

From Event to Monument: Modernism, Feminism and Isadora Duncan

Elizabeth Francis

Many intellectuals and artists who saw Isadora Duncan dance came away believing they had experienced the liberation they longed for in their hopes and dreams for the twentieth century. Duncan returned to the Greek emphasis on balancing ecstasy and harmony and made it “excitingly modern,” as one critic put it. Her performances from 1908 and throughout the 1910s excited the imagination of American intellectuals who sought to tear down the barriers of class and sex in order to see their philosophies reflected in a praxis of art and life. Max Eastman, editor of the *Masses*, wrote, “She was an event not only in art, but in the history of life.”¹ With their qualities of immediacy and yet recognizable significance, events crystallize moments of consciousness formation—they shock the viewer into a new recognition of identity. Sloughing off the old, embracing the new, Duncan’s dances were events through which her viewers recognized themselves as modern. They also were shocking, because Duncan performed the female body differently in a period when the transformation of womanhood was both a source of anxiety and a central element of radical theories of liberation. In this sense, Duncan was an event in the history of women’s participation in modernism.

Out of the twentieth century’s fragmentation of identity and the division of labor and play into ever smaller pieces, Duncan suggested the possibility of wholeness—the resolution of fundamental dualisms between body and mind, self and world, the individual and social collectivity.² She accomplished this resolution through a different signification of the

body as female. The heavy layers of Victorian clothing were gone. "She ripped off all the corsets and let herself go," as one admirer described the sense of liberation from the prohibition and repression associated with female bodies.³ Duncan was excitingly modern because she changed woman's place in the artistic process, transforming it from the grounds for representation to an agent *of* representation. In doing so, Duncan set into motion a series of dialectical relations that characterized modernism in the first decades of the century, thereby revealing the gendered dimension of that dialectic. For a variety of reasons, Duncan's career reached an impasse in the twenties. This impasse was emblematic of the pessimism and alienation among intellectuals after World War I. While Duncan established a new relation of women to artistic production by using her body as both the medium and the agent of representation, as Duncan grew older (she died at 50 in 1927), the signs of her body's aging became correspondingly more noticeable signifiers of her decline. Duncan herself used a divisive rhetoric of race and nation to attack the changes in modern culture that increasingly marginalized her. The dialectical interplay of the event of Duncan shifted to a reifying rhetoric that froze Duncan into a monument. By interpreting this shift, we can see the contradictions in the desire for wholeness among cultural radicals after the war and the effects these contradictions had on the perception of Duncan as an artist, a woman and a modernist. Duncan's career thus reveals both the connections and the tensions between feminism and modernism in the early twentieth century.

The Event of Isadora Duncan

"Everything must be undone,"⁴ Duncan wrote about 1910, playing on the metaphor of loosening the bonds of clothing to express her critique of dominant aesthetics in dance. Unwrapping the garb of culture from her body, Duncan took off shoes, stockings, and corset, all signifiers of constraints on the female body and its expressive potential. Duncan danced in a sheer, short tunic, secured at the breast and hips, and lined with a leotard.⁵ She believed that her tunic, uncorseted form and bare feet replaced constraint with unity and fusion as the basis for beauty. "It has never dawned on me to swathe myself in hampering garments or to bind my limbs and drape my throat, for am I not striving to fuse soul and body in one unified image of beauty?" she asked in the early 1900s.⁶ In its signification of transparency, the tunic let the female body be perceived as a unified whole. Her costume also became an emblem of women's emancipation, a radical performance of a woman's body freed from the binding and stifling layers of culture. In contrast to manipulating fashion and appearance to subvert the static perception of gender difference, Duncan sought to reveal an essential body beneath the surface of culture and to mold culture to fit that body. Promoting a universal image of woman-



Isadora Duncan by John Sloan, 1911. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Donald B. Abert.

hood, Duncan did not use costume as a form of fashion but as a timeless image that placed her outside the particular and various histories of womanhood.

In her appeal to universality and timelessness, however, Duncan sought to blur the static image of womanhood into a dynamic, moving performance. Duncan's "everything" was undone through her transformation of the medium of dance. At a Duncan performance, the stage design was simple—a backdrop of long, blue-gray curtains, a carpet and diffuse lighting. When Duncan appeared unassumingly from the shadowy corners of the stage, audiences saw a form of dancing quite different from the rigid commonplaces of the ballet of the period and the displays of sou-brettes at popular revues. Her movements magnified those of everyday life—runs, walks and skips—through which Duncan expressed an unmechanical relation to the world. Duncan also transgressed aesthetic boundaries by performing not to conventional dance music, but to Gluck and Wagner operas, Tchaikovsky and Beethoven symphonies and Chopin concertos. Duncan expressed her dismantling of performance conventions polemically as a rejection of dance altogether. Duncan often and vehemently rejected the cultural connotations of being a dancer, "I hate dancing. I am an expressioniste of beauty. I use my body as my medium, just as the writer uses his words. Do not call me a dancer."⁷

Duncan's transformation of dance was rooted in her struggle to disarm the power of civilization to dominate and control the body. In using her body as a medium, rather than presenting the female body as something to be assimilated and controlled through the vision of others, Duncan placed the body's development at the center of her social critique. Many radical thinkers had argued in the nineteenth century that civilization crippled rather than encouraged individuals to develop, and Duncan extended that argument by claiming that the individual would find in the body the sources of unity and harmony to counteract the negative aspects of civilization. Duncan tells us in her autobiography that early in her career, she stood for hours in front of a mirror and finally discovered the origin of movement within her body, at the solar plexus, rather than from an exterior source. "I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of the dance."⁸ From this central place, movement radiated outward, connecting self and world.

