I DREAM A WORLD: THE BALLETS OF AUGUST BOURNONVILLE

BY TOBI TOBIAS

For Dale Harris (1928-1996)

August Bournonville – dancer, choreographer, custodian and shaper of one of the world's half-dozen great classical ballet companies and schools – lived from 1805 to 1879 (fig. 88). (He was an exact contemporary, and the friend, of Hans Christian Andersen.) The first half of Bournonville's career falls within the period of what we now call the Danish Golden Age, and the choreographer carried many of its ideals into the second half of the nineteenth century, serenely ignoring radical shifts in the zeitgeist, among them the rise of realism, which inevitably spelled death to Romanticism. Bournonville's life in the theater was exceptionally long and productive. He headed the Royal Danish Ballet for the better part of a half-century and created more than fifty ballets. He made the Danish ballet what it is in the eyes of the world (ever since the world "discovered" it in the 1950s): singular and enchanting. Still, much as we may revere his achievement today, we must at the same time acknowledge the fact that the Bournonville ballets, as we know them from current performances, have changed enormously from what they were at the moment of their creation.

FIG. 88. Louis Aumont (1805-1879): *Portrait of August Bournonville*, 1828. Oil on canvas. 14 × 12.3 cm. Teatermuseet, Copenhagen. Inv. no. M 120/89.

The passage of time brought about alterations in aesthetics, in public taste, in the bodies and technique of the dancers, in access to influences from abroad (most compellingly, from Russia and the United States). Ballets are not like books or paintings or musical scores, all of which can endure long periods of neglect and then be resurrected and appreciated when there is a suitable audience for them. Despite modern techniques of recording – through dance notation as well as film and videotape – ballet remains essentially an ephemeral art. A dance exists if it is kept alive in the repertoire. It gets to stay in the repertoire if it continues to attract a ticket-buying audience. Failing to do so, it can become forever irretrievable, in as short a space as a generation.

Down the decades, it has been clear to the Royal Danish Ballet – the natural (and in most cases the sole) custodian of Bournonville's ballets – that if these works were to retain a popular audience, they would have to be modified to reflect changing conditions and changing taste. And so the ballets were cut; the more modern we get, apparently, the less patience we have. Extended mime passages were dropped and/or converted to danced sequences, yielding to the contemporary appetite for dazzling action. The dancing came to be executed by bodies that grew continually sleeker and acquired an ever-increasing virtuosic capacity. Occasionally, outside the Royal Theatre, the ballets were deliberately reconceived counter to what is known of Bournonville's aesthetic principles – in part to add bravura choreography for the thrill-a-minute crowd, in part to give them a psychological validity for an audience unable or unwilling to understand unconscious motives or meanings when they are expressed in the form of myth or fairy tale.

Some of the mutations were inevitable. For example, erosions occur in a choreographic text because of human laziness and forgetfulness, while – on the plus side – enrichments accrete through succeeding generations of dancers' interpreting the roles and leaving their mark on them. Some of the alterations – made with an I-know-better-than-the-master attitude – have been foolhardy, proof of which is seen in how speedily they've come to look outdated, being yoked to superficial stylistic conventions of their own era. Some deviations from the original have been downright insulting, such as the tendency to make the ballets more ingenuous in tone, as if to imprison Bournonville in the role of a dear old Biedermeier grandfather and leave the field to the swinging moderns.

Luckily, from the time of Bournonville's death to the third quarter of this century, when the Royal Danish Ballet was finally pried out of its cozy isolation, the ballets were modified within the framework of a very insular, tradition-conscious artistic sect, so that even as we hurtle toward a culturally bleak millennium, something of Bournonville's genius is available to us when we watch stagings to which his august name is attached, though he might not recognize them as his own.

As latter-day Bournonville watchers, we must also keep in mind the fact that the Bournonville ballets we know from the recent or current repertoire represent only a part of this prolific choreographer's work. We assume, somewhat too readily perhaps, that the surviving pieces are the finest the man created. This they may be, but only within certain categories. None of the mythological and historical ballets – The *Valkyr* and *Valdemar*, for example – have survived; the attempt in 1990 to resurrect *The Lay of Thrym* – from insufficient evidence and faltering confidence in the theatrical style of the original – was generally considered a failure.

