

Ecstasy, Primitivism, Modernity: Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman

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Ecstatic movement is of a dichotomous nature: it can originate as an inner impulse directed outward, or exist as an outer force directed inward. It can inspire a seemingly purposeless losing of the self or a surrendering that is determined by a distinct Other. In other words, such movement materializes as self-motivated rhythm or rhythm dependent on a preexisting polarity. In many cases, however, these two forms intersect with one another and appear as one.

Tanzkunst, Fritz Böhme (1926)¹

Ecstasy: Kandinsky called it “the inner sound”; Kirchner, “an inner vision”; Nolde, “a spiritual state”; and Beckman, “the profound secret.”² In the early dance theory of Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) and Mary Wigman (1887-1973) the language of ecstasy occupies a central position: it is what allows them to articulate an aesthetic of the body that had both liberating and reactionary repercussions on 20th century formulations of social identity and artistic form in the U.S. and Europe.

For Duncan and Wigman ecstasy connoted a meaning beyond the self. Its intention was not to “express” a subjective state of mind, but rather to communicate the essence, the character, the being of a given phenomenon, an object or a relationship.³ Duncan and Wigman, in step with the painters Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner, Emile Nolde and others associated with an expressionistic movement in art and literature, were informed by a Dionysian ethos made

popular by Nietzsche. Both had a vision of dance as a bacchic experience that transgressed traditional western divisions of mind and body, of present and past. Wigman contends: "Dancing is an expression of higher vitality, confession of the present, experience of being, without any intellectual deviations."⁴ And, in 1903, Duncan promises: "But the dance 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."⁵

Though Duncan was American and Wigman, German, they were both reknowned as international pioneers of modern dance. Duncan is often identified as the creator of "free dance," while Wigman is lauded as the initiator of *Ausdruckstanz*, or "expressive dance." Duncan was born nine years before Wigman; her dancing career began more than a decade earlier (Duncan's in the late 1890's, Wigman's in 1914). In 1899 Duncan, discouraged by American audiences apathetic to her new dance forms, left the U.S. for Europe where she accrued international recognition for her performances. She was enthusiastically received by audiences in St. Petersburg, Stockholm, Paris, Budapest, and Berlin. Wigman left her home in Hannover in 1909 to study with the Swiss music and rhythm theoretician Jacques-Dalcroze in Hellerau by Dresden. When the war broke out in 1914, she and her most significant teacher and colleague Rudolf von Laban⁶ moved to Zurich where they performed in a program of dramatic masquerades, art "happenings," and dance evenings sponsored by a group of Da Da artists, among them Hugo Ball, at the Cabaret Voltaire. In the 1920s, however, Wigman's professional centers were Dresden and Berlin. Here, the philosophical origins of her *Ausdruckstanz*, profoundly influenced by the work and theory of German Expressionist artists, first emerged. Duncan founded her first dance school in Berlin in 1905, Wigman in 1920 in Dresden.

Taken together, Duncan and Wigman give us an important cross-cultural, intercontinental vision of an aesthetic theory which strove to transform popular knowledge of the body. In their attempt to theorize a dance form that was not yet accepted into the canon of dance history, Duncan and Wigman reached to the Nietzschean ecstatic as a way of dismantling nineteenth-century precepts of realism, romanticism and subjectivity in art. For both, questioning aesthetic form was a project that examined notions of how social identity was conceived in and defined through a culture of the body. In the early work of Duncan and Wigman the ecstatic is a dynamic that contested the markings of gender and nationality attached to the body. By the end of their careers ecstasy is reduced to myth and esoteric rite, the ecstatic body transposed into an icon of national character, unity and fervor.

Nietzsche and Dionysian Myth

Wigman and Duncan were not, of course, Nietzsche scholars. Like many of their contemporaries, though, they were taken with Nietzsche. Thus, I don't want to argue that Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian was extracted, analyzed and

subsequently integrated into the choreography and performance of Wigman and Duncan, but instead that popular fragments of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No-one* (1883) were apparent in their written and performed work. Wigman choreographed Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* as one of her first compositions, while Duncan (apparently after reading Kant's, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781) had Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* read aloud to her by a German admirer. Moreover, Duncan in *My Life* (1927), referred repeatedly to Nietzsche as one of the most important theoreticians of dance: "I realized that the only dance masters I could have were Jean-Jacques Rousseau ("Emile"), Walt Whitman and Nietzsche,"⁷ and again: "That was the origin—the root—but afterwards, coming to Europe, I had three great Masters, the three great precursors of the Dance of our century—Beethoven, Nietzsche, and Wagner . . . Nietzsche was the first dancing philosopher."⁸

Duncan and Wigman, as well as many other artists of this period were inspired by Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian. The artist group "Die Brücke" ("The Bridge"—a group of young German painters who banded together in Dresden in 1905) drew their name from the prologue of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*:

