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Moving Images, Moving Bodies

Greek Dance, Eugenics and Fascism

Fiona Macintosh | ORCID: 0000-0002-4500-0560

Faculty of Classics, St. Hilda's College, Oxford University, Oxford, UK

fiona.macintosh@classics.ox.ac.uk

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Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, under the influence of chronophotography and the arguments of the French musicologist Maurice Emmanuel, it was believed that ancient dance could be recovered for the modern world by animating the figures on ancient Greek vases. This led to a flurry of practitioners of so-called 'Grecian' dance across Europe, the US and the British Empire. At the beginning of the twentieth century, moving like a Greek became as popular and as liberating for women of the upper classes as discarding a corset and dressing in a Greek-style tunic. In the Edwardian period, since the most celebrated practitioners of Greek dance were women, this new corporeal Hellenism was viewed with deep suspicion as a perilous bid for Sapphic liberation from the patriarchy. But this new corporeality was no less part of a wider utopian return both to nature and the ideal of the collective that laid the groundwork for fascist appropriations of Greek dance in the 1920s.

Keywords

fascism – eugenics – classical antiquity – Cambridge Ritualist – comparative anthropology – modern dance – Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) – Maud Allan (1873–1956)

It is only recently that dance has featured in discussions of fascism, and so it is not entirely surprising that books such as Michael H. Kater's 2019 study, *Culture in Nazi Germany*, fails to mention dance at all. In some ways, this occlusion

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can be explained by the prejudices that still exist towards dance scholarship in general. But the neglect of dance in histories of fascism and culture stems, in large part, from the sensitivities of the dance establishment and their attendant desire to protect their founding fathers and mothers from the taint of history.

However, Kater's oversight in 2019 is curious not least because there had been at least four important studies on dance and fascism published in the previous thirty years that were hard to ignore: Susan Manning's *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman* (1993); Laure Guilbert's *Danser avec le troisième Reich* (2000); Lilian Karina and Marion Kant's *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich* (2003); and Mark Franko's *The Fascist Turn in the Dance of Serge Lifar* (2019). Now one could also add Arabella Stanger's *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance* (2021). All these scholars have demonstrated unequivocally that dance was central to Fascist and Nazi aesthetics; and the widely held view that there was a rupture between Weimar culture and the culture of Nazi Germany is simply not true in relation to dance. For *Ausdruckstanz*—Expressionist Dance, the major innovation in dance during the Weimar period—readily found its way into the Nazi festivals of the 1930s precisely because the ideals it embodied chimed with the ideology of totalitarianism. The assimilation of *Ausdruckstanz* was also made possible because many leading German dancers routinely conformed and nazified, often banishing non-Aryans from their companies with astonishing zeal. In this sense, it is apparent that Modern Dance did not escape the general attacks on modernism because it was a marginal art form. Instead, it was its own ethos that facilitated its easy assimilation into the Nazi regime.¹

Modern Dance was in many ways a community art form, in which the individual was subsumed into the collective. From the end of the nineteenth century, collectives of multiple kinds had sprung up across the German-speaking world—some even in honour of the Greek god Dionysus himself;² and dancing together was one of many important group activities practiced in these new communes. Dance specialists advocated dancing together, in the open air and away from the impurities of the modern, urbanized world, on the grounds that it promoted, through rhythm, not only healthy, muscular bodies but also an opening up of the individual soul towards communion with the group. The

1 Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).

2 Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 248.

healthy individual body would thereby merge with, and be enhanced by, the communal body.

Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman were both leaders and major beneficiaries of this nazification of Modern Dance in the early 1930s. Laban's *Volksgemeinschaft* [community] of dancers was established in the wake of the First World War on Monta Verità by the edge of Lake Maggiore, and Wigman joined him for some time during the 1920s. Here Laban developed his *Bewegungschor* [Movement Choir], a collective education programme that involved 'Reigen'—traditional walking and processing in rings—and was designed to enable the individual to become one with the community and thereby contribute to the building of a new future. With Laban's military background, the newly formed community was to conform absolutely to the direction and control of its leader. Indeed, Wigman made it abundantly clear that this *Volksgemeinschaft* was very far from any workers' collective: 'Community demands leadership and recognition of the necessity of leadership. The masses that refer only to themselves can never constitute a community. Work within and towards the community means to serve the work, to serve the idea'.³