What has come down to us in what the Danes call "the living tradition" – choreography passed personally from one generation of dancers to the next – is the lyric and genially comic part of Bournonville's œuvre, along with one tragedy, *La Sylphide*, which he appropriated from the French. In this partial repertoire, however, we can trace certain themes that reveal Bournonville's moral character and poetic vision. What's more, we can identify with these themes, which unquestionably have helped the ballets live so long. Without the engaging way in which he set steps to music, along with the keen theatrical gift that made him a deft storyteller, Bournonville would, quite rightly, be forgotten by now. Without his belief that the individual personality of each performing artist and the sincerity of his playing – to his colleagues on stage as well as to the audience – are integral to the vibrant rendition of choreographer's ideas, the Danish ballet would not have acquired the intimate, touching character for which we cherish it. But again, these aspects of Bournonville are most convincing when they are experienced firsthand, through watching the ballets in performance. I would propose, though, that Bournonville's world picture, which I can try to describe here, is equally significant in making him an artist not just for *his* time, not just for *our* time, but for generations to come.

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In November of 1979, the Royal Danish Ballet staged a Bournonville festival to honor the centenary of the choreographer's death. In the space of one week, with heroic energy and devotion, the company presented all the significant Bournonville works in the extant repertoire. Most of these ballets were unfamiliar outside Denmark. Dance writers and dance fans flocked from abroad for the occasion, which ignited an international enthusiasm for Bournonville that continues to prosper.

What was it, exactly, that amazed us? Choreography of genius, yes. Performances by a collective of artists with a unique style in both classical dancing and the nearly lost art of mime, yes. These, as I've indicated, are elements best understood by seeing a series of actual stage performances, an experience not available to us right here and now. What can be discussed, though, is the fact that Bournonville's ballets appeal to at least the part of the contemporary audience that is susceptible to such things by proposing a code of behavior that is the antithesis of the impudent, uncaring, and downright cruel conduct typical of urban life in this, the last quarter of the twentieth century. For a New Yorker in the 1990s, for example, watching Bournonville is a little vacation for the soul (fig. 89).

Bournonville offers today's besieged viewer the reflection of a environment gentler than the one in which he or she exists. Tender sentiments and attitudes towards one's fellow creature prevail. (It can be argued that this quality has been embedded in Danish culture for several centuries and is not particular to an era such as the Golden Age, though it seems to have flourished then; one has only to look at the paintings of the period for confirmation.) The tenderness I'm describing is based on empathy – a oneness with "the other," achieved through emotional identification and understanding, whether this "other" be a person, a place, or simply a sentiment, such as that of patriotism; the bond of family, friendship, or romantic love; domestic security; or the immanence of nature.

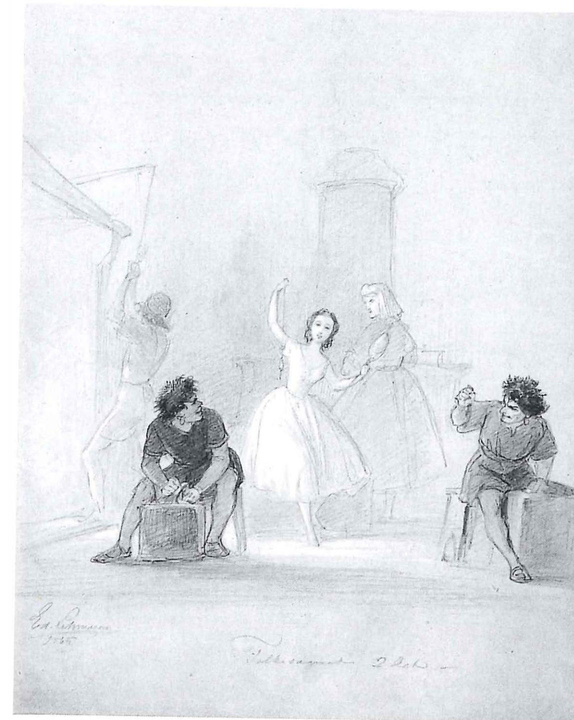

Fig. 89. Edvard Lehmann (1815-1892): *In the Mound of the Trolls. Act Two of the ballet A Folk Tale*, dated 1865. The ballet received its premiere in 1853. Pencil. Private collection.