Duncan was an event because her performances suggested—some even said made possible—the experience of coherence and totality. She theorized the coherent self as a way to lighten the pressures of modern life in the first decades of the twentieth century. Coherence meant reuniting the body and the mind, doing away with the split between nature and civili-

zation, and restoring an embodied self lost in the modern world. Duncan also evoked the desire for oneness and wholeness characteristic of appeals to totality.⁹ In her 1909 essay, "Movement is Life," Duncan wrote,

With the first conception of a conscience, man became self-conscious, lost the natural movements of the body; today in the light of intelligence gained through years of civilization, it is essential that he consciously seek what he has unconsciously lost.¹⁰

Civilization repressed the consciousness of the body, but it was only through civilization—and not an attempt to return to the primitive—that the expressive body could be rediscovered. The individual would rediscover an embodied relation to the world through sense—nerves, muscles and perception—but the senses had to be trained. Duncan theorized that if one was trained to make the most of this encounter with the world, then one also had the means to resist the moral and social prohibitions that dominate the body. In theorizing dance as a way to achieve oneness in a primary and uncorrupted relation to the world, Duncan posed her interpretation of Greek civilization against the censorship and constraints with which she associated Victorianism. Duncan thus overturned a central tenet of the nineteenth-century world view by arguing that the body must not *be* civilized, but rather that the body *was* the source of civilization. Thus, the body as the medium for self-expression liberated moderns to make and mold civilization, rather than submitting to civilization and its mechanisms of repression.

The shift from repression to self-expression was part of the discourse of personal and social transformation among intellectuals in the early twentieth century.¹¹ Modernists marked their distance from the Victorian world in their embrace of self-expression. While Duncan appealed to a broad audience at the height of her career in the early 1910s, her performances and her persona had special meaning for cultural radicals in America beyond 1908, because they sought to create a coherent ethos of artistic practice, social relationships and political beliefs. Anxious critics saw fragmentation and disorder in the new portrayals of reality in literature and art but many modernists actually desired wholeness in their insistent demands for cultural transformation.¹² At the core of the modernist appeal to wholeness before the war was a desire for both boundlessness and integration.¹³

Cultural radical Floyd Dell shared these desires for collective and personal transformation, and he understood Duncan's ability to represent this dream through a new aesthetic medium: the body itself. He wrote in 1916,

A strange and dark century, the nineteenth! . . . When I think that if I had lived and died in the darkness of that century I should never have seen with these eyes the beauty and terror of the human body, I am glad of the daylight of my own time. It is not enough to throw God from his pedestal and dream of superman and the co-operative commonwealth: one must have *seen* Isadora Duncan to die happy.¹⁴

In Dell's rhetoric of light and vision, Duncan dispelled the "darkness" of the nineteenth century. Yet she is not one of the philosophers of the metaphysical breakdown that shaped modern consciousness; she *embodies* those ideas. Through the shock of "seeing" Duncan's body, Dell recognized himself as modern, albeit with a utopian's sunny view of the twentieth century.

But Duncan's emphasis on liberating the body was shot through with ambivalence about the relationship between modernization and modernity.¹⁵ This ambivalence was shared by many cultural radicals who believed that the development of capitalism had established the preconditions for a classless society and sexual equality, but who found themselves rebelling from the iron cage of modernity, especially from the monotony and dullness of all things bourgeois. Since the late nineteenth century in America, intellectuals had worried over how modernization affected the body and the mind; they sought to loosen the bonds of rationalization and repression and to search for self-fulfillment.¹⁶ Duncan played upon but did not resolve this ambivalence because she believed that the bonds tying the individual to modernity not only could be loosened but that they could be escaped altogether. Her belief in the essential integrity of the body did not acknowledge the body's mediation by the machines of capitalism, either the assembly lines of industry or the telephones, automobiles and cameras of consumer culture.¹⁷

Instead, Duncan laid claim to the possibility of self-fulfillment and a creative and imaginative space in the machine age by evoking a dialectic between the self and the world. For Duncan, an inner self had to be discovered before the world could be reconstructed. "We do not know how to get down to the depths, to lose ourselves in an inner self, how to develop our visions into the harmonies that attend our dreams. . . . We are always in paroxysms."¹⁸ Those who met Duncan consistently point out that she was calm and self-possessed; she moved with a slow grace, and her voice was melodious and soothing.¹⁹ Duncan's response to modernization was to emphasize depth and harmony to counteract the corrosive effects of an increasingly accelerated and alienated twentieth-century world, what she called "strident, clamorous dissonance." Duncan's aim was to

slow things down, to calm the paroxysms of modern life in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Inner harmony was one way to break free from the constraints of the social world, but it led to a contradictory way of thinking about the interrelations of self and world. Duncan often said her motto was “*sans limites*.” The desire to be both unified and without limits—both coherent in self and encompassing the world—was for Duncan the “magnetic center” that redefined her relation to self, world and expression. “Often I thought to myself, what a mistake to call me a dancer—I am the magnetic centre to convey the emotional expression of the Orchestra.”²⁰ The experience Duncan sought to evoke as the center of movement and music was itself contradictory: her body as a medium for expression led away from the centered self. This contradiction also was rooted in a central dilemma among cultural radicals: how to bridge the demand for self-expression within a social movement that included socialism, feminism, and other collective demands for rights.