Man is a rope, tied between beast and Higher Man..a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under. I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over. I love the great despisers because they are the great reverers, the arrows of longing for the other shore.⁹

Presented here was Nietzsche's ecstatic paradigm. The individual or the self, at the center of his paradigm, was presented in a transitional, often precarious state of becoming: "a dangerous on-the-way." The risk of experiencing extremes, one of which is "going under," was in Nietzschean terms, a way of crossing over, of experiencing the new, the "other shore." Nietzsche offered a self that was mobile, amorphous, limitless. The beast and the Higher Man here echoed the Dionysus and Apollo surfacing in Nietzsche's earlier work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in which Dionysus symbolized a "duality in the emotions," an event where "pain begets joy" and "ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us."¹⁰

Apollo and Dionysus were described by Nietzsche as, at once, existing in tremendous opposition to one another and interdependent. In the Greek world, he contends, Apollo represented the art of sculpture, Dionysus, the "nonimagistic," art of music.¹¹ Their constant antagonism of one another was, Nietzsche argued, what constituted tragedy. Apollo, with his "impulse towards beauty," was continually confronted with the "barbaric" gesturing of Dionysus, that "horrible

mixture of sensuality and cruelty,” the “most savage (of) natural instincts.”¹² But, like the beast and the Higher Man, one could not enter one without finding the other. The Apollonian Greek’s consciousness was “like a veil,” it concealed the Dionysian world from his vision.¹³

A revival of myth, of the archaic, or a call to reexamine a Dionysian “destruction, change, becoming,” was a way of reenvisioning aesthetic consciousness for Nietzsche. His historical thesis about the origin of the Greek tragic chorus in the ancient Greek cult of Dionysus, though it appears to have acquired its critical point for modernity from ideas developed in early Romanticism, does not support a romantic messianism.¹⁴ His Dionysus is not the Christian savior-god. Nietzsche returns to ancient Greece precisely in order to bypass or overwhelm Christian mythology, not to reassert its hegemony. Though his Dionysus is—like the romantic Christian Dionysus, a “god who is coming”—it is a god who is both historical and foreign.¹⁵ This god’s absence is not founded upon the guilt of sin, but on the forgetting of an Otherness that has the potential to decenter modern consciousness.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian schematic held the contradictions of the modern project that Duncan, Wigman and their contemporaries were striving for early in their careers: the attainment of an aesthetic illusion which would disassemble rational subjectivities that had been defined by a static body. This body, in turn, was inscribed by gender and race. Only in a paradigm of the ecstatic were Duncan and Wigman able to perform a body that not only questioned nineteenth-century notions of female (non)corporeality, but—in step with Nietzsche—challenged enlightenment rationality. Jürgen Habermas describes Nietzsche’s affront to rationalism as an ecstatic moment that questions subjectivity: “the subject loses itself, when it sheers off from pragmatic experience in space and time, when it is stirred by the shock of the sudden, when it considers ‘the longing for true presence’” (Octavio Paz).¹⁶ Nietzsche’s Dionysus is not only distinguished from all other Greek gods as “the one who is absent, whose return is still to come,”¹⁷ but also by his embodiment of the high culture of ancient Greece and the lower impulses of the Primitive. It is precisely this shifting frame of subjective reference and cultural context that moves Duncan and Wigman to incorporate a Dionysian aesthetic into their work which could potentially free the body from a reifying of modern social hierarchies.

Greek Idealism and the Primitive in Duncan and Wigman

Dionysian ecstasy is transformative. It also has the potential to be transgressive. For Duncan and Wigman, ecstasy offered a model through which they could radically critique nineteenth-century precepts of female fashion, movement and desire without sacrificing—*tout court*—the elite status of dance in high culture. In order to displace ballet from its hegemonic position, Duncan and Wigman had to find a way of suggesting that their “new art” possessed both elements from the present and the classical past.

In the texts of Duncan and Wigman, Greek iconography intermingled with the “primitive.” Of course, Duncan’s evocation of ancient Greece was much more exhaustive than Wigman’s: it was the insignia of her popularity as an eccentric. Duncan’s donning of sheer Greek tunics, as she describes in *My Life*, even shocked contemporary Greeks when she travelled to Greece in 1903. While Duncan did engage in an extensive study of Greek vases, artifacts, and history, her Greece, in contrast to Wigman’s, was a Greece that was more effectively performed than theorized. Wigman, more than ten years after Duncan’s pilgrimage to Athens, explored the relationship between Greek myth and dance as a way of abstracting the cultic, of merging it with the Primitive in hopes that it would inform new methods for dance composition.

