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Isadora Duncan and Modernism

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Abstract: The presence of three words – ‘Isadora Duncan, dance’ – in the weekly planner for my first semester M.Phil. course entitled ‘Reading Modernisms and Desire’ intrigued me. This paper is a result of my fascination with Duncan, her dance and her presence in the weekly planner alongside Luce Irigaray, Hilda Doolittle, Elizabeth Anderson and other Modernists. In this essay, I will explore Isadora Duncan’s position in Modernism and also the position of dance in Modernism.

Article: Modernism, as M.H. Abrams remarks, involved a radical and deliberate break with the traditional bases of Western arts and culture, especially after World War I – “the catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence and durability of Western civilisation and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world”¹. Major Modernist works experimented with narrative (dis)continuity, characterization and syntax. For instance, Stein explored automatic writing, Joyce and Woolf experimented with stream of consciousness, and so on. These new forms of literary construction and rendering had parallels with the movements of Expressionism, Surrealism, Futurism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. The ‘avant-garde’ (a French military term, meaning ‘advance-guard’) group of Modernists deliberately undertook, in Ezra Pound’s words, to ‘make it new’. For instance, Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, which he painted in the summer of 1907, was a painting of five naked women on a large canvas. The women seemed to be cut-outs, pasted against a background of irregular geometric shapes. Two of the women wore primitive masks, which hid their faces. The other two women stared directly at the viewer. How was the viewer to respond to such a work of art? Picasso called it his ‘brothel’ painting. The painting was a result of a year of methodical commitment. Picasso was working with an established genre – brothel painting was a common nineteenth-century motif. But his painting was ‘new’. The responses to this painting were varied – Gertrude Stein found it ‘frightening’, Guillaume Apollinaire dubbed it as the ‘philosophical brothel’, Matisse did not like it too much.

¹Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. N. p.: Cengage Learning, 2012. Print. 122.

Modernist artists emphasised that art should be based upon forms, practices, ideas and methods derived from the contemporary moment. Yet, the presence of tradition and primitivism could also be felt. Infact, ever since Picasso included the two primitive masks in his painting, a connection between primitivism and modernism seemed obvious, although the nature of this relationship has not been resolved yet. In some cases, primitivism served as an inspiration for modernist art, while in other cases, modernist movements such as German Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, found direct aesthetic correspondences between primitive art and their own.

As I began thinking about Modernism and dance, I was reminded of my under graduation days where I first encountered these fields simultaneously – in Yeats' *Among School Children*. Yeats, often considered to be the last Romantic and the first Modern artist, wrote in *Among School Children*:

“O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

Critics have noted that Yeats might have based the structure of this poem on dance form, since it consists of eight stanzas, each of which is numbered. The numbering emphasises their individuality as separate dance steps. This structure suggests a Celtic dance comprising eight sets of dance steps, each lasting for eight bars of music.

According to Terry Mester, the image of the dance and the dancer is bound up in Modernism's “language experiment”² and is capable of expressing something that eludes verbal utterance. Arthur Symons remarked that in the dance, “there is no intrusion of words used for the irrelevant purpose of describing: a world rises before one, the picture lasts only long enough to have been there”³.

The dance and the dancer were two of the several important symbols for Yeats. For him, life and art are resolved in an ideal unity represented by the dance and the dancer. Dance was also ritualistic for him – a medium and symbol for the transformation of the individual to a higher state of spiritual being (infact, Modernism was characterized by a conjunction between materiality and spirituality). However, he disliked ballet dancers: “I spit upon their short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes

² Mester, Terry. *Movement and Modernism*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987. Print. 34.

³ Symons, Arthur. *The Dance Anthology*. New York: New American Library, 1980. Print. 347.

whereupon they spin like peg-tops, above all that chambermaid face”⁴. Instead, the dancer that he admired was not corseted and did not dance rigidly or without flexibility, but moved freely, symbolising unity and wholeness. He shared with the later Romantics a preference for the unschooled dancer over a trained ballerina because the former’s dance is “more likely to have form, the ballerina’s only shape”⁵. He saw symbolic power imbued within the freely-moving dancing body. Yeats’ father – J.B. Yeats – attended a dance performance by Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) in New York in 1908 and wrote, “Isadora Duncan danced all alone on this immense stage – and there...you felt the charm of powerful self-containment”⁶.