Duncan appeared to bridge that tension between individualism and collectivity in her performances. She wanted movement to suggest not individual expression but a collective social presence. Duncan’s essays claim over and over that she meant to play upon the individual’s access to harmony, but also to make the audience aware of itself as a collective presence reflected in the movements on stage, “call and response, bound endlessly in one cadence.”²¹ Her performances sought to break down the barriers of spectacle and bind the audience and the performer together into a collective event. Like Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* she carried with her everywhere, Duncan wanted her body to “contain multitudes.” She expressed collectivity by evoking the impression of a moving chorus rather than the solitary dancer on a spare stage. She claimed, “I have never once danced a solo.”²² Duncan’s medium was thus her body, but her theory of expression was not reducible to the body. In suggesting the chorus, she pointed to an arena outside the coherent, solitary self. Her performances also suggested an allegory of revolution, and they could be likened to the dialectical model for socialism and history. Marxist editor Michael Gold wrote in 1929, “She prophesied the future, when in a free society there will be neither money nor classes, and men will seem like gods, when the body and mind will form a radiant unity. Her own mind and body approached that unity.”²³

In evoking collectivity and a socialist body politic, Duncan distanced herself from individual artistic interpretation, equating her own persona with what she believed were universal feelings and drives. Mabel Dodge Luhan, Duncan’s friend and backer during her tours in New York, suggested in her memoirs, “[T]his life she let loose up through her body was not good or bad but merely undifferentiated and voluminous.”²⁴ Duncan

called this “multiple oneness,” and theorized movement as a social force, when she writes:

In order to realise these dreams, a single gesture of appeal will be able to evoke a thousand extended arms, a single head tossed back will represent a bacchantic tumult. . . . It seems to me that in this music is concentrated the . . . whole cry of desire in the world. . . . I repeat, I do not fulfill it, I only indicate it.²⁵

Duncan’s career was constructed around fanning the flame of “desire in the world.”

Duncan fanned the flame particularly through her challenge to the categories and conventions of gender. She evoked wholeness and unity as a woman at one with her body through dance. She was effective because women had been associated with the splits, fragmentation and divisions of modernity. Duncan’s ideas slide back and forth between the universality of woman and her sense of herself as unique, as a woman apart. This slippery relation produced the dialectical relations between self and world, individuality and collectivity, civilization and nature that surface in her theories. Her performances were powerful because the image of woman as emblem for a transformed modern world functioned on both sides of the dualisms. In this, she argued that she acted as a mirror for others: “Nietzsche says, ‘Woman is a mirror,’ and I have only reflected and reacted to the people and forces that have seized me.”²⁶ But as Duncan also suggests, the process of mirroring was rooted in the belief that she was capable of turning the mirror out upon the audience and projecting an image outside of history by emphasizing her own difference. The ancient Greek motifs in her costume and in her movements signified that outsidership in their timeless, abstract quality. As Luhan wrote, “She was able to project her vision upon the ether, and others, then, saw as she did.”²⁷ Duncan both sought a unified image of woman, which she saw in the strong stances of the classical statues she imitated, and exposed the extent to which contemporary women had been denied that unity in her critique of marriage and other social institutions. A central aspect of Duncan’s ability to fan the flame of desire in the world, then, was to “dance the freedom of woman.”²⁸

The discourse of women’s emancipation thus is central to understanding Duncan’s cultural impact. Tied to the body and subjectivity, women’s emancipation was the basis for a new civilization, not a civilizing influence. Duncan’s was a heroic theory meant to free women from weakness, dependence, and deformity. In Duncan’s critique, women had the most to

gain from eradicating the prohibitions associated with Victorianism. Her preeminent concern was with women's control over their bodies as the foundation for expression. She thus opposed marriage, encouraged open sexual expression, and believed in free motherhood.²⁹ Duncan's outspoken critique of marriage and her emancipated lifestyle, however, stood in tension with her view of gender and aesthetics. While she advocated sexual equality and sexual expression in the social realm, Duncan firmly rejected sexuality as a mode of expression in performance, arguing that wholeness and unity could only be experienced when audiences stopped eroticizing the female performer. In representing the female body as a source of wholeness rather than the site of fragmentation, Duncan allied women's emancipation to central ideas of modernism.

Duncan's lecture "The Dance of the Future," which was written in the early 1900s, allows us to look at how Duncan's view of modernity worked with a new definition of womanhood. Duncan composed this essay as a response to critics who attacked the legitimacy of Duncan's redefinition of dance. The rhetoric of the lecture is significant. After moving through two stances that establish the narrator as a figure to be looked at, Duncan reverses that relation, speaking as she herself boldly looks out upon her audience. She ends the speech with a peroration on the ability of woman to dance themselves rather than assigned roles in the trite and eroticized dance repertoire. "She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression."³⁰