In spite of their temporal and temperamental differences, Wigman and Duncan’s tendency to turn to ancient cultures as a source of rethinking aesthetic assumptions about form and content can be seen as representative of a distinct trend in certain early twentieth-century artistic and intellectual communities, both European and American. Rather than presenting intimate and accurate epistemologies of African, Indian, Oceanic, Egyptian, Roman, and Greek cultures, artists in the fine and performing arts created transmutations of social and cultural knowledge. For Duncan and Wigman, as well as their contemporaries, reaching back to the Primitive through the Greek was, perhaps, a way of incorporating the challenges brought on by the entrance of mass culture into a formerly elite discussion of aesthetics.

Here, I will first scrutinize a text from each performer that signals their initial ideas about dance as a traditionally transcendental experience and then turn to examples from their later works that reveal the evolution of these ideas in new historical and career contexts.

Isadora Duncan’s Greece

“But this is Greece!” I exclaimed.

But after I examined it more closely I realised that Berlin did not resemble Greece. This was a Nordic impression of Greece. These columns are not the Doric columns which should soar into the skies of Olympian blue. These are the Germanic, pedantic, archaeological Professors’ conception of Greece. And when I saw the Kaiserlich Royal Guard goose-step out of the Doric columns of the Potsdamer Platz, I went home to the Bristol and said, “Geben Sie mir ein Glas Bier. Ich bin müde.”¹⁸

Duncan’s texts were maddening, repetitive eulogies to her transmutable self. She was goddess, whore, scholar, angel, pauper, victim, diva. She was “trembling and stammering,” she assured her readers, when she delivered her first public

lecture which later became her most Dionysian of texts, *The Dance of the Future* (1903). Duncan's use of ancient Greece in this early text was a topos to which she could anchor her arguments against nineteenth-century women's fashion, ideals of beauty, and notions about artistic form. This early essay seesawed between an Apollonian ideal of serene physical perfection (which found its crowning expression in Greek sculpture) and a Dionysian ethos that sacrificed aesthetic harmony for the joy of uninhibited movement and the excitement of the novel.

The category "Natural" was a Duncan trademark. What it accomplished in this text was twofold. First of all, by evoking the "Natural," Duncan was able to use the then popular Darwinism—which pervaded polemics on the left and the right in the U.S. and Europe—in elevating the daily movements of the body to a position of art.¹⁹ "The sole of the foot rests flat on the ground, a position which might be ugly in a more developed person, but is natural in a child trying to keep its balance. One of the legs is half raised: if it were outstretched it would irritate us, because the movement would be unnatural."²⁰ Like Wigman, she exploited Darwin's "natural" body so that it extended to the movement of women as "natural," she writes: "It is not only a question of true art, it is a question of race, of the development of the female sex to beauty and health, of the return to the original strength and to natural movements of woman's body."²¹

Duncan also drew on Darwin to justify her "return" to Ancient Greece:

. . . 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.²²

The Greek, she argues, was an evolved "Savage":

So it has been with civilized man. The movements of the Savage, who lived in freedom in constant touch with Nature were unrestricted, natural and beautiful. Only the movements of the naked body can be perfectly natural. Man, arrived at the end of civilization, will have to return to nakedness, not to the unconscious nakedness of the savage, but to the conscious and acknowledged nakedness of the mature Man, whose body will be the harmonious expression of his spiritual being.²³

One could, of course, read Original Sin into this parable of body consciousness. Here, and, in fact, throughout this early text and in her memoirs, Duncan attempted again and again to make her Dionysian palatable (and acceptable to herself) to an often skeptical late Victorian public.

The effort to exalt the Primitive in aesthetic theory, as a component existing within "civilized man," was a project that had precedent during this period. The

Primitivism of the early twentieth century, like the Orientalism of the nineteenth century, included a homogenization of cultural heritages. This was achieved not only through the distancing achieved in their generic naming, but by an ad hoc appropriation of only those aspects of the culture of the Other that seemed to support contemporary Western European social and cultural projects. Examples of this could be seen in expressionist artists' use of "African" and "Asian" masks as a method of decentering the self in painting and sculpture, or the Munich-based artist group *Blaue Reiter*'s fascination with what they saw as a similarity between children's drawings and "Primitive Art."²⁴ Under the rubric Primitive or Oriental (which will become more apparent in Wigman's use of these ideologies), the Greek was included as a way of "dressing up" the unrepresentable Other.

What was "natural" in Duncan's terms, was also "beautiful." The Beautiful was Apollonian: it exhibited "perfect harmony," "form and symmetry,"²⁵ "health," and "strength."²⁶ It was no surprise that Duncan's reception in Germany was so favorable; in her tribute to the beauty of Greek art, she asked: "Why are its (Ballet's) positions in such a contrast to the beautiful positions of the antique sculptures which we preserve in our museums and which are constantly represented to us as perfect models of ideal beauty?"²⁷ She was clearly echoing sentiments shared by an influential segment of German intellectual society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who believed that the "good taste which is increasingly spreading through the world was first formed under the Greek skies."²⁸ Still, while a range of critics—German included—might have accused Duncan of simply mimicking Greek statues, her focus on expressive movement was not in step with one prevailing nineteenth-century German conception of beauty, which stated that it was "opposed to an excess of movement or decorative detail."²⁹