The dance critic of *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Fritz Böhme, admired Laban's methods and appreciated their potential affinity with Nazi ideology. In 1933, Böhme explained to Joseph Goebbels, then Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, that dance was a 'race question. There is no international dance form that is above race. Where dance is so cultivated, it attacks the roots and the aesthetic expression of a people'.⁴ As a purveyor of racial purity, the appropriately trained dancer could 'ward off the influx of alien movements and gestures, which are confusing the German character and undermining the German attitude'.⁵ According to both Laban and Wigman in a joint speech at the Dance Congress in Essen in 1928, the dancer had a role in the transformation of theatre as well: 'We want not only danced theatre—we want rhythmically moved and vibrating theatre'.⁶ Recognised as exemplary dancers by the regime, both Wigman and Laban survived and thrived for most of the 1930s and beyond: Wigman continued to enjoy prominence after the Second World War living in West Berlin until her death in 1973. Even following his fall from favour with the Nazis in 1936, Laban enjoyed huge status in postwar Britain.

3 Wigman in 1936 cited in Marion Kant, 'German Gymnastics, Modern German Dance, and Nazi Aesthetics,' *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 18.

4 Cited in Karina and Kant, *Hitler's Dancers*, 197.

5 Ibid.

6 Cited in Kant, 'German Gymnastics,' 18.

This article examines the links between dance under Fascism and Nazism and the Greek-inspired dances in Britain in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In Britain, and in the Anglosphere more broadly, neither the theory nor the practice has been subject to scrutiny, even though so-called Greek Dance still remains within the mainstream dance curriculum to this day. The Greek-style dances were directly informed by the technological advances in chronophotography towards the end of the nineteenth century, which made possible new understandings of corporeal movement and physical (ill-)health, and underpinned much clinical practice founded upon eugenic theories.

In addition to chronophotography, Greek Dance was also founded upon the arguments of the French musicologist Maurice Emmanuel, who believed that ancient dance could be recovered for the modern world by animating the dancing figures on ancient Greek vases.⁷ This chapter explores the ways in which the new media technology of chronophotography, together with classical scholarship, contributed to the visceral aesthetics of modernism. Chronophotography had initially served to photograph the physical and muscular movements of patients at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. But for many Greek dance pioneers, it provided a powerful medium for the development of body types that proved paradigmatic for the construction of eugenic ideals.

Classical Contexts

During the autumn of 1912, the English art and theatre critic Huntly Carter made a tour to explore the 'cultural' highlights of Europe. Commenting on his visit to Hellerau, the new garden-city on the outskirts of Dresden where he saw the work of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's Educational Institution for Rhythmic Gymnastics, he noted:

In the first place, this dance movement is another sign that Europe is under a rhythmic spell, that people are beginning to realise the immense importance of rhythm in life, and that we are in/at [*sic*] a renaissance of dancing. Something unusual has happened; and dancing, like the Sun-

⁷ Frederick G. Naerebout, "In Search of a Dead Rat": The Reception of Ancient Greek Dance in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe and America,' in *The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World: Responses to Greek and Roman dance*, ed. Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39–56, 43–49.

God Amaterasu, has emerged from the cave of neglect, and promises to give the light of her smile to the world once more.⁸

Carter was writing some two years after the first appearance of the Ballets Russes in London in 1911, and at a time when some of the best theatre practice in Britain was striving to acquire a 'rhythmic conception of play, player, decoration and music'.⁹ He is also seeped in a world of easy comparatism—here informed by *Japonisme* in his invocation of the Shinto goddess of the sun. But the ideal that Carter observed on the continent was, in his view, still only at a very rudimentary stage in London: 'Though the theatre and drama [in London] have not yet learnt to dance, at least they are throwing off the bonds of the conventional and attaining freedom in perhaps a heavy and clumsy fashion'.¹⁰

'Learning to dance' is what all of Europe was doing in the first part of the twentieth century; and London was watching eagerly. In the theatre, the meaning of the play was no longer deemed to reside exclusively in the word but in a 'rhythm' that encompassed word, body, set and score. With this new fascination with the moving body in performance came a widespread interest in the singing, dancing chorus of antiquity, and especially the singing, dancing chorus of Greek tragedy. What Carter dubs the 'rhythmic spell' that was capturing Europe in 1912 would arguably not have happened without the theoretical rediscoveries of the chorus made by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and more generally without the comparative anthropological interest in dance towards the end of the century.

Nietzsche's identification of the singing, dancing chorus as the wellspring from which tragic drama originally developed led to renewed interest in dance. For the first time in the long history of the reception of Greek tragedy, the chorus was accorded a primary and central role within the action. Whilst the flaws in Nietzsche's scholarship were damned as soon as the treatise was published, and even if mainstream classical scholarship remained broadly conservative in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and shunned Nietzschean-inspired insights into the ancient world, the broad contours of the treatise quickly entered the public imaginary and provided intellectual heft to emergent dance theory and practice.¹¹

8 Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in Drama and Art* (London: Frank Palmer, 1912), 120–121.