Duncan separated her own stance as an artist from the sexuality of female performance through the appeal to a seemingly timeless, abstract hellenism. In doing so, she sought to dismantle the twin discourses that structured the perception of women as hopelessly split between body and mind, intelligence and animality. "She will dance the body emerging again from centuries of civilized forgetfulness, emerging not in the nudity of primitive man, but in a new nakedness, no longer at war with spirituality and intelligence, but joining with them in a glorious harmony." For Duncan, the female body did not represent civilization, but *was* its source: "the highest intelligence in the freest body!"³¹ Duncan's superlatives overturned the characterization of women as fundamentally weak and at war with their dual natures. Duncan's fusion of a "new nakedness" from her selective reading of the split between the primitive and the civilized was a central move in the modernist vision of wholeness.³²

Duncan's emphasis on the wholeness and unity of her body stands in stark contrast to the depiction of nudity at what is usually considered the inception of modernism in the United States, the Armory Show of 1913. Marcel Duchamp's painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which became the unofficial emblem of the show, used the conventions of the nude to

demonstrate how fragmentation and multiple points of view actually generated a more complete configuration of reality. In contrast to representations of modern life through fragmented images of the female body, Duncan turned such a schema on its head; she used her body to present an image of the whole. Duncan represents the moment when woman breaks free of her status as the sexual ground for modernist representation.

Significantly, most cultural radicals did not talk about the inspiration that they took away from Duncan's performances in terms of an expressive sexuality—even though liberating sex from the repression associated with Victorianism was a pervasive discourse of the period. Rather, Duncan set into motion another dialectical relation: that of women and the perception of gender difference. In fact, many critics emphasized that Duncan's performances were freed from a relation to sex, a freedom they characterized as androgynous. Carl Van Vechten wrote after seeing her perform in New York, "She called her art the renaissance of the Greek ideal but there was something modern about it, pagan though it might be in quality. Always it was pure and sexless...always abstract emotion has guided her interpretations."³³ By evoking ancient statues, Duncan had shifted the emphasis from the female body parts eroticized in her own time to a different image. "Imagine for yourself a woman with a body that suggests the perfection of Greek sculpture, without the slightest resemblance to the modern French figure. . . . Straight, slender as a sapling, robust hips, with legs at once feminine and virile, bust fragile," a French critic wrote.³⁴ Duncan did not resemble the "modern French figure" because the gaze of the viewer shifted from her bust to her powerful legs. To prove the artistic stature of Duncan's work and to undermine the association of Duncan's performances with her famed lifestyle of "free love," her conductor, Martin Shaw, wrote, "There was no sex appeal in Isadora's dancing."³⁵

Duncan's challenge to gender difference, "her sexlessness," opened up more avenues of interpreting the significance of her work, and reviews of her performances are filled with hyperbole and metaphor. Many cultural radicals saw her performances as moving and visual enactments of theories of freedom and revolution. But in doing so, Duncan's body itself became a metaphor. Painter and sketch artist John Sloan was one of many American artists breaking away from the techniques and subjects of academic, genteel art and moving toward representing life as they found it—on the streets and from the rooftops of immigrant neighborhoods—with a style to depict both the beauty in everyday life and the injustice they saw all around them. Duncan was a special subject for Sloan's painting because she helped him to see in aesthetic terms a new iconography of the body different from both mannered portraits of society women and academic conceptions of the nude. Sloan's 1911 painting of Duncan perform-

ing on a darkened stage attempted to capture the event of Duncan in paint. Sloan's broad strokes arrest Duncan in a lyrical moment. Her body is figured with head back and arm flung wide with the fluttering tunic draped lightly and transparently over her body. But as he wrote in 1911,

Isadora as she appears on that big simple stage seems like *all* womanhood—she looms big as the mother of the race. A heavy solid figure, large columnar legs, a solid high belly, breasts not too full and her head seems to be no more important than it should to give the body the chief place.³⁶

Sloan used the rhetoric of universality and a eugenic view of civilization to render Duncan back into the ground for a modernist point of view, an object of representation.

Despite Duncan's ability to disrupt the association of eroticism with the female body, the attempts by cultural radicals to make Duncan into a beacon of feminism and emancipation served to disarm the power of Duncan's intervention. Floyd Dell, for example, recognized himself *as* modern in seeing Duncan's dancing body. But when he wrote about Duncan as a feminist, he turned attention away from Duncan's disruption of conventions of representing the body as itself a feminist act. He writes:

That women should make so much fuss about getting the vote, or that they should so excite themselves over the prospect of working for wages, will appear incomprehensible to many people who have a proper regard for art, for literature, and for the graces of social intercourse.³⁷

Duncan, for him, represented the leap from political and social agitation to the realm of "truth" and "beauty." "It is only when the woman's movement is seen broadly . . . that there comes the realization that here is a cause . . . from which sincere lovers of truth and beauty have nothing really to fear." To see the women's movement "broadly" for Dell meant to rewrite its history from its roots in the nineteenth century to the re-orientation of American culture signified by the modern movement in art, literature, and philosophy. In doing so, Dell assimilates feminism into modernism. Dell quotes "The Dance of the Future," to make this point, finally concluding that "In any case, it is to the body that one looks for the Magna Charta of feminism."³⁸ Duncan, then, was writing one of the founding texts of feminism with her body; she was a hero, a "world-builder" in her encouragement of women to be that "self-sufficient, broadly imaginative and healthy-minded creature upon whom we have set our

masculine desire.” While Duncan turned her gaze to the audience and re-defined the terms upon which women would inhabit their bodies and thus change the world rhetorically in “Dance of the Future,” Dell’s appropriation of Duncan’s essay reinscribes her performance of womanhood within the terms of masculine desire. In doing so, he re-established her as no threat to those who have a “proper regard for literature and art.”