One of myriad examples occurs in *A Folk Tale* – which Bournonville aptly called "my most perfect and finest choreographic work, especially as regards its Danish character" – in the feeling Hilda shows for Viderik. Our heroine, the loveliest of maidens, is a changeling, stolen from her cradle to be raised in the unruly, unmannerly society of trolls. Hilda's natural, civilized, instincts have been thwarted at every turn, until finally she's threatened with being married off to one of her two grotesque foster brothers. Throughout her tribulations, she has maintained not only her humor and her spirit, but her very human sympathy for the other brother, who is sweeter and therefore put upon by his own kind. Hopelessly in love with her, this Viderik helps her escape from their hideous underground lair and join her Prince Charming in the world of light. But when, once free and joined with Mr. Right, Hilda explains to Viderik that she can't possibly marry him, she takes care to do so with such delicate tact and such genuine pity, he can accept the inevitable, although he weeps.

Tender emotion permeates *A Folk Tale*. Even in the triumphant wedding scene, when Hilda comes into her legitimate kingdom – now free from all the claims of trolldom (in other words, the grosser aspects of life) – and her groom kneels before her to offer his hand and heart, she indicates through her expression and gesture, "No, no, it's too much," and softly raises him to stand beside her.

This tenderness of feeling and behavior goes hand in hand with the decorum that prevails in Bournonville's ballets. I'm not talking about the repressive propriety that is scorned nowadays as one of the worst aspects of Biedermeier culture, but rather about a quiet, luminous modesty, the physical aspect of which indicates a spiritual dimension, and which is welcome in any age that allows it to flower. The characters in his ballets that Bournonville would have us admire are incapable of putting themselves forward with brash egotism; they make their way gradually, with reticent charm, until they are accepted, indeed invited to enter another person's – if you will, personal space.

The ballet *Kermesse in Bruges* contains a duet – frequently performed out of context, as an attractive entity in itself – that illustrates this point sheerly through dancing, with only the most slender reliance on narrative. It occurs in the first act, when the young protagonists, Eleonore and Carelis, meet on the communal fairground, and is a perfect portrait-in-movement of hesitant, burgeoning love. Twice Carelis, ardent but restrained, approaches a shy Eleonore – first to offer her a rose, then to urge a promenade on his arm; each time, she dutifully consults her father, who encourages her with his consent. But even when the two are still separated by a gulf of

Fig. 90. Gustav Uhlendorff as Carelis and Ellen Price de Plane as Eleonore in a performance of *Kermesse in Bruges*, 1909.

space, their mirror-image phrases – of curving, stretching limbs – suggest yearning, and embraces that touch only in the imagination. The ingenuous lovers' excitement and daring increase by perceptible stages as they display their sweet youth and their coltish agility in alternating variations that invite the audience to fall in love with them as they are discovering each other. The fourth, final, solo is Carelis's and only now is he bold enough confidently to close the gap between him and his heart's desire. He shoots toward Eleonore, rakishly kicking up his legs, finally daring to enter the invisible envelope of air that surrounds her like a halo of chastity. The choreographer's psychology here is astute: Rather than retreating before the onslaught, Eleonore, gently wooed, does not merely consent but animatedly responds in kind, until Carelis seizes her by the waist and turns her so that they can dance, joined, in perfect harmony.

The exquisitely tempered behavior that Bournonville is celebrating in his ballets could not be achieved by a conglomeration of individuals or even a handful. It depends on two other factors we're sorely missing in our own lives: a community of which any given member sees himself as an integral part and a social hierar hy in which each person knows and accepts his place, confident in the ability of the several ranks to coexist, not merely politely, but fruitfully and with pleasure.

