



Figure 1. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden I
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches
Private Collection
Image courtesy of Juliane Roemhild.

Anna Karenina Remix: Death, desire, and the space in-between

NATALIE PIROTTA

'At the still point of the turning world...there the dance is' 'At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

The space I have sought to explore in these works is the 'still point' – the space created by the dance that is outside the normal passage of time and space. The dancers follow the steps of the dance, which take them to a space outside of everyday day life that is 'strangely unstable and strangely regulated, strangely spontaneous, but at the same time strangely contrived'(Valery 70). Within this space there is no time, or rather time ceases: there is only the flow of the dance to the rhythm of the music. Valery describes this as a 'dwelling place where certain muscular themes follow one another in an order which creates a special kind of time that is absolutely its own'(71). Just as time and place seem to cease, so does the individual self – the boundaries between the self and other blur – 'there is only the dance'.



Figure 2. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden VIII
Oil on Canvas, 12 by 12 inches

The dance is a spectacle, an allegory, yet also serves a narrative function. The model for these paintings has come from the ballroom scene in Joe Wright's film *Anna Karenina*, based on Tolstoy's novel of the same name. Anna is 'enchanted' as she moves through the ballroom: "...enchanted in her simple black dress...enchanted her curly hair in disarray, enchanting the graceful, light movements of her small feet and hands, enchanting that beautiful face in its animation." (Tolstoy, 255) But for Kitty, reading Vronsky's facial expression as lost, there was something 'demonic' in Anna's enchantment of Vronsky.

At the ball Anna and Vronsky give into their desire; they swirl rhythmically around the dance floor and become increasingly entranced by each other and the dance, until the crowd of (disapproving) onlookers fade away and we are left with Anna and Vronsky alone. A warm yellow light encases the couple as the music slows and they gently trace the movements of the dance with their bodies: they exist now in a space outside of time, a place they have created. The music increases in speed and intensity, spirited, furious, as they dance 'frantic-mad', like Shakespearean lovers, 'past cure.., now reason past care, frantic mad with ever more unrest' (Dolimore, 103) .



Figure 3. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
*Death and the Maiden V: Just
 because you feel it doesn't mean
 it's there*
 Oil on canvas, 10 by 10 inches.

I watch and re-watch the dance sequence, taking still shots of the couple mid-dance. I'm fascinated by patterns made from her silk dress as it arcs through the air, and the stiffness of Vronsky's stark white military uniforms <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOwsZ6bDqJU>. The emotional force of the dance and the music hits me in what Barthes would describe as 'a vague zone'. Barthes suggests that the film still "throws off the constraint of [filmic] time" and enables us to focus on the essence of the meaning (332). He attempts to describe the feeling that a particular Film Still from Eisenstein's film evokes in him: he wrestles with a paradox. He wants to communicate a feeling that is particular to him at that particular time, although he acknowledges this is impossible – he describes this as the 'third' or 'obtuse' meaning (Attridge). This 'obtuse' meaning is what gives a creative work its power to move us – what Attridge refers to as its 'nameless grace...the work's animating power"(84). For me, the 'vague zone' where the feeling land is a 'potential' or 'transitional' space, named by Donald Winnicott to describe the place where creativity occurs. The feeling lands in a place which is not quite me, and not quite other, a place in-between. Like Barthes, I want to make sense out of this experience, however instead of using alphabetical text, I chose paint to shape and order my experience.

The film stills that suggested a 'third meaning' for me were the ones where the flow of the blue/black dress was stilled in mid-flight: moments when the dancers were in the grip of the dance – they are one with each other and the dance – and they are also at their most vulnerable – one slip and they are both physically and emotionally split asunder. There was also an aesthetic pleasure in compositions – linseed oil infused with Indigo and Prussian Blue flowing across the canvas, yellow triangles of light evoking Baroque drama. To paint is also to play.



Figure 4. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden II
Oil on linen, 10 by 10 inches.

Two songs from Anne of the Wolves resonated with the work I was doing in the studio. The Anna I painted jumped and twirled to the gypsy carnival beat of 'Black and Blue': like the character in the song, my dancer was dressed in a blue dress, which spun around, floating like 'moonbeams in the sky'. The jagged beat, with the almost music box interlude, was an excellent accompaniment to the physical act of painting. While 'Betty Blue' tells the quintessential story of 'Death and the maiden', told from the standpoint of 'Death': in this case 'a man of God', who has watched his prey since she was a young girl and "then late one night" he makes his move, and "cuts her chiffon blouse with [his] bowie knife'.