Duncan made sweeping, often biologicistic statements about movement, such as: the untaught child's "movements are beautiful,"³⁰ "the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body,"³¹ "the dancer of the future "movements will become godlike, mirroring in themselves the waves, the winds, the movements of growing things." However, she included a seemingly harmless anecdote of a Roman girl that radicalized her concepts of both beauty and movement in this piece. Beginning with the notion of the timelessness of movement as it exists in nature ("the movement of waves, of winds, of the earth is ever in the same lasting harmony . . ."), her lecture made it increasingly apparent that her use of an evolutionary argument was, first and foremost, a powerful weapon against the hegemonic, highly formalized, and constricted movement of ballet. Specifically, the word "evolution" gave Duncan the oxymoric effect for which she was searching. It implied both a stationary and dynamic condition:

The ideal of beauty of the human body cannot change with fashion but only with evolution. Remember the story of the

beautiful sculpture of a Roman girl which was discovered under the reign of pope Innocent VIII and which by its beauty created such a sensation that the men thronged to see it and made pilgrimages to it as to a holy shrine, so that the pope, troubled by the movement which it originated, finally had it buried again.³²

This, I want to argue, was a very Dionysian moment. This kind of movement had the potential to motivate change, to stir things up. Beauty became transgressive. The statue must be removed and, in a sense, came to represent “the god that is absent.”

Duncan’s Roman girl digression was a very crucial turning point, a point in the Duncan lecture that also changed the tone of her argument. Duncan attempted to explain that she was not merely mimicking the imagined dances of the old Greeks. Here, she was in accordance with Wigman when she wrote: “We don’t have any ritualized cult dances in the same way they existed in antique culture.”³³ Nor was Duncan’s goal a revival of the dances of “primitive tribes.”³⁴ Still, she set up a linkage that imagined an intimate relationship between civilized high culture and the Primitive. The Greek and the Primitive, however, existed on the same plane and had a valency with which to attack the etiquette of ballet morality. As Habermas argued for Nietzsche, one could also apply to Duncan in her early work: rather than supporting an aesthetic that solely called for a “heightening of the subjective to the point of utter self-oblivion,” it attempted to bring the Dionysian of Greek myth into the “experience of contemporary art.”³⁵ In this way, Duncan was able to refigure questions about form that could also challenge conventional categories of social identity. For instance, commenting on nationality she wrote: “The dancer will not belong to a nation but to all humanity.” Or, Duncan envisioned a woman who ventured beyond traditional definitions of femininity when she wrote: “She will dance not in the form of the nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette but in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression.”³⁶

Mary Wigman’s Primitive

Wigman’s relationship to contemporary art or the historical avant garde in her early theoretical work was much more readily apparent than was Duncan’s. This had historical as well as cultural reasons. Duncan was speaking in 1903, before contemporaries were consciously speaking of Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism as “modern” art. Her influences, however, were “towering . . . at the threshold of modernity”³⁷ and included: Richard Wagner, the Ballet Russe’ (with Serge Diaghileff at its fore), Loie Fuller, Auguste Rodin. Wigman made her debut in 1914 with “Hexentanz I”, well after Duncan’s important 1904 St. Peterburg’s performance, Nijinsky’s 1912 revolutionary choreography of “Afternoon of a Faun,” and the publishing of Kandinsky’s Expressionist text, *The Spiritual in Art*

(1912). Wigman entered a world already rich with the chaos of redefining of aesthetic categories in and through the culture of the body. Duncan, on the other hand, was present at the start of this aesthetic questioning.

Though Wigman also used Greece as a model for the harmony of body, soul, and intellect—where dance was seen as playing an integrative role—the Dionysian moment of her early work was an eclectic cultural experience. This experience was profoundly influenced by Wigman's proximity to German Expressionism. *Ausdruckstanz*, like Expressionism, emphasized the intrinsic nature of subject-object relationships. One way of articulating that "inner sound" (Kandinsky's key concept in *The Spiritual in Art*) was to attach it to some kind of ethnic and racial Otherness: the Jewish, the Carribean, the Peruvian, the Nigerian, the Indian, the Asian. Ethnographic masks, for example, became models of the exotic, and thus, the transcendent for both Nolde and Wigman. Wigman used masks, usually of "oriental" origins, to encourage experimentation with new identities in her choreography.

