured in the early Ballet Russes. Levitz uses the term Sapphic here to define the sexual relationships shared between women. Rubenstein’s performance was critically lambasted, but it appealed to the Parisian Sapphic community’s sense of nostalgia (470). Levitz claims Rubenstein’s Sapphic performance sparked an intense interest from the influential pedagogue, Nadia Boulanger. Levitz notes that Boulanger socialized frequently with Rubenstein during the production, and even edited Stravinsky’s piano-vocal score (471-472). Boulanger proclaimed Perséphone to be one of the “greatest masterpieces of music” and included the work in her teachings from 1935-36 (472). Levitz contends Boulanger used Perséphone to perpetuate the memory of the neoclassical Sapphic tradition. This is just one example of the attention to detail exhibited in Love. The minute details of the production are effectively dissected in this chapter, resulting in a nuanced discussion of Persephone.

Part 3, Hope, begins with a vivid description of the ballet’s final scene when, “the critics forgot their boredom and sat back to luxuriate in Stravinsky’s rich and beautiful music and the moving spectacle on stage.” The placement of this passage in the final section mirrors how the production of Perséphone failed to capture the audience’s imagination until the closing act, when the ballet finally shows the potential the collaboration of these brilliant artists promised. Levitz uses her account of the beauty of the final scene to contrast the overall negative critical response to Perséphone. With the exception of Stravinsky, the collaborators
quickly distanced themselves from the production; Copeau was so distraught by the performance he admitted he had “completely failed” (619). His reaction also suggests, perhaps, why traditional historical texts do not devote much research to this project.

Levitz ends *Modernist Mysteries* with a meditation on how each artist inspired her work. She writes her most important note on the value of microhistorical analysis in this section by comparing her work to Stravinsky’s. Levitz writes, “Stravinsky commits his act of mourning through a perfected compositional art… He provided me with a model for musicological scholarship. What better way to remember the dead than conjure their presence through detailed research and hermeneutic interpretation” (623)? The genre of microhistory allows authors to revitalize the presence of those who have passed. It allows for us to reevaluate important personalities from a detached perspective. It allows for future generations to know who the creative collaborators involved in this project really were in an in increasingly intimate way.

After reading *Modernist Mysteries*, twentieth century Stravinsky scholarship appears to be dated. For example, on the topic of Stravinsky and inspiration, Richard Taruskin provides the example of the second quartet, writing, “As early as 1919, Stravinsky acknowledged [a] performance [of] as the source of his inspiration for the second quartet piece, completed on 2 July 1914.” Taruskin then provides a brief point as evidence before moving on. This approach is dry and leaves and offers the reader little data from which to develop his/her own conclusions. The reader is left with a vague idea of who the composer truly was, and there is too much importance placed on dates and theory. Contrastingly, Levitz would approach a similar topic in a far more nuanced way: “[Stravinsky’s] religious and political differences with Gide led to their becoming embittered adversaries around the time of *Perséphone*. With Cingria, Maritain, and Suvchinsky whispering in his ear, Stravinsky entered the *Perséphone* project already subtly biased against Gide and unlikely to be sympathetic to beliefs countering his own” (134). This is far more engaging and illuminating than just providing a grocery list of events. Art is not about dates or events; events are just valuable footnotes in an extensive creative process. The

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5 I must note that Taruskin, arguably, does a more nuanced job of approaching history in other cases such as the chapter “Stravinsky and Us” from *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*. 
difference between these two approaches can be further explained using Alan Watts’ musical score analogy. Watts argues that any process is similar to a musical composition. The end is not the point of the composition. If it were, there would be composers who just wrote finales. One listens to a symphony for the journey the music takes you on. If one views the point of life to reach an end goal, they will miss the entire journey. Focusing on events and dates only tells a fraction of the story. Levitz’s approach to microhistory follows the journey of the creative process in an unprecedentedly thorough and engaging way.