Max Eastman also brought his desire to bear upon his assessment of Duncan. In motion, Duncan was powerful. When she left the stage, however, her stature was literally diminished, he writes:

She was not of heroic size, as you expected after seeing her on the stage, and her body, though comely in a mellow way, was not excitingly beautiful. She had in supreme degree only the powers of expression and motion. Thus her physical presence in private life did not make up, as an Amazon’s should, for a certain overriding force in her—a sort of didactic, almost bluestocking assertiveness. . . . She was the most advanced outpost of the movement for woman’s emancipation. Her position was not too advanced for me—that is not what I am trying to say. But it was an intellectual position; she was invading a field where serious thinking had been done and some was still to do.³⁹

Again, Duncan’s claim for women’s emancipation diverted Eastman’s admiration and unleashed a torrent of pejorative labels associated with feminism. Moreover, as soon as Eastman placed Duncan on a frontier of women’s emancipation, he reintroduced the split between thinking and the body. Her body was a liberating force, but she could not be taken seriously when she staked out an intellectual position.

Consideration of Duncan thus poses the problem of feminism in relation to the modernist quest for wholeness. Duncan’s mode of representing the body appealed to the modernist ideology that sought liberation from social bonds, including those of gender, but modernists were also concerned with the creation of new ideals to counteract the negative aspects of modernity. As in Sloan’s painting, the impulse to erase and redraw cultural and aesthetic boundaries met in the moment of watching Duncan perform.⁴⁰ The problem that surfaces in the modernist impulse expressed by such cultural radicals as Dell, Eastman, Sloan and others is that Duncan’s body was mediated by such conventional metaphors as youth, joy, and beauty and as a feminist she was labeled a bluestocking, Amazon, and intellectual invader in order to assert or diminish her power

as a woman in modernism.

Duncan acted as a metonymy for utopian aspirations by using her body to depict a whole, unified world, yet she could not sustain this metonymic relation. Duncan began to be recognized not as a dynamic event, but as a monument—an immobile allusion to a lost moment of freedom. Her appeal to totality was divorced from the moment of performance and began to be expressed in a shrill nationalism and attack on popular culture. Just as a monument stands for an abstract thing called the past, the discourse of monumentality separated Duncan from the present moment of transformation.

The Monument of Isadora Duncan

The end of Duncan's career in the 1920s, indeed, vividly demonstrates and exposes the contradictions in the modernist quest for wholeness and their view of a unified culture. The visual apprehension of Duncan's performing body as the unity of a new definition of womanhood and utopian aspirations for the twentieth century fragmented as Duncan herself confronted difference and change in modern culture. Duncan saw a widening split between her theory of a whole civilization and elements of popular culture influenced by African-American forms. From the start, Duncan's ideas about civilization had embedded racial theories of evolution that situated the "new" woman in a white, hellenic tradition. She writes in "The Dance of the Future,"

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. It is a question of the development of perfect mothers and birth of healthy and beautiful children.⁴¹

Duncan's eugenic view was at the root of her belief that the emancipated body would allow women to overcome weakness and dependence. Moreover, Duncan's ideas about harmony required that difference dissolve into "multiple oneness."

While Duncan used a rhetoric of universality in her earlier essays, the implications of her division between the "primitive" and the "civilized" became more disturbing and forceful in her manifestos written in the twenties. Her rejection of the conventions of dance took a new polemical turn when she saw how pervasive the culture of popular dances had become in America in the early twenties. She also began to have qualms about her ability to draw an audience when dance crazes were sweeping the country and capturing the imagination of young Americans. Duncan used a divi-

sive racial rhetoric to criticize the “primitivism” of popular dances and music influenced by African-Americans.⁴² In attacking popular dances as primitive, not civilized, her rhetoric re-associated dance with race and sexuality. Her later essays also connected her ideas about women to her fear that her conception of dance was being contaminated by popular expression. Her own rhetoric took on a moral, civilizing overtone when she wrote in 1927,

If, twenty years ago, when I first pleaded with America to adopt my school and my theories of dancing in all the public schools, they had acceded to my request, this deplorable modern dancing, which has its roots in the ceremonies of African primitives, could never have become dominant. It is extraordinary that mothers who would be intensely shocked if their daughters should indulge in a real orgy . . . will look on with smiling complacency at their daughters indulging in licentious contortions upon a dance floor, before their very eyes.⁴³

Duncan’s protest reasserted the very dualisms she earlier had sought to undo: popular dancing was merely sexual for her. Poet Claude McKay made this clear in describing an argument he had with Duncan in her studio in Nice. “Isadora was . . . severe on Negro dancing and its imitations and derivations. She had no real appreciation of primitive folk dancing, either from an esthetic or an ethnic point of view.”⁴⁴ Duncan’s belief in a utopian philosophy of the integration of art and life was in tension with what she saw as the primitive allure of popular culture.