Like Duncan's Greece, however, the primitive proved problematic in Wigman's work. Wigman functionalized what she considered primitive in order to achieve an ecstatic state that took the subject out of its own cultural context. The body, immersed in the process of becoming the Other, could momentarily transcend itself. And, likewise, the Other was a way of revealing the repressed parts of the self. "The mask he brought me," wrote Wigman in 1926 in *Zerimonielle Gestalt* (Ceremonial Form), "was of a largely demonic character. I loved it at first sight. But as I pulled it over my face an unsettling feeling crept over me. Instead of bringing calm, it elicited uneasiness. The mask emphasized the personal, where it should have estranged."³⁸ The Orient plays a central role in Wigman's early solo work. For example, "Marche Orientale," (1918-19) and "Vier Tänze nach orientalischen Motiven" (1920) were important in garnering Wigman public recognition and in pushing her to develop a theory of the ecstatic in her writings on dance composition.

In Wigman's first analytical statement, *Komposition* (1925), she conceived the Orient as unchanging and eternal, the silent, knowing Other, and a Primitivism that conjured up a primitive of the wild, the innocent, the impulsive, and the holy. What resulted was a generic "aesthetics of inwardness," which, in turn, informed Wigman's theory of the transcendent in dance.³⁹ This theory, however, was not only a theory of the Other. It was also an attempt to define dance in terms of language and movement, in terms of its relationship to space and color. Wigman introduced *Komposition* by informing the reader that "there is no technique for producing form."⁴⁰ In this piece she attempted to examine how formal structures were created in response to a dancer's *Ausdruckssehnsucht* or desire to express. This desire was located, Wigman argued, in a language inscribed in the moving body: "Dance is language, announcement, language of a body in motion."⁴¹ Dance language was created when one was able to confront modern form with the cult and ritual of the Primitive. Wigman explored this confrontation through the

concepts which she termed the “ornamental,” the “dynamic,” and the “nuanced.”

Wigman was much more analytically sophisticated than Duncan. Still, Duncan initiated a discussion of how movement could reevaluate the Beautiful and this, in turn, contributed to a rethinking of form that Wigman could build on. For Wigman, the Beautiful, becomes radically synthetic; she calls it the “ornamental.” Wigman questioned what was considered traditionally beautiful. Moreover, she questioned it in a semiotic manner; it became just one more representation of a body which invited a multiplicity of meanings. Wigman defined the ornamental as “illustration, a kind of jewelry, or a changing of dress.”⁴² Its effect on artistic composition is an “enlargement or enrichment . . . a complicating of the compositional text through playful movement motifs.”⁴³

The structure of a dance, for Wigman, consisted of a system of “dynamics” and “nuance” resulting from the study of the relationship between motion and the forces affecting motion, between movement and form, between the inner and outer tensions of a composition. Dynamics was “inner breathing,” that which made a composition fluid. Nuance was color; it illuminated an especially dynamic *Ausdrucksmoment* (expressive moment).

Wigman, unlike Duncan, did not feel compelled to deliver a diatribe against ballet, though her *Ausdruckstanz* was still considered an affront to ballet by adherents of classical dance even into the 1920s. She did, however, make a qualitative distinction between European social dances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and *Ausdruckstanz*. The “step-dances,” as she called the March, the Polonaise, the Gavotte, and the Minuet were “functional dances,” formal, traditional structures one could use to increase one’s range of opportunities for expression. Likewise, the Mazurka and the Waltz which she called *Springtänze*, dances which utilized a leap, a jump, or a hop also belonged to the category of the functional. They had a “strict rhythmic orientation” and illustrated a “definite theme” that did not vary from a pre-ordained musical structure whose time was ordered and measured.⁴⁴

Wigman clearly saw *Ausdruckstanz*—which she labelled the “emotional dance” and juxtaposed with functional dance—as the more innovative form. It was the text or “song” of the body⁴⁵ that could house a variety of forms. This dance-song functioned through a “lyrical content of feeling.” In other words, through a particular discursive logic. “There is a main sentence or clause, a middle clause, and a main thesis which is repeated. This is, however, accompanied by a change of the last few movements (or words).”⁴⁶ This grammar, however, was always being destroyed, for it was a “free song-form” created anew again and again.⁴⁷ It was Wigman’s Dionysian, where the “seemingly most varied, most opposing formulations lose definition because of a sudden outbreak of (dance) passion.” Differences “flow into one another and work together” and created yet another structural novelty.⁴⁸

Wigman saw the Romance, the Ballad, the Rhapsody, the Cultic, and the Elemental (as in nature-spirit) as the characteristic *Ausdruckstänze*. Wigman intended here, I think, to emphasize the extremes entailed in the ecstatic: *Lust/*

Leid (desire/suffering), *Tod/Leben* (death/life) and, thus, its capacity to transcend traditionally polarized sets of meanings. This, however, was an instance where the Dionysian, precisely because of its inherent polymorphism was laid open to a variety of interpretations that could divest it of its transformative qualities. Toward the end of *Komposition*, a kind of gothic romanticism entered Wigman's theoretical inquiry. Wigman isolated the Primitive as cultic so that it was no longer confronted with contemporary form. The Primitive was presented by Wigman as that which "renounces all that is playful," that "concentrates on the big line," that became, at once, "rigid, broad, monumental."⁴⁹ Wigman followed this assertion by pointing to a recovering of contemporary experience, "Cultic dances can also be religious forms—religious in the sense that they offer ecstatic-mystical conditions of earlier cultures—but should not be purely formal imitations of this 'previous,' but rather the performance of a real dance experience."⁵⁰ That "real dance experience" was composed of particular elements that left the reader hovering on the brink of a gothic romanticism, which, with hindsight, suggests one wellspring for an ideology like *Volk* under National Socialism. How did the notion of *Ausdruck*, that push for the expressive in both Duncan and Wigman, lead to an unimaginative and non-regenerative Nationalism?

