Some Modern Legends

Isadora Duncan

Isadora Duncan refused to be filmed while she danced. The most eager prophet of modern bodily movement avoided the great new vessel of the truth of motion—unwilling, it would seem, to do without the audience rapport that was indispensable to her success. Her reluctance went with her noticeably religious attitude toward her own dancing and toward art in general. She found she rather liked going to the pictures, but the entertaining movie camera was certainly not the thing to register the sacred communion between Isadora, her muse, and her followers. That, rather, was for fellow artists to attempt.

The visual record of her work consists of artists' renderings, posed and unposed photographs, and written descriptions—much the same as that of Nijinsky's appearances in the same era. But Isadora was a true original, a real prophet, and she had none of Nijinsky's flavor of being a rare flower tended by responsible others; nor did she work in a known tradition that later generations could use as a reference in the absence of any film footage. Her admirers wrote of her in cloudy superlatives rather than in detail, as Nijinsky's also did, but Isadora Duncan, unlike Nijinsky, had detractors, too.

She still does, in the sense that her name is not unreservedly synony-

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Review of *Life into Art: Isadora Duncan and Her World*, eds. Dorée Duncan, Carol Pratl, Cynthia Splatt; Foreword by Agnes de Mille (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993) in *The London Review of Books*, March 10, 1994.

mous with greatness but carries a whiff of the ridiculous. Why is this so? When we try to determine the reason, the lack of any comprehensive, mobile visual evidence is all the more tantalizing, since the great photographs by Genthe and Steichen lend Duncan their own dignified, suggestive beauty, whereas some of the indifferent posed shots or amateur snaps often verge on the funny. The drawings and watercolors are more interesting. They give a pretty good idea of the flavor of her dancing, and their own flavor helps support the ecstatic tone of many descriptions, since all three are products of the same epoch and emphasize the same kind of aesthetic response.

It's evident from old reproductions, old magazines, and old posters that a draped female figure with one raised knee, outflung arms, and a tipped-back head frequently appeared toward the end of the last century as a generalized emblem of aesthetic freedom with a tinge of sexual license, a discreetly Dionysiac vision—flying drapery, mobile seminudity, but no blood, no dirt, no brutishness. The artists who drew Isadora Duncan from life seem to be pursuing the ideal into this century, as if they viewed her new propositions for the dance with recognition, not surprise—as if, in fact, both she and they were continuing something that had already begun.

All the renderings of Duncan actually dancing, despite their great variety of personal style, show a curious uniformity in the poses. All the artists caught the same moments—and they were the ones you can already see in the academic and popular art of the previous generation, where Duncan herself must have seen them. Duncan's first European admirers, in 1903 and after, saw this rather purified ideal of natural sexuality and creative freedom coming to amazing life—besides coming from America, the home of Daisy Miller and other free female spirits of the nineteenth century.

Apart from Isadora's imprint on written and pictorial history, there exists the physical memory of the actual Duncan dances, which still dwells in the bodies of her artistic descendants, the students of the students of her original six pupils, the famous Isadorables. Of these genealogically transmitted dances, there are indeed films and videotapes, the works are still being taught, and Duncan classes are still being held. What emerges from all this is the strong, music-like construction of the dances and the complex physical training Duncan developed for herself

and her pupils; and yet in both scornful and enthusiastic descriptions, she was always perceived to be improvising, reinventing the music through her body as she heard it. Clearly she was a great genius of stage performance. Almost nobody can achieve the effect of inspired improvisation, in any stage medium, without very careful composition and rehearsal, so that none of the hard work shows at all.

Many music lovers hated her habit of imposing female solo dances on the profound works of Bach and Beethoven, and traditional dancers trained in the ballet found her movements sloppy and her aims incredibly pretentious. Her admirers were entranced by what was believed to be her complete naturalness, made evident by the absence of showy technical feats. "No leaps! No pirouettes!" they marveled; whereas the ballet master, choreographer, and dancer Serge Lifar, in his *Ballet Traditional to Modern*, said, "Isadora Duncan did nothing but run with her knees bent and her head thrown back . . . Her movements were of a hopeless poverty and monotony." The dances now on tape, in fact, seem various and complicated. What they nevertheless do lack is the sharp edge and harsh force so important in most modern neoclassicism, the unfamiliar and slightly unpleasant formal rigor that distinguished the works of modern artists seeking only the most radical methods, not the most pleasing motifs, in the classicism of the past.