At the same time, Duncan saw that sexuality, not women’s control of their bodies, had become central to the discourse of modern culture in the twenties, but she displaced that distinction onto her rejection of “primitivism.” Her emphasis on the licentiousness of popular culture reiterated the division between primitivism and civilization. To convey the perils of an identification between dance and sexuality for young women, she writes:

A seemingly modest young girl would not think of addressing a young man in lines or spoken phrases which were indecent and yet the same girl will arise and dance these phrases with him in such dances as the Charleston and Black Bottom, while a negro orchestra is playing *Shake that thing!*⁴⁵

Popular culture itself destabilized the essentialized, ideal form Duncan had sought to rejuvenate in her interpretation of the ancient Greeks. The racial

signifiers of jazz—the negro orchestra—and popular dances—the Black Bottom—replaced the image of woman as the universal figures in Duncan’s rhetoric, but her allusions were highly negative. While her image of the female body freed from its relation to sex and to social constraint had been dynamic and radical, the more this emphasis was displaced in her later rhetoric, the more static her idea of womanhood became.

Further changing her rhetoric of universality, Duncan also began to use nationalism to express her opposition to the direction of youth culture. She wrote in her 1927 autobiography,

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. . . . 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.⁴⁶

Popular dances shook Duncan’s philosophy to the core: they challenged Duncan’s story of discovering the “motor” of dance in her body at the solar plexus, where the interior center expressed exterior harmony. Instead, popular dances became cultural machines that openly asserted sexuality and accelerated its expression. For all of their loosening of constraint in an expanding consumer culture, they subverted Duncan’s emphasis on dance as a productive, generative philosophy of life. For Duncan, popular dances were not universal and had no pretense toward a totality of art and life.

In changing her rhetoric to emphasize her critique of popular culture, Duncan own self-presentation shifted. The dialectic of subjectivity in “Dance of the Future”—the movement from a figure to be looked at to the narrator who looks—hardened into a concrete, stable narrative in such later essays as “I See America Dancing” and in *My Life*. Not only did Duncan see herself in a battle with popular culture, she herself was attacked during her performances and in the press for her own mode of displaying the body and her lifestyle on her last tour of the United States in 1922-23. In response, Duncan resorted to a nationalist discourse of identity. She began to tell a story about her own origins as an American often, in essays, speeches and in her autobiography, over and against an oppositional culture. She made herself into a symbol of America but asserted that it was an Anglo-Saxon image, emphatically not “primitive,” not African. Duncan began to think of herself as a heroic American at the same time that she felt doomed to exile by its dominant culture, and the story pro-

duced a stable identity for Duncan in a sea of cultural contention. Her posture became more and more that of a demagogue, her stance rigid with an ideological notion of America as she denounced materialism and prudery.

Cultural radicals responded in kind: they built rhetorical monuments to Duncan that gestured toward a utopian lost moment but that were not grounded in the conditions of Duncan's career in the changing culture. As if to corroborate Duncan's movement from an abstract collectivity to a rigid Americanism, many writers and artists claimed that Duncan was symbolic of America, and that American ideals would be exhibited by American bodies. Max Eastman wrote, "All the bare-legged girls, and the poised and natural girls with strong muscles, and strong free steps wherever they go—the girls that redeem America and make it worth while to have founded a new world, no matter how badly it was done—they all owe more to Isadora Duncan than to any other person."⁴⁷ The shift in rhetoric from the transformative event of Duncan to the monumental Duncan thus is central to the interpretation of Duncan's ideas about the expressive body, her role as an artist and to the historical assessment of gender in modernism.

In this context, the division between being a subject—Duncan's control over the process of being both an artist and a woman—and an object of representation—how others described, photographed, and drew Duncan—asserted itself powerfully in the twenties. This division, however, was channeled metaphorically into the perception that Duncan had aged, a convenient discourse but one that had everything to do with a generation's anxiety over the failure of a cultural idea.⁴⁸ As Duncan entered middle age, she no longer signified an artistic, philosophical, cultural unity to others: instead, her body got in the way of the visual apprehension of her ideas. Critic Andre Levinson wrote in 1929,

The art of Isadora Duncan had aged with her. Those who had not seen her when she was twenty had not seen her. It was at the Trocadero, in May of 1923, that these inexorable ravages were apparent to me for the last time. . . . How I remember from the upright and noble carriage of her small head, to the torso of a robust amazon. . . . Yesterday, tortured, I sought those traits in her heavy face, the nape of her neck, and her massive thighs, revealed by an overly short tunic. . . . The arms, the wrists had lost their suppleness. . . . [A] single memory stays with me. I see the dancer, again with arms crucified as on an imaginary cross, the body weighed down, knees bent, legs broadly, brutally split apart. Then the

head rolls back, the chest follows and the short head of hair sweeps the floor.⁴⁹

The stream of metaphors that Duncan's performances had generated in the 1910s stopped abruptly in the 1920s. Her tunic no longer signified transparency and sexlessness, and her body referred to nothing but itself. Rather than as symbolic of abstract concepts such as freedom, unity, nobility, or images drawn from "nature," Duncan was described in terms of her bodily parts: legs, breast and hair. Modernists could not watch her without remembering what they had seen years before in her performances, and they could not brook the comparison. To many, Duncan had become monstrous.