Unlike his Russian contemporaries, Bournonville avoids representing the upper echelons of the aristocracy in his ballets. (Only a couple of supernatural creatures and carnival masqueraders get to wear crowns.) Instead, the choreographer peoples his stories with folks who ply a trade: farming, fishing, defending the nation, keeping house and raising children, ministering to the soul, dancing. To these he adds the occasional eccentric or outsider – the alchemist, the itinerant street singer, the gypsy), who also has an acknowledged role in the community – albeit a tangential one. As for the Bournonville characters who possess greater leisure, cultivation, and disposable income, their level in the social scale rarely rises above that of high bourgeois. In many ways, then, these people are "just folks," a fact that makes them more accessible to the general public.

Nevertheless, the ballets depict definite social gradations. Most often, Bournonville uses these to demonstrate how exquisitely and naturally disparate classes can interrelate. The opening scene of *A Folk Tale*, for instance, shows us gentry and peasants, masters and servants, who are plainly separate from one another. Although both groups dance in this scene, they don't intermingle in the process, and each group keeps to its distinct style of dancing. Between them, though, there is a cordial co-existence, based on their tacit recognition of the fact that they are mutually dependent. The peasants harvest the land and keep the domestic scene going; they provide *A Folk Tale's* society-in-miniature with food and care. The gentry, for their part, provide the order that comes with hierarchical authority. If they are the privileged caste, they have a commensurate obligation. On a day-to-day level it is to set an example of proper behavior. Their dignity and graciousness are not superficial, aristocratic airs, but a demonstration of the courteous conduct becoming a fully developed human being.

Kermesse in Bruges carries the same kind of message. A stratified community is laid out straightaway in the opening scene. Here several classes mingle on their common ground – the town square – without losing or confusing their social identities, except with minor lapses that serve to reinforce the original premise. *The King's Volunteers on Amager*, in which townsfolk come to board with country folk, is a picture-book illustration not merely of mutual civility but genuine affection between the two types. The conflicts that do arise are not the result of class differences but of individual peccadilloes (fig. 90).

By and large, Bournonville's characters are content with the social identities the fates have assigned them, perhaps because they are shown respect and feel self-respect for what they are. As I've indicated, their various lines of work are seen as important contributions to their society's functioning and well-being. They have the personal satisfaction of being what they are expected to be. The ambitious beyond their station or the more seriously restless and discontent are the exceptions to the prevailing rule in Bournonville's ballets; as we'll see, the plot of several of the ballets turns on these more troubled characters' being brought round to accepting their lot or discovering their true nature and destiny – and settling down contentedly in the life proper to them.

Respect in Bournonville's imaginary world extends

across age boundaries too. Elders are honored as repositories of experience and wisdom; children are celebrated as symbols of the culture's lively and hopeful future. Bournonville's ballets contain roles for seven-year-olds and seventy-year-olds, and these are not all walk-ons. Madge, the witch in *La Sylphide* and Muri, the queen of the trolls in *A Folk Tale* are coveted star turns, usually won in maturity; the children's roles in *Konservatoriet* have launched the stage career of many a youngster who has not yet mastered the multiplication tables. Until lately, the Royal Danish Ballet itself was organized according to these premises, and many mourn the perhaps inevitable passing of such a sensibly arranged institution.

Another key element in the ideal world Bournonville envisions is the concept of home as an essential base that beckons to us when we voyage out from it, that anchors us in a sense of comfort and security. Home is where one's heart lives, where one utterly "belongs." As Bournonville knew full well – his ballets show him to have been an extremely pragmatic psychologist – the idea of home is glorified by nostalgia. Home looms all the more attractive when one is away from it – through rebellion (as in *La Sylphide*, where the hero, James, feels himself imprisoned by bourgeois domesticity); through duty laced with a yen for adventure (as in the case of the sailors posted to the coast of Argentina in *Far From Denmark*); or through fateful circumstances, threatening not merely one's happiness but one's very life (as in *Napoli*, where the exuberant lovers in a land that is all sunlight and robust vitality are catapulted into an eerie undersea realm that insidiously lures them into forgetting themselves and their commitments in the concrete world).