The destruction of traditional styles was a vital theme at the turn of the century, and Isadora Duncan was an artist with advanced creative intuitions; but her neoclassicism was rather literal-minded, unlike that of Stravinsky, say, or Picasso. Ancient Greece was her model, but she was stuck in the entrenched Romantic idea that because Greek art expounded physical Beauty as Truth, Greek art was the truly natural art. That meant that its sacred visual vocabulary should not be tampered with, or treated with any modern aesthetic distance or any irony—postures and garments had to be meticulously studied and followed. In holding to this visual idea, she was very traditional indeed, and perhaps it was the real secret of her instant success. Studying the Greek friezes and vases as if they held the real secret of the human body put her in the same camp as Winckelmann but at a considerable distance from Cézanne—closer, in fact, to Gérôme and Alma-Tadema.

But her performances, which could seem so formless to the artistic avant-garde, so unseemly to staid audiences, were undeniably beautiful,

beyond criticism from either side. The movements, however vigorous, were never uncomfortably startling or ugly, always harmonious and decent, like those fondly associated with innocent childhood. Her greatest genius seems to have resided in her solitary, rather unassuming physical presence, her tall and well-made body dressed in plain drapery, animated by total conviction and native grace, moved by great music. She wore her straight hair plain, put almost no makeup on her gentle face, and hung up plain blue curtains for a backdrop; but she used the best and most subtle stage lighting available, along with the best works of certified musical giants. She danced, moreover, with bare feet, and that in itself was both infantile and licentious, faintly penitential, daring, dangerous, and inescapably disturbing. It wasn't authentically Greek, but it was great show business.

Isadora Duncan clearly appeared at her own perfect psychological moment: a generation earlier or later would have been no good. She might have pulled it off a hundred years before, as a sort of Corinne of the dance in the full tide of Romantic neoclassicism, but neither the heavily responsible mid-nineteenth century nor the fully streamlined mid-twentieth would have welcomed her brand of enthusiastic artlessness, her brave female summons to unconscious forces, mediated neither by the established rules of stage artifice nor by any brilliantly invented new ones.

Unlike that of most dancers, Duncan's stage career only ended with her life, accidentally truncated in 1927, when she was forty-nine; but the lack of discipline often associated with her art became manifest in her body during her last decade, as she gained weight and lost control of her beauty. She had gone through frightful suffering after the accidental deaths of her two older children, later followed by the death of a third after a few hours of life. She became weighted with sorrow, and incidentally with drink. By then, too, the epoch was no longer congenial to feminine fleshiness, and everybody's ideal natural woman was young, sleek, and taut, not soft, heavy, and mature.

Now dancing in a tragic vein, Duncan became somewhat laughable on stage as the 1920s progressed, but her influence was already profound and international, assured for a long future. Her pupils in Germany, Russia, France, and the United States were responsible for only a part of it. The rest was her legend, the memory and broad effects of her early

performances, the record of her relations with the great and small of her day, the pictures, and the anecdotes. With these went the eternal modernity of her message, which in sum consisted of a call for honesty, originality, and spontaneity—things often in short supply in the long history of art.

Many books have been written about Isadora Duncan, mainly about her impact, and she wrote an autobiography, mainly about her ideas. *Life into Art* is a work of homage, a sort of latter-day memorial edited by three American women who had separate reasons to admire her and who became friends. First among these is Dorée Duncan, granddaughter of Isadora's brother Raymond, who was himself a fervent and innovative disciple of ancient Greek modes of life and art. The other two editors came to an interest in Duncan through connections with the theater and with Paris, where they met Dorée, who became director of the Akademia Raymond Duncan upon the death of her grandmother in the 1970s. Dorée Duncan writes the acknowledgments and tells the story of the book's inception; Carol Pratl is a dance teacher and historian; Cynthia Splatt has written a book about Duncan's influence on the theater and her theatrical link with Gordon Craig.