But in their desire to hold onto the possibility of cultural transformation, even though it no longer could be produced through the event of Duncan, her intellectual companions used militaristic as well as utopian imagery in their writing about her. Using his memory of Duncan to explain his own cultural crusade against "puritanism," Eastman cast Duncan in the mold of a militant hero in battle armor, in contrast to the fluidity of the transparent, silky tunics in earlier descriptions. He writes:

America fighting the battle against Americanism—that was Isadora. From that battle incomparable things are to come—things that will startle and teach the world. And Isadora led the way into the fight all alone, with her naked and strong body and her bold character, beautiful as an Amazon. If America triumphs over itself—over its cheap greed and prudery, its intellectual and moral cowardice, its prurient puerile senility—if America triumphs over that, Isadora Duncan will be sculptured in bronze at the gate of the Temple of Man in the new day that will dawn.⁵⁰

Even as Eastman built a monument to Duncan's struggle against social constraint, the complexities of her ideas and her performances, not just her polemical posturing, were lost. The image of Duncan as a statue occurred frequently in tributes to her, for example, by a gushing admirer in 1920: "No man who lives is great enough to to build a permanent monument to you."⁵¹

Duncan grew impatient with those who wanted to memorialize her while she was engaged in an ongoing struggle. She said in 1921, "I know you will put up a monument to me fifty years after my death, but what good will that be? I will then be far away from the agony and struggle and unable to give you a great school and a great idea that you cannot

understand or appreciate.”⁵² Making Duncan into a monument was an ideological move that distanced Duncan from an ongoing cultural process and it was a move that was easily codified. Duncan was substituted for that other ideological emblem of freedom, the Statue of Liberty. Victor Seroff, Duncan’s companion at the end of her life, claimed, “The time will come when freedom-loving Americans will throw the Statue of Liberty, that symbol of so-called freedom, into the sea, and raise in its place a statue of Isadora Duncan, who was the personification of true freedom and who called for the brotherhood of nations.”⁵³ Eastman makes the association even more boldly: “She looked like a statue of real liberty.”⁵⁴ The appeal to a national symbol shifted Duncan from an abstract dialectical notion of self to a concrete, stable one as an “American.”

This appeal to a national symbol further separated Duncan’s project from a younger generation of modernists who found little to value in Duncan’s experiment for their own struggles for self-expression. Margaret Anderson, editor of the *Little Review*, castigated Duncan’s performance because she saw in it both a frightening nationalism and a sentimental portrayal of the body. Anderson turned her experience of seeing Duncan perform into an opportunity to express how her idea of art differed from Duncan’s. She used the metaphor of monument-building to establish her critique of sentimentality: “You must not insist to us that Isadora Duncan is an artist. This generation can’t be fed on any such stuff. We are tired of that kind of loose valuation. . . . Isadora Duncan, as you will know after seeing her once, is a . . . monument of undirected adolescent vision, an ingrained sentimentalist.”⁵⁵

Conclusion: The Scarf

Others, however, remembered the significance of Duncan’s transformation of gender and the conventions of representation, her stance as both an artist and a liberator. For example, Janet Flanner, who wrote cultural criticism for the *New Yorker* and paid particular attention to the participation of women in modernist culture, liked Duncan’s performances during her later career. Flanner saw the tension between aging and Duncan’s aesthetic project, but believed that modernists such as Levinson saw failure in the midst of their own anxiety over the fate of an artist’s career. In Flanner’s view, the cultural memory of Duncan neutralized her explosive, uncomfortable presence that had opened a trail for women’s artistic expression. “Only Isadora, animator of all these forces, had become obscure. Only she, with her heroic sculptural movements, had dropped by the wayside, where she lay inert like one of those beautiful battered pagan tombs. . . .”⁵⁶

The reification of Duncan from an event significant to the history of women in modernism into a sentimental monument to a lost moment for

cultural radicals can be seen clearly in assessments of Duncan's death. In 1942, Eastman wrote about his ambivalence about Duncan as a hero of emancipation. "As an aging woman, she needed a truer and more austere wisdom than she had," he wrote. "She could not live on gestures any longer. . . . If the scarf had really been given life by her dance, it could not have acted more loyally."⁵⁷ The scarf that Eastman refers to is the one that broke Duncan's neck when it wrapped around the wheel of a Bugatti sports car in southern France in 1927. While the cruelty of Eastman's statement denied Duncan's humanity and his friendship for her, his statement also referred to Duncan as an image and a character, a symbol of "Isadora Duncan" in a web of ideas about the meaning of cultural intervention in American life in the 1910s and 1920s. The scarf acted loyally to the creation of Duncan into a monument, not to Duncan as an ongoing event. The scarf fluttered gaily in the wind, dropped into the spinning wheel, was pulled tight. Dialectical disorder and fluidity in a moment of abandon was pulled tight into a line of separation in a dualistic framework.⁵⁸ For Eastman, then, Duncan was killed by her own contradictions. The ideas that Duncan depicted through her body were worthy of expression for most moderns—oppression and freedom, the desire for oneness—but casting the body into a statue reified her ideas, and has immobilized our perception of Isadora Duncan by making her a legend, outside of history, obscure and inert.

Notes

1. Max Eastman, "Heroism Plus Heroics: Difficulties in Worshiping Isadora Duncan," *Heroes I Have Known: Twelve Who Lived Great Lives* (New York, 1942), 86. I am grateful to Mari Jo Buhle, Ellen Rooney, Mary Gluck, Gail Bederman, Mary Louise Roberts, Linda Grasso and William Graebner for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. I am especially grateful to Chris Amiraault.

2. For a good introduction to the desire for wholeness among American modernists, see *American Quarterly* (Spring 1987), especially Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," 7-26.