Mikhail Fokine – a choreographer for the *Ballets Russes* (an itinerant ballet company from Russia which performed between 1909 and 1929 in several countries) – also shared with Yeats a dislike for ballet. Fokine was inspired by Duncan’s dance, but he did not reject ballet *per se*. He wished to reform what, for him, had become an art stripped of spirituality and reduced to acrobatics – ballet had become “mechanical and empty”⁷. Its ‘soul’ could be “restored by basing it on the laws of natural expression”⁸. He attacked ballet’s dependence upon the artificial form of the mime, which was meaningless to most of the audience, and the ballerina’s tutu and pointe. The initial parts of his ballet entitled *Carnaval* (1910) were executed amid the audience. This was a daring work as it challenged the dancer-audience spatial convention and as it did not employ ready-made and established dance steps. He adopted Duncan’s concept of the ‘framework’ of dance – which, in her case, was – Greek dance. He followed Duncan in seeking a more genuine manner of expression, wherein the whole body of the dancer was engaged in expressing meaning – “Man can be and should be expressive from head to foot”⁹.

Ballet in the late nineteenth century in America was similar to contemporary European ballet. Ballet in America was viewed as entertainment, not art. The emphasis on visual spectacle, precision, accurate movements and positioning, resulted in the loss of expression, meaning and depth. It emphasised form, rather than content. Such a dance form did not engage or involve the audience. The audience enjoyed the extravagant costumes, stage sets, visual effects of the “spectacle”¹⁰ that was ballet. It

⁴ Kelly, John. *Yeats’ Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. Print. 64. (Henceforth abbreviated as YL)

⁵ YL, 66.

⁶ YL, 78.

⁷ Guest, Ivor. *A Short History of Ballet*. London: Flammarion, 1979. Print. 23. (Henceforth abbreviated as SHB)

⁸ SHB, 26.

⁹ Copeland, Roger. *What is Dance?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 45. (Henceforth abbreviated as WD)

appealed to and dulled the senses and the consciousness of the ‘spectators’. According to Susan Au, the dancer became a part of the stagecraft, rather than its focus. This led to a depersonalised approach to the body. Modern dance emerged as the reaction to ballet. Erin Hawkins asserts – “Modern dance came into existence because it had to”¹¹. Modern dance was encouraged by the vast and varied developments in science, technology and psychology (for instance, by scientists such as the Curies, Ernst Haeckel, by industrialization and motorization and by Freud, Jung). These developments transformed the way people thought, lived and danced. Ballet reached its expiry date, since it was thought to be an insufficient means for expression and it imposed form on the human body. According to Barteneiff, “Modern dance replaced the fading content of Western dance with certain key notions: spontaneity, authenticity of individual expression, awareness of the body, themes that stressed a whole range of feelings and emotions”¹². American modern dance began with Duncan, Loie Fuller and Ruth St. Denis.

Fuller (1862-1928) believed that expression does not have to be predetermined in dance. “What is the dance? It is motion. What is motion? The expression of a sensation. What is a sensation? The reaction in the human body produced by an impression or an idea perceived by the mind”¹³. For her, dance is a reaction to thought. Fuller objected the rigid formality and artificiality of ballet. Her dance was influenced by the Industrial Revolution – she created lighting effects on stage using coloured glass, electrical lights and lanterns.

Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) explored oriental dance and its connection to spirituality and Duncan explored ancient Greek dance to rebel against the superfluity of expression in ballet. Both sought expression through physical movement.

Duncan wrote in her autobiography – *My Life* – “I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body’s movement. For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus...I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement. When I had learned to concentrate all my force in this one centre, I found that thereafter when I listened to music the rays and vibrations of the music streamed to this one fount of light within

¹⁰ I use the term “spectacle” in the sense that Michel de Certeau employs in his book – *La Societe du Spectacle*.

¹¹ *WD*, 68.

¹² Barteneiff, I. *Dance Therapy*. Maryland: American Dance Therapy Association, 1975. Print. 247.

¹³ Fuller, Loie. *Fifteen Years of a Dancer’s Life*. Brooklyn: Dance Horizon republication, 1915. Print. 73.

me, where they reflected themselves in Spiritual Vision, not the mirror of the brain but of the soul”¹⁴. In this sense, Duncan’s proclamation that she ‘discovered’ dance, can be justified – Hawkins observes that Duncan was the first dancer in the West to “intuit a kinesiological truth – that human movement starts in the spine and the pelvis, not in the extremities – legs and arms...human movement, when it obeys the nature of its functioning, begins in the body’s centre of gravity and then flows into the extremities sequentially”¹⁵. Unlike ballet, which was based on the principles that all movement emanated from the spine and that dance needed to defy gravity, Duncan’s dance originates from within. For her, the techniques used in ballet – such as use of turnout in legs – were ‘unnatural’. She emphasised the ‘natural’ in her life and dance, in contrast to the “dictates of convention”¹⁶.