The general tone of the text, written by Splatt, is uniformly and irritatingly adulatory, and somewhat dependent on cliché. We are offered little historical or cultural background to account for what is presented as the cometlike phenomenon of Isadora Duncan. Although her family is credited with a primary effect on her work, she is seen as utterly unprecedented, always an influence upon culture, never in any way enabled by its influence, consciously or not. The aim has been not to produce a thorough study but to register allegiance in the familial mode. The three editors are creative and strong-minded women, like Isadora herself, and they wish to see her as the first apostle of modern female freedom, the forerunner of all contemporary women's accomplishments—although this can really mean only personal and artistic accomplishments.

In this book, Isadora is hailed as yet another to whom the abolition of corsets ought to be attributed, but there is no record of her desire that women be free from any other sort of external constraint. Their right to vote, their claim for effective contraception, their need for wages equal to men's were apparently of no concern to Isadora Duncan. She

seems to have cared only about women's right to free expression, including sexual, of course. Nevertheless, she is hailed here not as a devoted bohemian in a long tradition but as an advanced feminist—the best kind, never shrill and strident—even though she had no political sense at all. She also had rather disastrous and dependent amorous relations with various men, in another old female tradition.

Teaching, however, was in her blood, and she made a great leader and missionary. The facts of Isadora's early life and upbringing in San Francisco, which are among the good things offered in this book, help to explain the force of her later career. They show how Isadora's performances could have the air of being transcendent lessons, not just shows. After her father abandoned the family, her mother, Dora, had run a dancing school to make a living, and so had her older sister Elizabeth. Isadora learned dancing, teaching, and performing simultaneously, during her earliest years. In the 1890s, all four sisters and brothers appeared in dance concerts up and down the California coast, creating their own material, and this helped to form the content of the dance classes they helped to teach.

Dancing was the stuff of life itself, nothing rare and unusual. Social dancing, waltzes and polkas, were taught at Dora's school; and the young Duncans made the artistic dancing up and figured it all out. They had some help from a bit of ballet training and the applied general principles of François Delsarte, whose originally Parisian school of aesthetic dancing influenced several generations of American dancers and teachers. Eventually, Elizabeth Duncan ran the German school Isadora founded, and Raymond not only founded the Akademia in Paris but at first set up a colony in Greece, where dancing and music went along with farming, spinning, and weaving, all on the ancient models. The other brother eventually became an actor. The whole of this California family seems to have been talented, stubborn, and compelling. In about 1908, Raymond permanently took up draped costume, long hair, and sandals, and could occasionally be seen in them on the streets of Paris and New York until his death at an advanced age.

Seizing the spotlight for herself and coming to life under its creative gaze was not the point of Isadora's artistic mission: dancing was inseparable from getting others to dance. Although she produced her greatest public impact as a solo performer, she gave many concerts with her first

pupils and later with large groups of children from her schools. It's possible that her audiences felt carried away by the feeling that they could be doing it, too—could move so freely, could allow themselves to be so transported by music, could even be so beautiful. It was a very different effect from that of the Russian ballet, with its glittering, weightless, whirling creatures from another world, or that of cabaret dancers with their shameful displays.

Agnes de Mille's introduction is another good thing about this book. She, too, cannot praise Isadora enough, but she does it with the advantage of having actually seen her dance. It was 1918, late in Duncan's career, and de Mille was a child. Isadora's body "shook with fat," she writes, and she reports being unmoved; but her mother was in tears, deeply touched by the grief expressed in Isadora's movements, and de Mille was impressed by that. De Mille notes that Duncan had no humor and that her mode was forever heroic or ecstatic; but she remembers the impression of simplicity and clarity her dancing gave, with a pure authority in it that kept Duncan herself from ever being really ridiculous. It's clear, though, why those of us who never saw her, who can only see the pictures and read about her, can get the feeling that she might have been.