Blue and Black

I want you to have this dress but not because it doesn't fit me. I just want you happy with your body just like I'm happy with mine.

I want you to have this smile but not because it doesn't suit you. I just want to see you have some semblance of some human feeling.

But you're blue. Dressed like you, you're black to the core. You're you dressed in black and blue. Black and blue, like you.

From behind the black curtains you stare up at snowy peaks. The mountains mock, "You'll never get this high." Oh me, oh my. You lie because you're blue. You're blue. Dressed like you you're black to the core. You're you, dressed in black and blue. Black and blue like you.

I'd so love it if you could see my darkness. I'm so polished on the outside. Look how I'm spinning around, my skirt it floats like the moonbeams in the sky.

"Blue and Black", song lyrics by Bek Chapman, Anne of the Wolves, 2104.

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Figure 5. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden IV.
Oil on canvas, 24 by 24 inches

Betty Blue

Betty Blue, I see you crying.
Betty Blue, I'll be there in a bit.
Betty Blue, I know you're not a shy one.
Word around town is you ride yourself fit.

Betty Blue, I see you on Sundays, When you're kneeling like a saint. How your lips they move,
In the second pew,
And you tense when my hand it does stray for you.
Betty Blue.

You look just like my mother.
She bore me and then she was gone. Lucky I grew to be a man of god,
And they won't suspect me none.

The town looked on as he courted you,
While I put my pieces in place.
In the field I looked on as he had you. But, in my eyes, I had you.
Betty Blue.

Then late one night,
In the glow of your lantern after the fight,
He'd hit you and gone on his way,
Now my part comes into play.

Through your girlish blouse of chiffon
I could see the shape of a woman.
I confess I did cry
When I came inside
And I cut your body with my bowie knife.

And now I lay you to rest.
Such a pretty young thing in a dress. And at the good priest's behest,
That boy is now theirs to arrest.

"Betty Blue", song lyrics by Bek Chapman, Anne of the Wolves, 2104.
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Figure 6. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden III,
 Oil on canvas, 10 by 16 inches.

In a later work on photography, Barthes notes the particular relationship a photograph has with its subject: ‘the necessary real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph’ (Barthe in Attridge 85). The knowledge of this relationship arouses in us an ‘intense apprehension of time...the inevitability of the death’ that awaits the subject (Attridge 85). The idea of Death is ever-present in my mind as I watch Anna dance. Having read Tolstoy’s novel I know where Anna’s desire for Vronsky takes her, and Wright provides a foretaste of what is to come in the closing moments of this scene as Anna sees herself reflected in the mirror – the ballroom behind her slowly morphs into a steam train chugging through the snow – as if Anna can see her own fate in the glassy surface. Keira Knightly’s Anna is gaunt and cadaverous, in her black ball gown she swirls around the dance floor with febrile intensity evoking the Dance of Death from the 15th and 16th Centuries in Eastern Europe. In *Death and the Maiden IV* I have borrowed Death from a mural by Bernt Notke in Tallinn, Estonia (Gertsman). Death dances a jig with the maiden, a palpable reminder of the inevitability of death.



Figure 2. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden VII
Oil on linen, 8 by 10in.

These paintings are my 'trace recordings of [the particular] beauty' I found in Wright's interpretation of Tolstoy's dance scene (Amerika, 248). They are my attempt to make sense of the feelings the scene evoked in me; a response I suspect had something to do with stillness and movement, death and desire. As paintings they are also about darkness and light, the glory of Prussian Blue, the despair of Indigo, the hope of all shades of Yellow, my hand moved the paintbrush across the canvas in response to Dario Marinelli's soundtrack and Anne of the Wolves theatrical music. And although each one is a finished work in itself, I suspect the series is not yet finished – there is still more for me to explore about the eternal stillness in the dance.



Figure 4. Natalie Pirotta, 2014
Death and the Maiden VI
Oil on canvas, 24 by 24 inches
Private Collection.
Image courtesy of Erin Anderson

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