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*The “Becoming - Mother”: Motherhood in the Life and Work of Isadora Duncan*

Isadora Duncan is widely considered to be the mother of modern dance. Born in 1877, Duncan was an incredibly influential dancer, choreographer, and activist until her death in 1927. Expanding upon popular movement and exercise styles from the turn of the century, like Delsartism, in addition to taking much inspiration from Ancient Greece and the natural world, Duncan rejected the tenets and qualities of ballet and developed a philosophy of dance focusing on the natural body and its movement. Her work privileged the feminine form, and she viewed her dance as a kind of conduit to the movement of the universe, a connection to a universal divinity which she could access and express through “natural” movement. Intrinsically tied to her work were also the ideas of creation and motherhood, her conceptions of which were strongly influenced by European feminisms and intellectual movements of the early 20th century. The relationship between Duncan’s ideals of motherhood and her choreography was at times paradoxical, but nevertheless central to her development as an artist, especially in the aftermath of her children’s deaths.

Duncan’s work, both artistic and activist, was quite profoundly influenced by the burgeoning feminist discourses of the turn of the century. American feminists of the late 19th and early 20th century were preoccupied with female suffrage; their goal was gaining the right to vote and more equal opportunities for women.¹ Working from networks established in the

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¹ Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 163.
abolition, temperance, and religious utopian movements of the 1800s, women like Lucrecia Mott, Susan B Anthony, Alice Paul, and countless others petitioned Woodrow Wilson’s government to pass the 19th Amendment. This early feminist organizing was also characterised by a conversation around dress reform, a movement from the more restrictive, heavy clothing of the Victorian era, and towards alternative undergarments to the corset and the increasing availability of simplified garments designed for sports and leisure activities.²

European feminisms, however, were preoccupied with quite different questions. As Ann Taylor Allen explains, declining birth rates in the relatively new nations of Europe were widely publicised and sensationalized, creating a sense of panic about the future of the nation, both in terms of the preservation of culture and military strength. Much of the public discourse surrounding this phenomenon adopted language from Social Darwinism and eugenics, and reframed the issue from just a question of birthing more children to birthing and raising better, stronger children - a responsibility which was placed on the mother. These fears of a weakened nation were sublimated onto the figure of the mother-citizen, placing a new importance on what was referred to as the “will to motherhood,”³ meaning that women could no longer simply follow their maternal instinct or duty, but must instead have an active investment in birthing and raising children in order to secure the future vitality of the nation. It is out of this milieu of newly formed nationhood and conversations about reproduction that German women like Helene Stöcker and Adele Schreiber emerged and developed their organization Bund für Mutterschutz, or the League for the Protection of Mothers, in 1905. This group was heavily influenced by bourgeois feminist movements, as well as the rhetoric of eugenics and writings of philosopher

² Daly, Done into Dance, 164.
Friedrich Nietzsche, and advocated for a re-definition of motherhood and family structures “appropriate to the changed cultural, economic, familial, and reproductive patterns” of the era.\(^4\) They viewed motherhood as the highest possible calling for women, and as such advocated primarily for women’s “right to become a mother with the full respect and support of society.”\(^5\) They claimed that the restrictive, legal institution of marriage inhibited women from raising their children with the proper support and security, and proposed a “new ethic”\(^6\) that would replace conventional moral codes dictated by the patriarchal sexual norms that relegated women to a position of sexual exploitation, both within marriage and without. This new moral code would instead celebrate female sexuality and pleasure, and acknowledge motherhood as the natural conclusion of said pleasure.

Another important figure in the feminist milieu of the time was Swedish writer and intellectual Ellen Key, who wrote primarily on issues of women’s roles in facilitating the betterment of society and protection of morality. Like Schrieber and Stocker, Key was deeply influenced by the developing theories of Social Darwinism and progress which dominated contemporary social thought. She advocated for the re-evaluation of marriage and other structures that constrain the state of motherhood; and claimed, much like her German counterparts, that it was “[t]hrough motherliness” that a woman “makes her greatest contribution to civilisation,”\(^7\) and therefore that said contribution should be more highly valued and respected. In her work *Renaissance of Motherhood*, Key argues that marriage, though an important institution, must be made more egalitarian, because it “still bears traces of the earlier times when