The very best thing about this book is the illustrations, of which there are many never before published. De Mille says they are all the more important in the absence of films of Duncan's dancing—but I would agree with Duncan herself that movies of her would have been something of a shame. Modern viewers watching them as historical curiosities would find themselves at a great distance from the real Isadora, the exponent of sacred immediacy.

Meanwhile, there's a lot to see. The photographs here include old family pictures, always interesting, and very early shots of the young Duncans dancing together in Spanish costumes, Isadora as Primavera, and the like; many unfamiliar posed photographs, early and late, of Isadora promoting her art or her career, and of other people important in it; wonderful blurry snapshots taken by Raymond of Isadora dancing among ancient Greek monuments (in sandals, not barefoot) and many other snapshots of her squinting into the sun at domestic or convivial moments, sometimes dressed in current fashion, sometimes wearing experimental varieties of flowing costume other than Greek. There are photos taken at the Duncan schools in several countries, showing masses

of draped children dancing on the grass or posing in attitudes, with a draped teacher looking benign. There are illuminating pictures of Raymond's colony and academy, with many draped adults weaving and painting on fabric, and some of them dancing, too.

Then there are the masses of drawings, watercolors, sculptures, and prints—the list of artists includes Dunoyer de Segonzac, E.-A. Bourdelle, Auguste Rodin, and Gordon Craig, along with José Clara, Geoffroy de Chaume, Valentine Lecomte, and others. Some of the works are magnificent, like the ones by Abraham Walkowitz; others are dramatic, delicate, sentimental, very realistic or very abstract, or decorative; but all of them show the thrusting knee, the bowed or thrown-back head, the open arms, the whirling colored stuffs veiling the torso. None shows Duncan in midair. Along with running, she seems to have done a great deal of skipping and prancing, with her bare knees pushing up through slits in the drapery, but no high or broad leaping, no extended legs. Instead, she used the floor, kneeling and reclining, collapsing and rising. The face in the pictures is always blank—attention is riveted on those flashing naked legs and feet, those sweeping bare arms, that rounded exposed throat. All these artists help one to imagine the intoxicating effect.

Nothing in this book, neither in pictures nor in any quoted accounts, answers the vital question: What did she wear *under* the drapery? When I was about fourteen, having seen pictures and read descriptions of Isadora Duncan and being as intensely concerned with feminine habits as with stage custom, I put this question to my grandmother, another eyewitness. "She wore"—and my grandmother paused delicately—"uh, um, a sort of menstrual bandage." Wow.

Franz Kafka

The jacket photo for *Kafka's Clothes* shows him without any, sitting tailor-fashion on a beach, smiling above naked shoulders and a thin chest, the prominent ears rhyming with prominent bony knees. His swimming trunks are obscured in shadow. It's not the stiff-collared, well-buttoned Kafka we're used to, and the one introduced in this study is also unfamiliar. But he is convincing. Clothes might seem to be among the least of Kafka's interests, since he is usually taken as a devoted visionary, struggling only to purify his mode of expression in order to probe more keenly into the most painful matters of life and death and men's souls; and he is remembered as someone unworldly enough to break off his engagement in order to give himself only to his work. Mark Anderson has nevertheless shown that clothes mattered hugely to him, in life and in writing.

Clothes have always made a useful literary metaphor (language is the dress of thought, and so on), and they have also offered a useful descriptive device for most novelists, however surreal their vision. Simply finding instances of Kafka's use of each would not prove that he was unusually alert to costume. But Anderson's larger purpose is to reconnect Kafka with the worldly world he came from, and to show that he felt himself obliged to deal with it and live in it. He needed to consider his place

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Review of *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* by Mark Anderson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992) in *The London Review of Books*, September 24, 1992.

inside literary and human history instead of vanishing into the thin air of Modern Literature, where many readers have wished to keep him suspended.