According to Ann Daly, “‘Nature’ was Duncan’s metaphorical shorthand for a loose package of aesthetic and social ideals – nudity, childhood, the idyllic past, flowing lines, health, ease, freedom, simplicity and harmony. Through a series of correspondences, she elided Nature with science, religion, the Greeks and the Western civilisation and culture”¹⁷. She did not equate people from non-western cultures, such as Africans, or the rustic dwellers in villages, with Nature. She considered them to be barbaric and savage. She wished to separate herself from them. The Nature that inspired her included the ocean, the breeze and her scenic homeland – California. Also ‘Nature’ to her were the ordinary, common, quotidian actions such as running, skipping, walking and jumping; emotions such as happiness, sorrow, grief and love and positive human qualities such as courage and endurance through difficult times. All this shaped Duncan’s ‘movement vocabulary’. “I am inspired by the movement of the trees, the waves, the snows, by the connection between passion and the storm, between the breeze and gentleness, and so on. And I always put into my movements a little of that divine continuity which gives to all of Nature its beauty and life.”¹⁸ Also, she believed that children were naturally receptive to the art of dance. She encouraged her young students to venture outdoors and observe the movement of flying birds and leaves fluttering in the breeze. She believed that her students would develop best if constantly exposed to naturally beautiful things. For her, a child’s work of art was more beautiful than those of the artists, because a child, according to her, never thinks of exhibition, but only does something beautiful. Audiences frequently noticed

¹⁴ Duncan, Isadora. *My Life*. London: Sphere Books, 1988. Print. 75. (Henceforth abbreviated as *ML*)

¹⁵ *WD*, 42.

¹⁶ *ML*, 65.

¹⁷ Daly, Ann. *Done Into Dance: Duncan in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 35.

¹⁸ *ML*, 98.

common elements in the activities of children and Duncan's dance: immediacy, openness to new ideas and the ability to see beyond physical properties to the essence of an object, person or idea.

From Francois Delsarte (1811-1871), she had learnt expression that was simultaneously "true to nature" and "spontaneously charming in form". Delsarte, a French musician, philosopher and teacher, had studied the relationship between natural human movement and expression. He began his career as an opera singer, but after losing his voice in a throat surgery, he turned towards gestures for self-expression. He would patiently observe people in all walks of life and in all possible situations – for instance, people going to work, babies playing in parks, foreigners visiting historical monuments and so on. Through his observations, he explained how natural expression manifests itself in movement. He created his own principles of movement. His work opened up a way for artists, dancers and actors to map the intricacies of human behaviour and expression. According to F. Levy, Delsarte formulated laws he believed governed people's unconscious, expressive movement and employed these laws to interpret behaviour"¹⁹. His influence can be observed in the dances of St. Denis, Nijinsky and Ted Shawn.

Duncan wanted to rediscover the natural basis of human movement. She designed her dance in a way such that it spontaneous, artless and natural. She moved towards Primitivism (I use the term 'Primitivism' here in the sense that M.H. Abrams defines it – "preference for what is conceived to be 'nature' and the 'natural' over 'art' and the 'artificial' ...for instance, the innate passions and instincts, spontaneity, the free expression of emotions, non-conformity to conventions and forms"²⁰). Duncan reduced expression to its simplest, most essential and natural components. The 'natural' for her was also the beautiful; it exhibited perfect harmony, form and symmetry.

Duncan did not have much formal dance training. In her autobiography, *My Life*, she mentions having dropped out of ballet school in her childhood as she felt that the conventions restricted her freedom of expression and spontaneity. She found the ballet techniques ugly and unnatural. She claims, "My art was already in me when I was a little girl, and it was owing to the heroic and adventurous spirit of my mother

¹⁹ Levy, F. "The Evolution of Modern Dance Therapy". *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*. 59.5. 1988. Web. 24 Dec. 2012. 34-41.

²⁰ Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. N. p.: Cengage Learning, 2012. Print. 160.

that it was not stifled”²¹. Infact, her upbringing greatly impacted her style of free and natural dancing. She was first introduced to dance in 1885 when her mother organised dancing lessons. She took the knowledge she gained from these lessons and disseminated it. By the age of fourteen, she advertised her style of dancing as “a new system of body culture and dancing”²². She clarifies in *My Life* that it was not a ‘system’ per se. she had her own ideas of what dance should be. Dance gave her the freedom to express herself in her own way.