3. Michael Gold, "The Loves of Isadora" *The New Masses* 4 (March, 1929), 20.

4. Isadora Duncan, "The Dance of the Greeks," in *The Art of the Dance*, Ed. Sheldon Cheney (New York, 1928), 96.

5. Ann Daly, "Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze," *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover, 1992), 239-59. For other descriptions of Duncan's costume, see Norma Adler, "Reconstructing the Dances of Isadora Duncan in the United States," *The Drama Review* 28 (Fall 1984), 59-66.

6. Franklin Rosemont, ed., *Isadora Speaks* (San Francisco, 1981), 48.

7. Quoted in Rosemont, 53. For a description of Duncan's stage design, music and movement vocabulary, see Daly and Deborah Jowitt, "The Search for Motion," in *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York, 1988).

8. Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York, 1927), 75.

9. See Martin Jay, "The Discourse of Totality Before Western Marxism" in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984), 21-80.

10. Duncan, "Movement is Life," *The Art of the Dance*, 78.

11. The autobiographies of American intellectuals offer the most compelling accounts of the shift from repression to self-expression as both a subjective and political stance and

as one that signified much about women's changing roles. See for example Duncan's *My Life* and Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Intimate Memories*, Volume 3, *Movers and Shakers* (New York, 1936); as well as Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament* (New York, 1936); Floyd Dell, *Homecoming* (New York, 1933); Margaret Anderson, *My Thirty Years' War* (New York, 1930).

12. Singal, 14.

13. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York, 1981) See also Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, 1983).

14. Floyd Dell, "Who Said that Beauty Passes Like A Dream?" in *Looking at Life* (New York, 1924), 48-49.

15. For an account of the different but interrelated meanings of modernity and modernization, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, 1982).

16. See Lears.

17. Indeed, Duncan believed that she could preserve an unmediated aura as a performer when that aura was increasingly disappearing from the autonomous work of art. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969). Significantly, while Duncan was photographed extensively by such artists as Arnold Genthe and Edward Steichen, she refused to be filmed by a motion picture camera, believing that the technology distorted her practice as a dancer and distanced her from the audience.

18. Duncan, "Depth," *The Art of the Dance*, 100.

19. Mabel Dodge Luhan offers a good description of these qualities in Duncan's persona in *Movers and Shakers*, 320-39.

20. Duncan, *My Life*, 224.

21. Duncan, "Depth," 99.

22. Duncan, "The Dance of the Greeks," 96.

23. Gold, 21.

24. Luhan, 333.

25. *My Life*, 136 and 144.

26. *Ibid.*, 323.

27. Luhan, 324.

28. Duncan, "The Art of the Dance," in *The Art of the Dance*, 62.

29. Duncan's autobiography and the speeches and other writings in *Isadora Speaks*, ed. Franklin Rosemont, are good sources for Duncan's often impassioned stand for women's liberation.

30. Duncan, "The Dance of the Future" in *Art of the Dance*, 62.

31. *Ibid.*, 63.

32. Stephen Spender, "The Modern as Vision of the Whole," in Irving Howe, ed., *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts* (New York, 1967), 50. See also Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York, 1977).

33. Van Vechten in Paul Padgette, ed., *The Dance Writings of Carl Van Vechten* (New York, 1974), 24.

34. Quoted in Paul David Magriel, ed., *Isadora Duncan* (New York, 1947), 46.

35. Quoted in Francis Steegmuller, ed., "*Your Isadora*": *The Love Story of Isadora Duncan & Gordon Craig* (New York, 1974), 386.

36. Sloan quoted in Rowland Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Newark, 1991), 109.

37. Dell, *Women as World Builders* (Chicago, 1913), 41.

38. *Ibid.*, 43.

39. Eastman, "Heroism Plus Heroics: Difficulties in Worshipping Isadora Duncan," 73.

40. I have derived this point from Mary Gluck's 1990 graduate seminar on Modernism and Avant-Gardism at Brown University.

41. Duncan, "The Dance of the Future," 61.

42. Duncan, "Music and Dance" in Rosemont, 38.

43. Duncan, "Dancing in Relation to Religion and Love," in *The Art of the Dance*, 126.

44. Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New York, 1937), 212.

45. Duncan, "Dancing in Relation to Religion and Love," 125.

46. Duncan, *My Life*, 341.

47. Eastman, "Isadora Duncan is Dead" *The Nation* 125 (September 28, 1927), 310.

48. See Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents* (Bloomington, 1991).

49. Andre Levinson, "In Memoriam," *Ballet Review* 6 (1977-8), 15.

50. Eastman, "Isadora Duncan Is Dead," 310.

51. "To Isadora Duncan: A Tribute from a Young Student" *Touchstone* 7 (July 1920), 307.
52. Duncan, 1921 interview quoted in *Art of the Dance*, 134.
53. Victor Elyitch Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (New York, 1971), 332.
54. Eastman, "Heroism Plus Heroics: Difficulties in Worshiping Isadora Duncan," 69.
55. Margaret Anderson, "Isadora Duncan's Misfortune," *Little Review* (April 1917), 7.
56. Janet Flanner, "Isadora (1878-1927)" in *Paris Was Yesterday, 1925-1939* (New York, 1972), 28.
57. Eastman, "Heroism Plus Heroics," 70.
58. I am grateful to Chris Amirault for this diagram.