Is This Modern? A National Marking of the Dance Body

Despite its radical aesthetic project or ambitions, the early ideology espoused by the creators of modern dance at the beginning of the twentieth century—its conception of the body as an instrument through which one could register the dissonance and unity between movement and space—could appeal to authors of modern nationalistic discourses. Moreover, its evocation of the cult and the festive stirred the imagination of a historical period which contained both a fear of and a fascination of masses coalescing. German fascism, with its emphasis on symbol, myth, festival, found the theories of modern dance useful for its liturgical displays of a national *Volk*.⁵¹

The intersecting of dance and nationalism in the works of Duncan and Wigman remains complicated. Both performers participated in expanding the ideology of a movement of physical culture that had roots in both the U.S. and Germany at the turn of the century. While it exposed the body as ornamental, gave it a consciousness as a surface upon which gender was displayed and subsequently incorporated, it also reinforced a biological essentialism. It could be easily assimilated as an element of State programs that formulated their nationalism against the Otherness of a body marked by race, gender, and ethnicity.

Wigman, in the adopting of the language of National Socialism in *Deutsche Tanzkunst* (1935), converted her earlier theoretical inquiries into rhetorical caricatures. While her arguments previously toyed with or implied the biologic, they now engaged in a eugenics discourse that sealed emancipatory potential into a national apocalyptic. A static "destiny" replaced Wigman's earlier concepts of "inner urgency" and "expressive desire." The "creative fantasy" of composing

was no longer a process, but an essential product of a certain “blood,” and the individual “dancer” became the German *Volk*.⁵²

Group dancing, which had at its center “communal movement and leaping, festive walking, and virile running,”⁵³ became Wigman’s primary passion in the later part of her career. Wigman had already theorized about group choreography in *Komposition* in 1925. Her emphasis here, however, was on how group dance “expands the texture and variation” of form.⁵⁴ Though she wrote that this leads to “larger compositions,” there is no qualitative difference between the group and solo dance. Group dances appealed to Wigman because of the possibility of “multiple authors” for the production of composition ideas. They also interested her because of their “polyphonic possibilities.”⁵⁵ These “movement temperaments” could also “melt into one another,” but here Wigman was not speaking of a preordained unity. Rather her goal was overcoming boundaries, or playing with limits in order to re-imagine artistic form. This nuance of sophistication was, without question, lost in Wigman’s notion of the group in her 1935 *Deutsche Tanzkunst*: “The community presumes leadership. The mass that is self-reflexive never achieves community.”⁵⁶ For Wigman, the concept “community” acquired a resonance that did not appear in her initial vision of group dances: “What is German? What makes German art, German? . . . The unmistakable features of real German artistic accomplishment are not only present in the materials and themes of art works. They exist much more in the irrational, a place the personal must enter in order to experience something beyond the personal, or real humanity.”⁵⁷ Wigman’s Dionysian became national, propagandistic.

The sentiment that dance should be “choirs of movement,”⁵⁸ shared by Wigman and Rudolf von Laban in their later work, was realized literally in their choreography of a mass ornament of the German *Volk* for the Olympic Games in 1936 in Berlin:

It is especially fitting for the times that the cultic ideas of Laban’s amateur-dance and movement choirs be momentarily integrated. With his influence a certain amount of frivolous literary convention can be avoided . . . Without his imaginative world, the concept amateur-dancer would not exist. It does not matter if those laymen feel at ease or at one with Laban. He is needed so that the effort for an inaugural cultic festive occasion does not appear to be simply an offering for the needs of the bourgeoisie.⁵⁹

The program was arranged into five parts that extended the above-mentioned effort to appear “close to the people,” laymen-like. The first feature presented 2500 “German” girls moving in unison while Gret Palucca (one of the Wigman’s most successful students) danced a waltz. Another displayed 500 youth who, with balls and hoops, performed gymnastics. Wigman, accompanied by 80 of her

students, appeared as the fourth entry in her “The Lament of Death.”⁶⁰

Until 1937 Wigman and Laban, participated in and were accepted as performers and authors of *Volk*-ish work under National Socialism. While it remains unclear exactly why Laban eventually fell out of the good graces of Goebbels and other Nazi-party members, Goebbels has been quoted as punning: “There is only one movement in Germany and that is the National Socialist movement.”⁶¹ After 1936, however, the cultural politics of National Socialism measured all artistic expression rigorously against the touchstone *Volk*. Laban was arrested in the summer of 1937 and “allowed” to leave Germany for France. In Paris, he joined the faculty of a dance school belonging to Kurt Joos, a former dance student of Laban’s.⁶² In 1942 Wigman was forbidden to perform officially in Germany. From this point on, she was considered pro-Jewish, her dances were labelled *entartet* (degenerate), and public funding for her Dresden school was cut off.