Far From Denmark, as its title suggests, is regularly punctuated by references to the homeland and the ties of first things – that is, native loves and loyalties. The young hero, Lieutenant Vilhelm, lets himself be distracted by a sultry Argentinean flirt, momentarily forgetting his fiancée – who is represented in the ballet only by tokens: a betrothal ring, a letter. When push comes to shove, however, Vilhelm comes to his senses, reaffirms his allegiance to his betrothed, and leaves Rosita, the object of his temporary infatuation, to her local, hotheaded admirer. A touching scene is devoted to the sentiments of a pair of very young cadets, one of whom receives a letter from his mother, the other of whom doesn't. (Like the Danish fiancée, the mothers remain unseen, but are persuasively evoked.) The original libretto of *Far From Denmark* goes to some pains to spell out the fact that, as the cadets are musing soulfully on their individual, faraway mothers, a gunfire salute calls their attention to the Danish flag, waving boldly and gaily in the sea breeze, reminding them of their common "mother" – the motherland.) That touchstone of the flag keeps recurring. Perhaps the single most piercing moment in the ballet is the one in which an extremely young recruit, barely more than a boy, kneels and kisses the Dannebrog – the national banner. Only confirmed cynics who consider patriotism naive will be able to resist this. It is all of a piece with the ballet's theme of fidelity – a moral issue as well as one of the heart – to the place in which one began.

As for *A Folk Tale*, the entire ballet can be seen as a search for home, a quest so essential to self-definition that nothing can deter it. On sheer instinct – recognizing the clues offered to her about civilized humanity – Hilda flees the dark, distorted domain of the trolls and searches for a world that will match her true identity. Reaching the manor house that is her birthplace and birthright, she climbs into her old nurse's lap, and, lovingly rocked there as she was when she was a newly christened infant, recalls where she came from and thus who she is. Only at this point is she safely back on the track of her own happiness. Bournonville is equally insistent on the idea of belonging in his treatment of Hilda's opposite number, Birthe, the ill-tempered, erratic, and erotically unseemly progeny of the trolls who was foisted on the gentry at the manor. Birthe, the ballet indicates, has had a long, trying history of failing to integrate herself into a society where mannerly behavior springs from an innate goodness of heart. She is fittingly and unceremoniously expelled when Hilda is recognized as the true daughter of the great house. (Bournonville has the genius, however, to show Birthe's tragedy as well – the fact that she has sensed all her life that she doesn't belong in her surroundings – and let us pity her a little. Unpleasant and impossible though she is, she is far more victim than villain.)

If home and its primal significance are crucial to Bournonville, so is the opposite side of the coin – the exotic – which perpetually engaged his curiosity. A number of his ballets have a travelogue aspect to them: *Napoli*, with its colorful crowd scenes; *Kermesse in Bruges*, which is set in the Low Countries; *Far From Denmark*, which indulges the Nordic infatuation with a South that offered a warmer climate – not just in terms of weather, but also in terms of temperament and sensuality, though some of this ostensible abandon may have been mere wishful thinking (fig. 91). Bournonville tackled Spain in a

Fig. 91. Dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet performing an excerpt from the ballet *Napoli* in the courtyard of Thorvaldsens Museum, 1991.

divertissement called *La Ventana*, a part of which has been preserved: a mirror dance for a vivacious, fan-wielding señorita (and her anxious double). *Abdallah*, freely reconstituted from the choreographer's notes in 1985 as a pleasant if somewhat unfocused entertainment, evokes Arabian Nights country. And among the choreographer's late ballets is a work, now unfortunately lost, called *From Siberia to Moscow*; it was based on the choreographer's own visit to Russia (in the course of which he got to disapprove of the show-biz elements in the work of his great contemporary Marius Petipa.).