\(^4\) Allen, “Mothers of the New Generation,” 419.  
women and child were man’s property.”8 She writes that these “traces” must be done away with, “for the sake of man’s as well as women’s ethical ennoblement.”9 Key questions, then, the value of monogamy, asking “[a]re the children better served by the successive marriages and free unions than by a home where the parents are held together not by love but by a sense of duty toward the children?”10 As we will see, Duncan’s response to this question is a resounding “Yes!” however, Key is more hesitant with her answer, and instead writes that we must still look at the issue on a case by case basis.11

The discourses of European feminists in turn influenced Duncan’s own conceptions of motherhood and marriage, if not directly then through her exposure to the intellectual environment of Germany and France. She connected pregnancy and motherhood very closely with the desire she felt for her romantic and sexual partners; her own experiences with pregnancy, though difficult at times, were nevertheless inextricably linked with her lifelong celebration of her own sexuality. As her biographer Ann Daly writes, Duncan’s life reveals an explicit association of “motherhood with sexuality, mother love with heterosexual desire.”12 Like her European contemporaries, Duncan ascribed much of the limitations imposed upon female sexuality and maternal behavior to the institution of marriage, which she condemned both in her activism and personal life. In her speech “America Makes Me Sick!” Duncan speaks out against the stifling realities of Western, capitalist marriages, declaring that no child can be properly raised in those corrupt and unhappy circumstances, a sentiment that echoes Key’s writings. In her autobiography My Life, written several months prior to her death in 1927, she explains some

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8 Key, Renaissance of Motherhood, 28.
9 Key, Renaissance of Motherhood, 28.
10 Key, Renaissance of Motherhood, 66.
11 Key, Renaissance of Motherhood, 66.
12 Daly, Done into Dance, 164.
of this reasoning further, claiming “as a wage-earning woman … if I make the great sacrifice of strength and health and even risk my life, to have a child, I should certainly not do so if, on some future occasion, the man can say that the child belongs to him by law, and he will take it from me and I shall see it only three times a year!"\(^{13}\) This statement emphasizes the precarious relationship between a mother and child, a relationship that was effectively defined by the husband and could be severed easily, and legally, by him. In her view, maternity should not be dictated and controlled by the patriarchal structures that limited female autonomy and ownership, especially of children.

Despite her conviction that motherhood was the natural conclusion of a celebration of female sexuality, Duncan did not publicly acknowledge her children born out of wedlock, and often left them in the care of nannies and family members while she travelled and went on tour.\(^{14}\) However, she did publicly adopt many of her pupils and dancers, popularly referred to as the “Isadorables,” as her own; with several of them, like Irma Duncan, taking on her last name. Therefore, her public persona was quite paradoxical: though she advocated for voluntary motherhood and the deregulation of female sexuality, and performed while pregnant with her illegitimate children, she continued to officially maintain the illusion of a purely virginal figure as the “mother” of her young female pupils. Duncan inhabited this conflicting role until the deaths of her two young children, after which she was thrust into the very public role of a grieving mother.

Duncan conceived of her roles as mother and choreographer to be quite inextricably linked, informing and supporting each other. When discussing her first pregnancy in 1906 with Deirdre, the daughter of Duncan’s lover Gordon Craig, Duncan makes the immediate connection

\(^{14}\) Daly, *Done Into Dance*, 168.
between her artistic inspiration and her unborn child. In her autobiography she describes the 
moment she knew she was pregnant, a moment in which she visualized Ellen Terry, a favorite 
artist of hers, and Craig’s mother, leading a young child by the hand and calling out to Duncan 
“[l]ove… love…”15 She goes on to write, “Birth and Death! Rhythm of the Dance of Life! The 
divine message sang in all my being. I continued to dance before the public; to teach my 
School.”16 Her first experience with motherhood, therefore, was deeply associated with female 
creativity and artistry, and she connected it at once with her performance, choreography, and 
pedagogy. As she intimates in this passage, Duncan continued to perform publicly through much 
of her pregnancy, even as her body changed and her condition became very apparent. As Daly 
relays, when one audience member came to Duncan to complain about her performing while 
very visibly pregnant, Duncan responded by asserting that her pregnancy was merely an 
extension and enhancement of her work, exclaiming “[e]verything rustling, promising New Life. 
That is what my Dance means--.”17 Her philosophy of dance fundamentally celebrated the 
natural female form and its capacity for generation, therefore, it follows that her identity as 
dancer and as mother were practically one and the same.