Prior to Modernist Mysteries, Maureen A. Carr’s Multiple Masks: Neoclassicism in Stravinsky’s Works on Greek Subjects was the central analytic text regarding the 1934 production of Perséphone. The essential difference between Carr’s Multiple Masks and Levitz’s Modernist Mysteries is that Carr is interested in what the compositional sketches tell us and Levitz in a humanist analysis. The issue with Carr’s text is that it attempts to draw humanist analysis from theoretical knowledge, while citing some questionable sources. For example, Carr contends that André Gide focused on the Christian concept of redemption in his libretto, citing Justin O’Brien’s Portrait of André Gide: A Critical Biography. O’Brien does not make this claim credible, lacking even a single source to back up his argument. Levitz contends Gide’s libretto was deeply autobiographical, containing messages alluding to his pederast lifestyle. It was Stravinsky and Copeau that added the Christian message to the ballet. Levitz supports her argument with over one hundred pages of extensively sourced analysis. Levitz’s work is more believable than O’Brien’s, and by extension Carr’s.

Levitz also makes a valuable contribution to the field of history by sharing insight on interwar Paris through the perspectives of some of the most influential artists of the period. Through the eyes of Perséphone’s collaborators, Levitz is able to paint a picture of this turbulent time:

Economic hardship was visible everywhere in Paris. Hitler’s election to power in Germany in 1933 had even further destabilized the situation. These events polarized the French Left and Right and created a pervasive feeling of fear that affected all aspects of life. The collaborators felt the desire to escape into the past, creating a sense of sentimental retrospection around every aspect of the Perséphone project (9).

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6 Maureen A. Carr, Multiple Masks: Neoclassicism in Stravinsky’s Works on Greek Subjects (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 159.

This passage exemplifies how Levitz can place the reader in the moment. History texts generally struggle to achieve this effect, and Stephan Schloesser’s *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris 1919-1933* is no exception. Schloesser’s text chronicles the same time period in Paris as *Modernist Mysteries*. But where Levitz paints a picture of inter-war Paris, Schloesser’s text is focused on dates and figures. Schloesser’s text is valuable because factual information is necessary to draw conclusions. However, Levitz is able to dig deeper by interpreting what these known events meant to the people who lived at this time.

There are of course, some flaws in the microhistorical method. Microhistory is based on analyzing sources that detail the thoughts and actions of the characters. How do scholars determine which information is accurate? Especially because sources that analyze another’s thoughts are inherently erratic. Levitz used a wide range of primary evidence in *Modernist Mysteries*, such as diaries and letters, to support her key arguments. This made the text believable, but there remain gaps in the evidence. To fill in the blanks, the author needs to examine secondary and tertiary sources. This is the primary area in which the microhistorical method is flawed. Even the best secondary sources can be unwittingly fallacious. For example, Levitz cites Robert Craft’s collection of letters from Stravinsky often and uses them to imply Stravinsky’s intentions. But as Charles M. Joseph points out in his book, *Stravinsky Inside Out*, Craft’s collection of letters from Stravinsky are not exceptionally accurate. Joseph writes, “As several reviewers noted, the frequent misdatings, mis-translations, and other apparent changes Craft chose to make raises questions about the reliability of the editing process.”¹⁸ Maureen Carr’s *Multiple Masks* runs into a similar issue when citing Justin O’Brien about the meaning of Gide’s libretto. The O’Brien citation was purely an opinion, without any credible facts to support it. Though the veracity of primary sources drawn upon by any scholar affects all methods of historical analysis, it especially concerns microhistory. The genre adds an extra margin of error because these studies require historians to venture another step further beyond the concrete facts. Future authors of microhistorical studies will need to figure out how to best negotiate this inherent shortcoming in the process.

Despite this limitation, *Modernist Mysteries* marks a paradigm shift in historical writing. Levitz’s new approach results in an engaging and multifaceted text that speaks in a particularly significant way to readers in the twenty-first century. Our education system today has appropriately devalued the importance

once placed on events because anyone with access to the internet can acquire that information instantly. Students are now taught that historical importance is found in the collective thought and epistemic values of the time period. Modernist Mysteries effectively ushers in a method for historical scholarship that is built around this new ideal.

Modernist Mysteries demonstrates the value of understanding one specific event. Levitz’s analysis of Persephone, an often-overlooked ballet, has led to new insights into an incredible number of fields, including musicology, European history, art history, Catholic history, and literary history. From this, we learn that understanding anything in a multifaceted way can lead to the discovery of larger truths. For example, Freud’s identification of the Oedipus complex arose from individual cases uncovered in analysis, each working towards their own specific resolutions. Through these separate cases, broader themes emerged, leading to the discovery of the Oedipus complex, a concept of far-reaching implications. Levitz has written a rare text that generates a true window into the human experience. Modernist Mysteries will have a lasting impact on the canon of Stravinsky literature.

For Further Reading