The specific foreignness in Bournonville's ballets is a disarming blend of cliché and direct observation. Both diverted the original audience for the ballets, for whom "elsewhere" was in most cases so remote and inaccessible, it may well have seemed part of the territory of the imagination. Curiously, even in this present day of easily accomplished physical travel and readily available armchair travel – through photo essays, films, and video – Bournonville's evocation of, say, Naples can seize and hold our attention. It is not so much the accuracy of the rendering that captivates us – a camera could manage as much – but the energy of the vision; the choreographer's enthusiasm for the locale and its people still pulses strong in the ballet a century and a half after its creation.

Bournonville's interest in exotic climes is, of course, related to a desire prevalent in artists of the Romantic era – writers and painters, especially: the yen to escape from pedestrian existence into experience that was out of the ordinary, for adventures that promised to "take one out of one's self." A way to begin, at least, to fulfill this compelling wish was to remove to an unfamiliar landscape. Those of you who are visiting Denmark, especially those who have never been here before, may be enjoying a mild form of this phenomenon.

Like his fellow Romantic artists, Bournonville was attracted to the "long ago" as well as the "far away," travel in time being the cousin of travel in space. *A Folk Tale* is based on folk songs and stories – dating back to the Middle Ages – that had been preserved in oral tradition and that nineteenth-century enthusiasts were especially active in collecting and publishing. Denmark boasted an equivalent of Germany's Brothers Grimm, a folklorist named Just Mathias Thiele, and Bournonville drew upon his gleanings from Thiele and related material not only for *A Folk Tale* but also for an earlier ballet, now lost, called *Kirsten Piil*, whose enchanting libretto centers on Scandinavian Midsummer's Eve lore.

Despite the undeniable attraction of the exotic, it is, nevertheless, one of the sources of disturbance in the golden world Bournonville envisions. *Far From Denmark* spells this out in no uncertain terms, as we've seen. Of course a narrative ballet requires trouble of some sort, if it is to function theatrically. Bournonville is not a lyric poet, after all, operating in a genre in which perfect self-expression can be achieved on a single sustained emotional note; he is a dramatist and, as such, requires conflict.

Bournonville relies on a number of other factors to stir up trouble in his ballets and repeats them often enough for us to think of them as typical seeds of discord in his world view. In his most ambitious works – *La Sylphide*, *A Folk Tale*, and *Napoli* – the supernatural intrudes. And it is, in itself, a heightened form of the exotic. In *La Sylphide*, two of the three main characters are otherworldly. The hero, James, is of this earth, but, like most dreamers, he is both blessed and cursed with a desire for more than this earth holds: perfect beauty. He abandons the ordinary happiness that might so easily be his – the farm, the fiancée, the friends (in other words, quiet, stable contentment) – to follow his ecstatic vision of the Sylphide, who inevitably dies at the very moment he seizes her. Thwarted in his craving for something beyond the reach of mere mortals, James is also cursed by the witch, Madge, a practitioner of evil magic for all that she first appears to be a half-crazed but harmless village crone. In this twofold encounter with the supernatural, James is destroyed.

The second act of *Napoli*, as we've observed, takes the ballet's passionate, here-and-now lovers out of their lusty, colorful world into the hypnotic underwater realm of the Blue Grotto, which is ruled by a lord of the deep and peopled by tritons and neriads (fig. 92). The scene is a little like the long passage of the wilis and their imperious queen that opens the second act of Giselle; just imagine it set in a lush aquarium. Our hero and heroine, paradigms of the life force, barely escape the lure of this unreal kingdom with its seductive promise of oblivion – as fatal as it is strangely beautiful.

A Folk Tale, as I've mentioned, is based on a body of Danish legends that the book-learned of the Romantic era were busily appropriating from oral tradition. The ballet has not only its already cited population of trolls – refined society seen in a distorting mirror, and basically up to no good – but also a ghostly contingent of Elf Maidens, who, set loose on an innocent fellow, drive him out of his mind and usually out of this life. (They, too, are related to the wilis of German legend.) Junker Ove, the brooding hero of *A Folk Tale* falls prey to them and nearly succumbs.