Duncan was an unlearned, unschooled dancer. She believed that dance cannot be learned or taught, that it is the natural expression of the soul. She worked hard with the choreography of her dances so that her steps did not appear artificial or non-spontaneous. She designed her dance steps in such a way that they preceded the music beat by a few seconds; in order to give the appearance that the dance determined the music, and not vice-versa, as was the convention. Traditional ballet music was written to commission, thus, in performance, the music often seemed to follow the dance or the dance to follow the music. But Duncan *created* dances based on the musical compositions of Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Gluck, Brahms and so on. She seemed not to dance to the music but to dance the music. Critics initially misunderstood her dance as out of sync with music and therefore believed that she paid little or no attention to choreography. She wished to show that her dance is an improvisation of self-expression and that it is like the “movement of free animals and birds”²³. Her idea was that every artist should return to Nature, and not be restricted by social norms and conventions. Duncan employed the techniques of ancient Greek dancing (which were further developed by Mary Wigman after Duncan) as a way of finding within her own body a natural human essence and origin of movement. In her essay – ‘Movement is Life’ – she insists that “movement imposed from without” is opposite to the spontaneous and natural movements found within the human body. The French poet Paul Valery stated that “the dancing body seems unaware of its surroundings...it seems to hearken to itself and only to itself”²⁴. For Alain Badiou, dance is a “wheel that turns itself....Dance frees the body from all social mimicry, from all gravity and conformity....Dance is not a consequence, but a source of mobility”²⁵.

“From the mystery of the Parthenon, the frescoes, the Greek vases, and the

²¹ *ML*, 14.

²² *ML*, 11.

²³ *ML*, 78.

²⁴ Valery, Paul. *Philosophy of The Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Print. 7.

²⁵ Badiou, Alain. *A Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Stanford: Stanf Univ Press,2005. Print. 67.

Tanagras came my dance”²⁶ - Duncan justified her usage of Greek techniques as follows: “...the Greeks were the greatest students of the laws of nature, wherein all is the expression of unending, ever-increasing evolution, wherein are no ends and no stops...the Greeks understood the continuing beauty of a movement that mounted, that spread, that ended with a promise of rebirth”²⁷. In her turn to Greece, she signified the Modernist yearning for inspiration from those cultures which positioned the arts as the locus of spiritual expression. The ballet was conceived an inadequate form of expression for the Modernist era. Duncan would copy gestures from ancient Greek statuary and vase painting and reproduce them with her body. She felt that “Greek gestures evolved from the movements of nature”²⁸. She was enthralled by the Dionysian rituals and their implication for modern art. She was not the first one to look to Greek art. Delsarte had also used Greek sculpture to illustrate principles of expression. Later, H. D. drew upon Dionysian ecstasy in order to depict the intensity of emotional experience.

Almost every critic and commentator of Duncan has mentioned her unconventional costumes (which shocked, awed, surprised, amazed, dazzled, befuddled and confused them) – wildly flowing light transparent tunics, bare feet, togas and so on. Her attire served as a visual symbol of fluidity and freedom of movement and expression, as did her dances. The almost transparent tunics let the body be perceived as a unified whole. She discarded the heavy layers of Victorian clothing. “She ripped off all the corsets and let herself go, evoking a sense of liberation”²⁹, remarked Michael Gold. “Everything must be undone”³⁰ – she wrote in 1910. Critics who despised her stated that she danced almost naked on the stage, and appeared vulgar and low. They did not consider her dance as art. For them, it was cheap entertainment. But Duncan viewed her dance as art. Infact, she called herself an *artiste*, an *expressioniste* of beauty. She wanted to replace ballet from its hegemonic position. She wanted to suggest that her “new art” possessed elements of distinction which validated its displacement of ballet. Critics have noted that Duncan did succeed in transforming dance from mere entertainment to ‘culture’. She legitimised her dance as ‘high art’. She created a ‘taste’ for dance. I use the word “taste” in accordance with Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural taste’ in *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement*

²⁶ ML, 89.

²⁷ ML, 90.

²⁸ ML, 101.

²⁹ Gold, Michael. *Duncan’s Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print. 45.