This pattern can be seen in her pedagogy as well, which she viewed very much as an 
extension of her art and philosophy. She established several schools throughout her career, in 
New York, Berlin, and Moscow, and though she herself did not teach very often, she succeeded 
in creating the foundation for a lineage of teachers and dancers that extends to the present. In her 
piece, “Dance of the Future,” she writes, “My intention is, in due time, to found a school, to 
build a theatre where a hundred little girls shall be trained in my art, which they, in their turn,

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15 Duncan, My Life, 189. 
16 Duncan, My Life, 189. 
17 Duncan, My Life, 241-2.
will better.”\textsuperscript{18} She goes on to speak about how to allow the body to move naturally, saying that her goal is not to “force them [young students] to study certain definite movements,” but rather to “help them to develop those movements which are natural to them.”\textsuperscript{19} As she reveals in this essay, the development of these children’s natural bodies was very important to her wider vision of her art and its capabilities, and she took a very maternal view towards these students and her role in their lives. In her autobiography, Duncan refers to her school as “that other child,” reveling that the students, whom she had not seen in some time, “had all grown so tall.”\textsuperscript{20} She did not see herself merely as a dance teacher, rather, she thought of her schools as teaching children “to feel and to express life,” and ultimately, teaching them a new mode of interacting with their surroundings and with their own bodies. This idea of teaching her students about life and love puts her in a profoundly parental role, and shows just how deeply linked her art and her lifestyle were.

These identities were not always seamless, however, and did come in conflict with each other over the course of her career. Duncan had quite difficult pregnancies that resulted in prolonged bouts of depression, and she was bedridden with pain and fever after the birth of her daughter on September 24, 1906. She was diagnosed with “neurasthenia,” what basically amounts to female hysteria, while recovering from Deirdre’s birth, and was subject to relapses and depressive episodes throughout her life, especially during and around her pregnancies (her son Patrick was born four years later in 1910). She writes that she would frequently ask herself “if a woman can ever really be an artist, since Art is a hard task-master who demands everything,

\textsuperscript{19} Duncan, “Dance of the Future,” 127.
\textsuperscript{20} Duncan, \textit{My Life}, 227.
whereas a woman who loves gives up everything to life.”\textsuperscript{21} Despite her confidence in performing while pregnant, she often felt “completely separated and immobilized”\textsuperscript{22} from her art, and from her inspiration.

Much of this connection between Duncan’s conceptions of dance and motherhood stem from her reading of Friedrich Nietzsche’s texts, as Kimerer LaMothe explores in her fascinating article, “Giving Birth to a Dancing Star: Reading Friedrich Nietzsche's Maternal Rhetoric via Isadora Duncan's Dance.” Upon traveling to Berlin as part of her tour with Loie Fuller in 1902, Duncan was introduced to Nietzsche’s texts, and continued to refer to them for the rest of her life, going so far as to call \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} “her bible.”\textsuperscript{23} It was in texts like \textit{Birth of Tragedy} and \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra} that Duncan encountered Nietzsche’s motherhood rhetoric, in which he speaks about intellectualism in language that strongly references pregnancy and motherhood, describing the process of creation as a kind of double becoming or embodiment. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, becoming a mother (and being an intellectual) is the process of becoming oneself through the growth of another living being, according to LaMothe, it is the acquiring of an “[a]wareness of doubleness within the flesh,” as the individual mother exists in the liminal space of “becoming-two.”\textsuperscript{24} In his work \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra}, Nietzsche’s central figure, the prophet-like Zarathustra, speaks to the highest, wisest men, telling them “[l]ift up your hearts, my brethren, high, higher! And do not forget your legs! Lift up also your legs, ye good dancers, and better still if ye stand upon your heads!”\textsuperscript{25} In doing this, Zarathustra is also

\textsuperscript{21} Duncan, \textit{My Life}, 245.  
\textsuperscript{22} Duncan, \textit{My Life}, 245.  
\textsuperscript{24} LaMothe, “Giving Birth to a Dancing Star,” 355.  
encouraging these intellectuals to reach beyond themselves, and avoid what he terms “voluntary death,” or self-death, and instead to birth one-self as a laughing, creative being. As LaMothe explains, Duncan interpreted this rhetoric of self-embodiment and double becoming in terms of her own dance and art making, a process by which she, as a woman, could facilitate her own self-possession through movement and creation. Her philosophy of discovering and following the natural movement of the body can therefore be read as a “call for women to dance the meaning of their own embodiment.” This provides an example of a very interesting relationship to corporeality as defined by Susan Foster in her work Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power (1995): not only is Duncan’s physicality a site of meaning making, it is actually the means of Duncan’s self-becoming and self-definition as an artist. By performing a maternal logic in her pieces, in which she “births herself” through the presentation of her creativity and choreography, Duncan facilitated a realization of the value of the maternal being - and of women in general - as creator and artist.