It need hardly be said that these threats, expressed in terms of supernatural beings, have psychological and moral equivalents that are simple enough to decipher. It's the job of the contemporary viewer, however, to believe in the metaphors Bournonville has chosen to express his meanings; our children and grandchildren, enchanted by a fairy tale, can manage this trick, but far too many adults of our day have, sadly, lost the knack.

A more concrete source of trouble in Bournonville's ballets is social displacement. As I've suggested, the choreographer had a firm faith in the idea of a natural, perhaps God-given, social order. When a person intrudes into a compartment of society inappropriate to himself or herself – whether by choice or fate – the result is upheaval, even chaos, for both the individual and the affected community. In *Kermesse in Bruges*, Bournonville takes a comic tone to illustrate his conviction about a place for everyone and everyone in his place. Here Geert, a sweet but oafish fellow of the lower classes, endowed with a magic ring that renders him automatically adored, wins the favors of an elegant, rich widow. An entire scene is devoted to the demonstration of his clumsy inability to function in the society of his lady-love and her fancy friends. He can neither dance nor consume his dinner in their style; he is equally unable to sustain an ordinary introduction and to declare his ardor without offending them. At home, among his peers, he probably got along just fine.

The same notion of a person's proper place in the scheme of things is addressed with gravity in *A Folk Tale*. We've talked about the changelings – the human Hilda and the troll Birthe – both of whom are deeply troubled when their experience is at odds with what they feel themselves to be, or to be destined for. In the same vein, the ballet's hero, Junker

Fig. 92. Friedrich Thöming (1802-1873): *The Blue Grotto, Capri*, 1833. Oil on canvas. 13,1 × 21,5 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen. Inv. no. B 297.

Ove, slated to marry Birthe, although only a Hilda could be his soulmate, despairs to the point of chancing death at the hand of the Elf Maidens. Birthe's behavior at the manor house chronically sets it at sixes and sevens, while it's evident from the views we're given of troll life, that she'd be, figuratively as well as literally, right at home. Personal and social serenity are established only when each of these characters is relocated in his or her correct environment.

In considering the encounters with foreign spheres – geographic, social, or supernatural – that Bournonville sets forth in his ballets, we need to be aware of the choreographer's conviction that impulsive, extravagant adventure is a disturbing and negative force in the benign, placid life one should aspire to, and that temperate conduct produces the happiest outcomes. For the European artists of the Romantic Age, by contrast, a quest like that of *La Sylphide's* James represented the kind of elevated imaginative experience for which it was worth risking everything, even one's life. Indeed, for them – in their art, and frequently in their personal conduct – death in pursuit of heightened experience had a tragic glamour that was implicitly preferable to the tamer pleasures of ordinary existence. But Bournonville, having borrowed *La Sylphide* from the French, disapproved of James's choice. His sanguine and realistic temperament (his bourgeois outlook, if you like) acknowledged that alien territories existed and could not resist exploring them – but only to a point. In the end he drew back – sometimes in fear and revulsion, sometimes through sheer common sense – to insist that an unexceptional life among one's own kind was the safest and, all things considered, best course.

It is this humane, practical Bournonville who presides over the most subtle threat to order in the idyllic world of his imagination. This menace – mild, but pervasive and unavoidable – consists of man's foibles, which are lovingly understood in the ballets and lovingly corrected. You have seen the dancing-school section of *Konservatoriet*; in the original form of the ballet, as the libretto reveals, it had an intricate narrative surround. The machinations of the ballet's plot – treated with light good humor but resonant with human feelings and human values – serve to correct the owner of the dancing school, one M. Dupond. Greedy and over-confident of his personal charms – though surely no more so than the next guy – Dupond refuses a scholarship to the poor but talented child seeking admission to his school and ignores his promise to marry his devoted housekeeper of many years, instead seeking (through a personal ad in the newspaper, no less!) a pretty young woman half his age or, barring that, a rich widow. Playfully, his students contrive an elaborate ruse to bring him to his senses so that all can end well.