9 Carter, *The New Spirit*, vi.

10 Ibid.

11 For an overview of the scholarly reception of *The Birth of Tragedy*, see Michael Silk and Joseph Peter Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Modern Dance took much of its practice from nineteenth-century gymnastics training, and from the *Turnen* programme pioneered by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn from 1807, in particular.¹² Its intellectual cues came principally from Nietzsche's privileging of the singing/dancing collective. However, Nietzsche did not simply put the dancing collective centre stage; he also provided a radical challenge to understandings of Greek antiquity that proved key to modernist understandings of self. For most of the nineteenth century, the prevailing understanding of the Greeks was that they were a serene, rational people, a view derived ultimately from the hugely influential *History of Art* (1764) by the German art historian and archaeologist, Johann Joachim Winckelmann. According to Winckelmann, the Greek world was a utopia where man and nature lived in perfect harmony, and where naked male bodies on public display were a mark of individual freedom. Even as late as 1904, Winckelmann's imprint can be felt behind the words of an eminent German biologist and leading advocate of homosexuality:

If there is any field at all where turning to antiquity is still today almost synonymous with returning to nature; . . . then it is this. . . . in the honesty, i.e. in the absence of hypocrisy, in the acknowledgment of natural drives and in the unselfconsciousness of a harmless and delightful enjoyment of life, in this we can indeed take the ancients as our example. This is also eventually the yearning that so many of the best feel for the beauty-loving, sensual youthful-fresh, sunny Greece; and the core of such an obscure feeling of longing is the often not even clearly understood desire for liberation and the revitalization of this kind of cult of beauty, of friendship and of love, which in the sad jargon of our age with its frock and petticoat morality is called 'homosexuality'.¹³

Benedikt Friedländer's Greek utopia outlined here was not that far removed from the 'sunny', rhythmical world that enchanted Carter on his visit to Hellaerau in 1912. Ancient Greece is privileged in both contexts as a natural world happily untrammelled by the strict moral code imposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. And this view of 'sunny Greece' was also shared by the notable *fin de siècle* British aesthete, the poet and critic, John Addington Symonds, who was shortly to become the first British public advocate of homosexual-

¹² Kant, 'German Gymnastics,' 8–10.

¹³ Benedikt Friedländer in 1904, cited and translated in Sebastian Matzner, 'From Uranians to Homosexuals: Philhellenism, Greek Homoeroticism and Gay Emancipation in Germany, 1835–1915,' *Classical Receptions Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 74.

ity and for whom: 'the themes of celibacy and aestheticism, and of the sinfulness of carnal pleasure . . . are wholly alien to Greek moral and religious notions',¹⁴

However, whilst the supposed 'naturalness' of the Greeks remained a widely held view well into the new century, and underpinned the ideals of the neo-pagan communities that sprang up across Europe as alternatives to urban living, the supremely rational Greeks delineated by Winckelmann began to be eclipsed by alternative scholarly perspectives in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche was the first to proffer an alternative, darker, murkier vision of the Greeks, which was later endorsed and expanded by the pioneering scholarship of his friend and supporter Erwin Rohde.¹⁵ The unique achievement of Greek tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was that it was able both to afford a glimpse (through the chorus) into the terrifying (Dionysiac) abyss and equally to assuage the impact of that vision by providing the mediating formal (Apolline) qualities embodied by the actors/heroes. Rohde alone defended, if not all the detail, at least the destination of Nietzsche's treatise because it chimed with his own burgeoning interest in the Greek underworld and the ecstatic experience of the Dionysiac, which was to provide the subject of his study some twenty-two years later, *Psyche* (1894).

Walter Pater, a leading figure in the Aesthetic Movement, published two important essays in 1876, which shared Nietzsche's interest in this darker side of ancient Greece that became central to the visceral aesthetics of modernism. In 'Demeter and Persephone' and 'The Study of Dionysus' (both originally published in 1876, and then together in *Greek Studies* in 1895), Pater explored the Greek underworld and the irrational and ecstatic in Greek religion. Pater, often unfairly written out of the largely German-focused histories of classical scholarship,¹⁶ went even further than Nietzsche in his celebration of Dionysus with his vicarious pleasure in maenadism in 'The Study of Dionysus' (1876). In his essay on 'The Bacchanals of Euripides', Pater refers to the spring sacrifice in celebration of Dionysus in which 'that giddy, intoxicating sense of spring—that tingling in the veins, sympathetic with the yearning life of the earth, having, apparently, in all times and places, prompted some mode of wild dancing'.¹⁷ Pater's scholarship, like Nietzsche's, met with mixed responses from the

14 John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1880), 179.

15 Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, 125–131.