Duncan was not confronted with the political choices Wigman faced under National Socialism, nor did she live to react to the Stalin purges of the thirties. But as much as Duncan had rallied in her early writings and performances to free the body from the confinements of nineteenth-century fashion and morality, in her memoirs of 1927 (the year she died), she reverted to a racist, nationalist splitting and hierarchizing of dance into white, classically influenced “modern” dance and black, jazz inspired “nondance”:

It seems to me monstrous that any one should believe that the Jazz rhythm expresses America. Jazz rhythm expresses the primitive savage. America’s music would be something different. It has yet to be written. No composer has yet caught this rhythm of America—it is too mighty for the ears of most. But some day it will gush forth from the great stretches of Earth, rain down from the vast sky spaces, and America will be expressed in some Titanic music that will shape its chaos to harmony, and long-legged shining boys and girls will dance to this music, not the tottering, ape-like convulsions of the Charleston, but a striking, tremendous upward movement, mounting high above the Pyramids of Egypt, beyond the Parthenon of Greece, an expression of beauty and strength such as no civilisation has ever known.⁶³

I have argued that such a division existed in Duncan’s dance philosophy from the onset. It was a duality that—in her early work—she located within herself. The “long-legged shining boys and girls” in this text, however, are presented as radically separate from, and implicitly superior to the “primitive savage.” The “unconscious,” but “perfectly natural nakedness” of the “savage” is no longer the Dionysian “nakedness” found in the “mature” man or woman of her earlier work.

And Duncan's focus is no longer "movement" but rather, a valorizing of the static colossal of monuments: the Pyramids of Egypt, the Parthenon of Greece.

The moment of the sublime that Duncan had located previously in a complex and careful Dionysian—where the concept of beauty was put into question and radicalized becomes an anthem to the national here, as she writes:

It has often made me smile—but somewhat ironically—when people have called my dancing Greek, for I myself count its origins in the stories which my Irish grandmother often told us of crossing the plains with grandfather in '49 in a covered wagon—she eighteen, he twenty-one, and how her child was born in such a wagon during a famous battle with the Redskins, and how, when the Indians were finally defeated, my grandfather put his head in at the door of the wagon, with a smoking gun still in his hand, to greet his newborn child.⁶⁴

* * *

The idea of dance as an ecstatic rite existed in Wigman's and Duncan's arguments from the beginning. It assisted them in recalling the creative Dionysian, in devaluing the traditional (ballet) by exalting the experimental, and in gaining credibility from audiences that had capital and influence by presenting this rite as valuable in its subversion of high art. What, however, began as a critical scrutiny of the subjective and a challenge to high culture reverted to a confirming of the national.

Dionysian ecstasy—popularized through Nietzsche, constituting a model of disruption, change, and expressiveness—was used by Duncan and Wigman to pose questions about content and form, about inner and outer reality, about the plasticity of the body, of language. While the self is left intact by Wigman and Duncan, it became an instrument, at least in their initial pioneering work, through which one could impose a multiplicity of meanings in relation to the biological, the spiritual, the social.

The very precariousness of identity spurred by an awareness of cultural, racial and ethnic difference at the turn of the century, whether it came from the recent experience of colonization or the urbanizing of industrialization, was reflected in Wigman's and Duncan's revising of their earlier subversive Dionysian ecstatic to fit regressive State and National ideologies. Engaging in the aesthetics of ecstasy meant risking the familiar for the unknown. At its most emancipatory, it called for a reexamining of accepted categories of knowing, a moment that Wigman and Duncan were only able to sustain at the very advent of their careers.

Notes

1. Fritz Böhme, *Tanzkunst* (Dessau, 1926), 62. In writing this essay, I have benefited from many critical exchanges with colleagues in the Women's History Group at the Technical University in Berlin and in the Women's Studies Program at State University of New York at Buffalo. I am especially grateful to Jan Lambertz, Sabine Schmitt, Brigitte Mueller, Claudia Xander and Elizabeth Kennedy for their editorial rigor and unyielding support during the writing of this essay. Research for this project was supported, in part, by a fellowship from the Women's Research Commission of the Berlin Senate.

2. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), Emile Nolde (1867-1956) and Max Beckman (1884-1950) were artists associated with what is now referred to as an Expressionist movement in art (German Expressionism is cited most commonly as beginning around 1910). Beckman, however, is more commonly thought of as being closer to artists of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) who were active between the wars. See David Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven, 1987).

3. Artists, who are traditionally called Expressionists, are often viewed as striving to express a "subjective individuality." David Gordon, however, argues that this is a simplification of the Expressionist project which was interested in decentering subjectivity, and even transcending it rather than simply expressing it.

4. Mary Wigman, "Dance and the Modern Woman," (Akademie der Kuenste, Berlin—Manuscript from the *Mary Wigman Archive*), 2.

5. Isadora Duncan, *Der Tanz der Zukunft* (*The Dance of the Future*), Karl Federn (Leipzig, 1903).

6. Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) is often cited, together with Mary Wigman, as a founding theorist of *Ausdruckstanz*. His summer dance classes in Ascona at Monte Verita' from 1912-1914 received international recognition. He is most acclaimed, however, for inventing an intricate, but practical dance notation system.

7. Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York, 1955), 80.

8. *Ibid.*, 80.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1982), 126-27. Every succeeding reference to this work will be designated by the abbreviated title, *Zarathustra*.

10. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trs. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967), 40.

11. *Ibid.*, 33.

12. *Ibid.*, 39.

13. *Ibid.*, 41.

14. Jürgen Habermas, "The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, 1992), 92.

15. "With Semele, a mortal woman, Zeus gave birth to Dionysus, who was persecuted with divine wrath by Hera, Zeus's wife, and ultimately driven into madness. Since then, Dionysus wanders about with a wild herd of Satyrs and Bacchantes throughout North Africa and Asia Minor, a 'foreign god,' as Hölderlin says, who plunges the West into the 'night of the gods' and leaves behind nothing but the gift of intoxication." Quoted in Habermas, 91.

16. *Ibid.*, 93.

17. *Ibid.*, 91.

18. Duncan, *My Life*, 96.

19. For a feminist use of Darwinian logic, see Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Woman and Economics*, (1898).

20. Duncan, *The Dance of the Future*, 16.

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. *Ibid.*, 17.

23. *Ibid.*, 13.

24. For a more in depth discussion of Primitivism in Modern Art, see Sabine Windecker, *Eine Künstlerin aus dem Kreis des Blauen Reiter*, (Berlin, 1991).

25. Duncan, *Der Tanz der Zukunft*, 18.

26. *Ibid.*, 22.

27. *Ibid.*, 23.

28. George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, (Ithaca, 1975), 24.

29. *Ibid.*, 25.

30. Duncan, *Der Tanz Der Zukunft*, 22.

31. *Ibid.*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 25.
33. Mary Wigman, *Komposition*, (Überlingen 1925), 18.
34. Duncan, *Der Tanz Der Zukunft*, 25.
35. Habermas, "The Entry into Postmodernity," 93.
36. Duncan, *Der Tanz Der Zukunft*, 25.
37. Here I am borrowing a phrase used to describe Wagner by Andreas Huyssen in *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986), 36.
38. Mary Wigman, "Zerimonielle Gestalt," (Akademie der Künste, Berlin—Manuscript from the *Mary Wigman Archive*, 1925).
39. On Orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, 1978) and on Orientalism and Aesthetic Dancing, see Jane Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's 'Radha' of 1906," in *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1991, vol. 17. no. 11.
40. Wigman, *Komposition*, 9.
41. *Ibid.*, 12.
42. *Ibid.*, 14.
43. *Ibid.*, 14.
44. *Ibid.*, 17.
45. *Ibid.*, 17.
46. *Ibid.*, 17.
47. *Ibid.*, 17.
48. *Ibid.*, 18.
49. *Ibid.*, 18.
50. *Ibid.*, 19.
51. For an extension of this thesis, see Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 127-60.
52. Wigman, from "Hexentanz,"—manuscript in Akademie der Künste (Berlin) *Komposition*, (1925) and *Deutsche Tanzkunst* (1935).
53. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 157.
54. Wigman, *Komposition*, 25.
55. *Ibid.*, 25.
56. Wigman, *Deutsche Tanzkunst*, 64.
57. Quoted by Walter Sorell from Wigman's *Deutsche Tanzkunst* in *Mary Wigman: Ein Vermächtnis* (Wilhelmshaven, 1986), 185.
58. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 157.
59. Quoted by Elizabeth Hochgeschurz from "Male, Female and Cultic Dance," in *Der Tanz*, 1936 in unpublished Masters Thesis, "Die Entwicklung des Ausdruckstanzes von seiner Entstehung bis zu seiner Unterdrückung durch das Nationalsozialistische Regime." (Berlin, 1986).
60. From *Olympic Program*, 1936 (Akademie der Künste Berlin Archive).
61. Hochgeschurz, 91.
62. Sorell, 189.
63. Duncan, *My Life*, 342.
64. *Ibid.*, 340.