Another ballet, ostensibly light in tone, offers a far deeper study of human inadequacy. *The King's Volunteers on Amager*, is, on its surface, a rollicking genre picture of life on the island of Amager, only a short trip from central Copenhagen but dominated by the Dutch culture of its settlers. There, a colony of farmers plays host to the dashing officers of the elite reserve corps and their elegant womenfolk, come to join them for the area's celebrated Mardi Gras festivities. In the midst of the cheerful local color, however, lies a kernel of domestic infidelity, heartbreak, and resignation.

Threaded through the ballet's bustling action is a presumably typical passage in the history of a married couple now in early middleage. The husband, Edouard, a lieutenant in the volunteer corps, is endowed with the good looks, multiple talents, and irresistible personal charm that allow him to indulge the inclinations of a playboy. Despite her knowledge of his peccadilloes, which she still admits only with difficulty, his wife, Louise, remains faithful – not to uphold a moral standard (from which society blithely exempts males), not because she can't find anyone better, no – because she remains in love with the man despite herself. And Edouard, in turn, for all his chronic, casual womanizing, needs this wife as much as she needs him – not simply for her undeniable physical beauty (enhanced by its tinge of melancholy), not for her warm, sympathetic spirit, not for the scintillating vivacity she can muster when the occasion calls for it, but because she is his anchor.

Matters come to a head at the costume ball that climaxes the Shrovetide carnival. Louise, pointedly disguising herself as the Waverer, a character from a play by Holberg, flirts with her errant husband to teach him a lesson and perhaps to prove to them both that she is still able to fascinate him. Edouard, ever the Northern Don Juan, responds avidly to the invitation of this ostensibly new temptress. And then she unmasks. Immobile, they confront each other with a long, deep gaze before he slowly swears – ironically believing it himself – "You are the only one for me." We know the truth, and Louise knows the truth – she is and she isn't – and with this knowledge Bournonville shows us that we can learn to live our lives with imperfect love, that bittersweet endings are not to be despised.

In various ways, then, evil, misfortune, and just plain tough reality in the form of flawed human nature penetrate the worlds Bournonville constructs in his ballets. As I've said, he actually needs these elements if he's to have a show. Nevertheless, most of his ballets have a happy resolution. Good wins out; harmony is restored. By temperament, Bournonville is an optimist, you see. The ballets are not the sole evidence of this disposition. Read the choreographer's memoir, *My Theatre Life*; through its hundreds of pages, he greets every one of life's turns, even the most discouraging and frustrating, with ebullience, hope, and an impulse to positive action. Is Copenhagen attacked by a cholera plague? Give aid and comfort to the sufferers between rehearsals, then go off to the salubrious countryside with a congenial fellow artist and compose the libretto for *A Folk Tale*. Have your enemies goaded you into committing lèse-majesté with the result that your beloved king banishes you from the Theatre for six months? Use your period of exile to travel to Italy. You've yearned to observe its rich folk life firsthand, ever since you read those evocative descriptions by your friend, Hans Christian Andersen. Off you go, and you get to dance the tarantella with natives who acclaim your skill and verve; on the way home, you let your vivid experiences coalesce into the genesis of *Napoli*. If ever anyone lacked the tragic view of life, it is August Bournonville; he can barely tolerate gloom for long.

This is not to suggest, however, that the happy endings of Bournonville's ballets are facile or superficial. They are simply inevitable under the circumstances the choreographer sets up, a restoration of the natural coherence that he trusts governs the world. This order, as Bournonville understands it, is not imposed – from without, or arbitrarily – but, rather, rises from the core of the universe and radiates out through the better nature of human beings, inevitably overcoming or at least neutralizing their lesser instincts. It is, as well, a manifestation of the joy that Bournonville ardently held was the prime motivation of dancing and the mood that dancing could best express.

The restoration of harmony in the finale of a Bournonville ballet often takes the form of an exuberant communal dance. The action of many moving as one to the prevailing rhythm and melody, the clasping of hands, the dancing in a circle or in intertwining patterns – these are metaphors for connection, unity, and coherence, while the very act of dancing expresses a happiness so vital, it can't be contained in the mind but pervades and animates the body, that musical instrument made of flesh.