

VIEWS & REVIEWS

MEDICAL CLASSICS

The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky

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The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky

A book by Vaslav Nijinsky

First published in 1937

During early 1919, overwhelmed by turmoil about the end of his career, devastation at the recent war, and deep mental distress fostered throughout his life, the virtuoso ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky became consumed by psychosis. He documented this experience in his remarkable diary, written over a frantic six weeks. Nijinsky's private exploration of his dreams, anguish, and paranoia is an enlightening read, the more so because his subsequent story tells us much about the development of psychiatric treatment.

For a man who found global fame with the Ballet Russes during the early 20th century, Nijinsky's descent to madness was astonishing. Since his dismissal from the renowned theatrical company, his life had turned inwards and he had isolated himself in the Swiss Alps. The evening that he started writing the diary, Nijinsky's final performance saw him facing his audience for 30 minutes, seated on a chair. He finally stood, unrolled two pieces of velvet on the floor to form a cross, and announced, "Now I will dance you the war, the war which you did not prevent."

The diary reads like a textbook of psychopathology. Nijinsky describes a complex delusional system with somatic passivity and the suggestion of auditory hallucinations. The text features neologisms and paraphrasia and, as the author's mental state further deteriorates, he rhymes and puns his way through the second part of the text, his thoughts disordered in a mess of

vocabulary. Yet his utopian view of the world, born from the devastation of the first world war that so affected his native Eastern Europe, holds warmth and optimism.

Nijinsky's path is one familiar among psychotic patients; his wife Romola, finally unable to cope with the increasing volatility of his behaviour, plans to take him to see the local doctor and tries to conceal medication in his food. A paranoid Nijinsky tries hard and unsuccessfully to avoid this fate.

Thereafter, Nijinsky became a case study in the history of psychiatry. He was sent to see Eugen Bleuler, the notable Swiss psychiatrist who coined the term schizophrenia. When Romola emerged from her discussion with Bleuler, Nijinsky warned, "you are bringing me my death warrant," and his prediction may have been accurate. He received insulin coma therapy and other early treatments but went on to spend most of his life in psychiatric institutions.

Nijinsky's diary provides an insight into the experience of mental illness as perceived by one of the most famous creative talents of his age. The distorted perception of reality, the terror this evokes, the relentless breakdown in cognitive processes, and the futile search for help; it is a valuable lesson for anyone interested in mental illness.

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