Clothes exist to remind the self of the body, and to create a worldly body for each person. Anderson connects them with Kafka's interest in bodily states and qualities, both his own and those of his characters, as well as with his literary technique, the skillful cut of his fictional language, which created a unified body for his work. Anderson sees dress as a pivotal metaphor in Kafka's private thought, where it mainly stands for the mobile world of human exchange—at once vain and nourishing, both hampering to spiritual and artistic clarity and vital to continuing life. Clothing is itself malleable, like language and art, infinitely adaptable to alterations in form that change its meaning; but getting free of clothes altogether is impossible. One must simply get into a different costume.

Anderson's idea about Kafka makes sense in view of two sets of circumstances, one being the cultural ambience in Prague and Vienna during Kafka's youth, the other being that Kafka's father ran a wholesale dress-accessories business, buying and selling all sorts of captivating fashionable adornments. Kafka knew his father's shop, but he never had to work there or engage directly in the fancy-goods trade, like Gregor Samsa. He was free to observe the fashion business from an intellectual distance, but never free of it, or indeed free to think he should be. He had, moreover, an excellent eye for fashion, as letters and journals attest. During his young days as a literary aesthete, Kafka dressed with extreme elegance, subscribing to the Wildean theory that one must be a work of art or wear one—by which was meant one must do both—and thus following the creed of aestheticism that life itself should perpetually be transformed into art. Fin-de-siècle dandyism was based on the notion that clothes could accomplish this.

Kafka's youthful writings were also realized in the somewhat precious and purple style identified with the Decadence, which at the time was felt to be an expression of opposition to stuffy bourgeois values, a search for Beauty that rejected antimacassars and buttoned boots. Later, Kafka said that he wished to be made of literature, but by then he had discovered that turning oneself into writing meant constant hard work and sacrifice, not simply adopting a literary costume and posture. Yet he

never gave up the work of dandyism, either. Anderson describes him during his last two years of life in Berlin, very poor and ill but insisting on excellent clothes made by a tailor he could not afford, to sustain the physical image of a transcendent, coordinated self. He had kept his devotion to a bodily fastidiousness that expressed a desire for clarity and unity of form in art; he admired a cleanliness and limberness of performance that seamlessly identifies the physical with the artistic self.

It appears that Kafka was personally interested in the body-culture systems that flourished in German society at the time, and that he followed for years the gymnastics manual of one J. P. Muller, which had a picture of the Apoxyomenos on the cover and photographs of the author inside, a mustachioed version solemnly demonstrating the prescribed movements in the nude. Kafka was also interested in the Eurythmics of Jaques-Dalcroze and visited his school in Switzerland; and he was interested in the Dress Reform movement, on which he attended lectures. But gymnastics and acrobatics especially fascinated Kafka, who felt himself to be too tall, too thin, too awkward, and physically fragmented. His early devotion to sartorial elegance was among other things an attempt to harmonize himself, an effort continued by his bodybuilding regime. His health did give way to tuberculosis, despite all the Muller exercises, the vegetarian diet, the abstinence from alcohol, and the many hikes in the country; but the bodily effort had not been made to cheat physical death. Linked to the well-cut suits and to similar efforts in his writing, it was a private bid for aesthetic immortality; and that he achieved.

He achieved it against formidable cultural and personal odds. Like its cousin Art Nouveau, the Jugendstil movement was trying to make life beautiful by retreating from vulgar commerce and crude sexuality; it was a decorative artistic style that with all its suavity nevertheless seemed to lack force. Somewhat later, Adolf Loos and Karl Kraus, on the other hand, held that all ornament was criminal and that civilization advanced only to the degree that it rejected embellishment altogether, so that the resultant artifacts suggested a certain sterility along with their undoubted strength. Both such negative notions of the proper aims of art flourished in young Kafka's Prague, offering the idea that new art, in order to transform life, required some kind of withdrawal from it. It was a seductive thought for many artists. But these ideas did not offer

a way for Kafka to move forward—to avoid a self-limiting retreat but nevertheless to transcend what Anderson calls "the Traffic of Clothes."