³⁰ ML, 147.

of Taste. For Bourdieu, culture is a field of contest where people compete to accumulate various cultural capital goods and practices that are socially defined as distinctive and hence, lend the individuals an aura of superiority. This struggle for distinction is connected to the economic distribution of material goods. An individual's material conditions of existence ingrain a 'habitus' or 'set of dispositions', which in turn generates cultural tastes. The 'right' taste makes an individual appear distinctive. Duncan's financially impoverished childhood and (most of) adulthood accentuated her efforts at this "sacralisation of culture" – a term coined by the historian Lawrence W. Levine to indicate the process by which certain arts at the end of nineteenth century were re-conceived as elite, as belonging to 'high culture', as refined. Duncan achieved reverence of the audience for her dance by looking to Greece. Greece was a symbol for cultural legitimacy. In America, as Duncan danced in see-through tunics, she did appear nude, but this nudity was considered as equivalent to 'classical' nudity, as those found on ancient Greek vases, sculptures and statues. Also, her dances, though seemingly spontaneous and improvised on the stage, were a perfect proportion of "art with nature, restraint with abandon"³¹, remarked Max Eastman, editor of the *Masses*. Her movements seemed effortless, gentle and genteel.

In his "Manifesto of the Futurist Dance", Marinetti credits Duncan with the 'creation of free dance'. Futurism was a very early and radical avant-garde movement, infact the first. Futurists were concerned with "energy as the initiator of form. Futurist theories revealed to Modern art the dynamism and the kinetic rhythm of energy"³². Marinetti asserted that "art should be dynamic, forward-looking, not static or passeist"³³. The tenets of Futurism were ideals of progress, activism and perpetual motion.

The 'manifesto' was a major expression of the avant-garde. It was published in newspapers, handed out like political pamphlets or read aloud at performances. Duncan purposely associated herself with the avant-garde. This helps to gauge her position in Modernism. Curtain-call speeches were the final element of a Duncan performance. These speeches were meant to educate her audience about her dancing techniques and choreography, to defend her theories of education and political

³¹ The words "art" and "restraint" are *not* used here in the negative sense of "artificial" and "restriction" respectively.

³² Marinetti's *Manifesto of the Futurist Dance* (n.pag., n.p.)

³³ "

positions. They were also central to her thought-process and were often expanded as essays. Her speeches can be better understood in the context of the Modernist manifesto, a performative genre which was a crucial component of the avant-garde. Just as Marinetti railed “Why poison ourselves? Why rot by touring museums?”³⁴, Duncan insisted, “I do not mean to say copy ballet, imitate it’ but to breathe its life, to recreate it”³⁵. Both their manifestos were characterised by effrontery and confrontation with the audience. Scandalizing the public had become common during Modernism. The purpose was not only to scandalize, shock or offend, but to provoke the public and awaken it from its deep slumber to the effects of a rapidly changing world.

Duncan’s desire to appear spontaneous shaped her choreography. But there was another influence on her choreography too – her image of the ‘motor in the soul’: “Before I go out on the stage, I must place a motor in my soul. When that begins to work, my legs and arms and my whole body will move independently of my will. But if I do not get time to put that motor in my soul, I cannot dance”³⁶. Her idea of human will was influenced by Nietzsche. He theorised the two muscular manifestations of the will as follows: the natural, harmonic and the restricted, oppressed motions. These became primary choreographic principles for Duncan. She tried to reimagine the spirit through machine processes, as did many other Modernists. The machine’s ability to move several objects connotes the notion of a ‘multiplied body’ – a notion she shared with Marinetti. The motion of the motor is also for her, a symbol of continuous, effortless dance. The image of the motor also suggests a revitalization of the spirit through modern industrial technology.

Thus, I feel that Duncan was a Modernist in the way she looked to Greece for inspiration, in the way that she aligned herself through her dances and manifestoes with movements such as Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and so on, in her use of costume, in her Nietzschean efforts to forge a link between the ‘motor’ in her soul and self-expression (“Emotion works like a motor. It must be warmed up to run well, and the heat does not develop immediately; it is progressive. The motor allows us to lose ourselves in an inner self”³⁷), in her speeches after her performances, in her rebellion against ballet, in her self-presentation as a unified being against the fragmentation and

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³⁵ *ML*, 60.

³⁶ *ML*, 66.

³⁷ *ML*, 118.

catastrophe which characterized the era of Modernism (several Modernists evoked coherence, unity and order in their works, or expressed a yearning for stability), in her essays which were an effort to explicate her techniques to her audience, in her portrayal of her body on stage, in her efforts to present her dance as a coherent entity and in her reconfiguration of the spiritual in connection with dance, which deconstructed the binary that separated body and spirit (Duncan writes – “The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body”³⁸).

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³⁸ *ML*, 129.

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