Duncan’s synthesis of maternity and dance making became even more significant in the aftermath of her children’s tragic deaths in 1913. While driving along the Seine with their nanny, Duncan’s young children Deirdre, the daughter of Gordon Craig, and Patrick, the son of Paris Singer, got into an accident and all three drowned in the river. A year later, Duncan again conceived a son, but he died within twenty four hours of his birth. Heartbroken and traumatized, Duncan choreographed several pieces over the following years dealing primarily with themes of loss and lamentation, all with the mother as the central figure. One of these pieces was a solo entitled “Mother,” choreographed in 1921 as part of a sequence set to the Scriabin Etudes. The

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26 Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra.
27 Lamothe, “Giving Birth to a Dancing Star,” 357.
piece begins with the dancer entering from the upstage right, alternately reaching down to her side with her right arm then gesturing to and traveling down the diagonal to the stage left corner. On center stage she opens her arms widely in a generous gesture to the audience, and kneels, beginning a sequence of folding and bending her arms in close to her center and rocking back and forth, mimicking the motion of cradling a baby, her head tossed back at the end of each movement. This sequence is repeated several times, interspersed with a series of pleading, pushing gestures with her arms. Finally, the dancer comes to rest on her left hip, and brings her right arm directly over her head, and waving slowly and distinctly in the direction of the down stage left corner, focused on something in the distance.

This piece, with its marked simplicity, constitutes an expression and processing of Duncan’s personal and artistic experiences with motherhood, an exploration of what it means to create and to lose, and a profound shift in her career and art making. Scholars agree that the soloist represents a kind of universal figure, a perpetually grieving, dancing maternal body; as LaMothe writes, “she is every mother, everyone’s mother.” Andrea Mantell Seidel, a dancer who trained in Duncan’s technique and who has performed “Mother” many times, explains that the piece moves through the lifespan of a mother: from the joy and intimacy of life with a small child, to the grief of its eventual loss, either as the child reaches maturity, or in the case of the Duncan children, dies tragically young. In this sense, Duncan presents a universal narrative of motherhood as a process of creation and loss, in which the dancer embodies each stage of this life as she moves along the diagonal. In the Nietzschean conception, the dancer herself is birthed through this process of generation; the dance is therefore both a commentary on the experience

29 LaMothe, “Giving Birth to a Dancing Star,” 364.
of motherhood and childrearing from a very quotidian, personal sense and a physical processing, almost exorcism, of Duncan’s trauma, and the trauma that she proposes is inherent to the life cycle of any mother or creator.

The piece also echoes Ellen Key’s ideas of the morality and value of “motherliness” -- to return to her work *Renaissance of Motherhood* -- in which she wrote that it is in “mother-love” that “[s]elf-sacrifice and self-realisation come to harmony.”31 This understanding of the state of motherhood acknowledges the joy and sadness inherent in that experience, a tension that “Mother” fully explores in its narrative. Key interestingly also incorporates some language reminiscent of Nietzsche in her discussion of the self-realisation that comes through motherhood.

In this sense, “Mother” is a perfect melding of Duncan’s philosophies of movement, her intellectual influences (both feminist and philosophical), and lived experiences; the epitome of the interconnectedness of her life and work, especially in regards to her identity as a mother. It demonstrates her love for her children, and despair at their passing, as well as her complex but ultimately joyous relationship to the act of creating as both a process of self-realisation and emancipation and a central aspect of her feminist (or pseudo-feminist) thought. The piece emphasizes the duality in her own identity as an artist as well: the artistic inspiration and validation that came from pregnancy and motherhood, along with the feelings of constraint, sacrifice, and isolation. Regardless of the occasional friction, Duncan’s art was deeply connected to her conception of herself as a maternal being, and her ideas of the feminine permeated her life’s work.

31 Key, *Renaissance of Motherhood*, 105.
Works Cited