He uses this phrase to mean the aspect of life embodied in Kafka's father's business. It means the style of temporal living that turns existence itself (which necessarily includes art) into a ceaseless set of aimless exchanges, a perpetual "traveling" that is mobile yet confining, false and distracting, erotic but joyless, incapable of acknowledging and articulating real psychological truth or of permitting the exercise of a natural dynamic energy that could make something new and authentically beautiful—something modern. Aestheticism turned out to be offering essentially the same false thing, disguised by a new style. There is a deep conflict suggested by the fact that clothes, if they are at all interesting, seductive, and complex, whether made in the stiffly layered bourgeois style or in the trailing gauzes adorned with arabesques favored by the Jugendstil, are difficult to keep clean and free of wrinkles. Kafka often mentions the dirtiness of dress, as if it were built in.

It is interesting to note, although Anderson does not emphasize this much, that for the Dress Reform people, and apparently for Kafka, too, the most false and distracting clothes, and unfailingly the dirtiest, are women's clothes. They were of course the whole substance of Papa's concern; we don't hear of him dealing in cravats and embroidered gentlemen's waistcoats, only lace collars and fringed parasols and the like. Ordinary women's clothes of the time—the pleated skirts and tucked shirtwaists, to say nothing of the jackets with passementerie, the hats with feathers or ribbons, the complicated underwear—seemed full of some profound unwholesomeness. Their drag on spiritual aspiration and clear thinking was somehow even worse than the one lurking in the multiple buttons and lapels, the starched shirts, stiff bowler hats, and cuffed trousers affected by the male sex.

Women themselves were often then seen to be entirely devoted to Traffic—to all human intercourse, sexual, social, and especially familial; to fashion, which keeps urging trivial shifts in custom and appearance; to the unreflective, repetitive, and unending busy-ness of housekeeping and shopping; and to commercial sexual traffic if they were prostitutes, another métier requiring endless repetition and exchange. Female dress with all its compromised lack of straightforwardness could easily seem the same as female life; so that if a woman appeared to be nothing but

her clothing, she could even seem to be assuming her proper responsibilities as a woman simply if she were dressed. A male artist could view her only from an entranced and baffled distance, unless he wished to tangle with those easily soiled and creased petticoats.

Men, however, were the ones who wanted to be artists, to bound like free-swinging nude acrobats above the flow of Traffic, to attempt the journey out of time and the river. And men's clothes, as opposed to women's—Anderson touches on this only at the end of his story—do offer a way out. The beauty of perfect male tailoring has in it the possibilities for transcendent modern abstraction that Beau Brummell originally saw in it. The perfectly cut suit, so perfect that it is unnoticeable, can finally create a perfect nakedness for the imperfect, disharmonious body of the aspiring artist. A writer may proudly wear it in Elysium, where it can rightly show his true genius to be free of ornamental lumber and awkward posing.

But Kafka, with his swiftly crystallized artistic ambition, was nevertheless deeply ambivalent about the aspect of life embodied in pleated skirts and passementerie, or indeed in elegant dress suits and gleaming neckwear. He felt the appeal of attractive clothes for both sexes, of sex itself, and of art in its erotic guises. Anderson demonstrates his debt to Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau, and Sacher-Masoch, to Baudelaire fully as much as to Flaubert. Withdrawing from all this was not psychologically or morally possible for the artist Kafka was becoming; backing away meant weakness, bad faith, and lack of conviction. Anderson shows that Kafka's ultimate strategy instead was head-on vigorous attack, straight through and out the other side. For Kafka, writing was a journey of no return on the religious model.

And so we get *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor, the fearsome beetle, clad in his functional carapace, is the new-made Modern Artist, the ultimate gymnast free to walk on the ceiling and fall without harm, who makes ultimate mockery not only of overstuffed chairs and polite behavior, of the dress-goods business and of domestic hopes, but of all the old realities—especially artistic ones. This includes the idea at the core of nineteenth-century novels that clothes, just like facial and bodily traits, always correctly express character. Persons in clean respectable costume are honest and hardworking; persons in showy or flimsy garb are dishonest and morally loose; persons in dirty garments are lazy and