16 Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn, eds., *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

17 Walter Pater, *Macmillan's Magazine* 60 (1889): 63–72. The essay was written c. 1879.

academy, especially when the casual links made between British Aestheticism and homoeroticism appeared to be founded in fact in the wake of Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895.

By the turn of the century, in Cambridge in particular and under the influence of the new discipline of comparative anthropology, the second most important development to lay the foundations for the privileging of the figure of the dancer in Britain took place. This was the emergence of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists—amongst whom were the classical scholars and popularisers of their subject, Gilbert Murray and Jane Ellen Harrison, both clearly indebted in various ways to Nietzsche and Pater. The Cambridge Ritualists also drew attention to the gods of the underworld and insisted on their equal importance (if not their primacy) in relation to the Olympians. They were especially attracted to what became the antithetical deity to Olympian Apollo, the god of transformation, fertility, the dangerous, androgynous and exotic patron of drama, Dionysus. The Cambridge Ritualists designated dance as a form of primitive prayer and maintained that Greek tragedy had grown out of the ritual dances in honour of Dionysus. If Nietzsche had claimed that the essence of tragedy could be located in the hitherto neglected ancient chorus, the paradigmatic chorus now became those intoxicated maenadic dancers who danced in honour of Greek tragedy's patron god, Dionysus.

Harrison had been amongst the first of the women undergraduates at Cambridge and she earned herself a popular profile by giving public lectures on Greek art from the outset of her career.¹⁸ According to Harrison in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), it was only by studying ritual that Greek religion could be understood; and in *Themis* (1912), she explains that the worship of Dionysus comes from group, rather than individual, desires and emotions. Dionysus, in Harrison's reading, is Nietzsche's 'boundary' breaker but he is also tied to a social collective. An essay by Murray was appended to *Themis*, in which he argued that tragedy enacted the ritual pattern of the dying 'Year-God' (originally Dionysus himself), according to which the tragic protagonist's death is assuaged and offset by the continuing presence of the tragic chorus which ushers in the new 'Year-God'. The dancing chorus, in this schema, becomes key to securing the society's future.

Both Harrison and Murray were also deeply indebted to the archaeological findings (now strongly resisted) by Wilhelm Dörpfeld, whose excavations in the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens in the 1880s and 1890s seemingly demonstrated

18 Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

that there was originally no stage in the theatre at all.¹⁹ Dörpfeld's stageless theatre was popularized by Harrison in her study, *Primitive Athens* (1906), where she argues that theatre was not originally a site of artistic endeavour but had served as ritual ground.

The ideas of the Cambridge Ritualists proved controversial within the classical academy because of their links to James Frazer and their adoption of methods from the new discipline of comparative anthropology. The American classical scholar, Paul Shorey vehemently criticized Murray for mixing scholarship with the faddism informed by Modern Dance and particularly non-European, 'alien' cultural referents:

Professor Murray has done much harm by helping to substitute in the minds of an entire generation for Arnold's and Jebb's conception of the serene rationality of the classics the corybantic Hellenism of Miss Harrison and Isadora Duncan . . . the higher vaudeville Hellenism of Mr Vachel Lindsay, the anthropological Hellenism of the disciples of Sir James Frazer, the irrational, semi-sentimental Polynesian, free-verse and sex-freedom Hellenism of all the gushful geysers of 'rapturous rubbish' about the Greek spirit.²⁰

In their search for deeper truths below the surface of ancient Greece, Murray and Harrison and their close colleague, F.M. Cornford were importing 'modernist intruders in a traditional field which had its own adequate standards of appropriateness and proof'.²¹

Yet, however controversial within the academy, the new darker perspectives on Greece proffered by Pater, Nietzsche and the Cambridge Ritualists were routinely adopted and adapted within the wider cultural sphere in the first decade of the new century, when things 'Greek' became highly fashionable. In many ways, earlier developments within the arts had anticipated this ritual turn in scholarship: Wagner's notorious festival culture at Bayreuth had had a direct influence on Nietzsche's theory; and the fascination with ancient cultic practices had informed recent developments in Modern Dance in general, and Jaques-Dalcroze's school at Hellerau, in particular. As Harrison herself explained in *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913), now adding her reading of the

19 For a detailed account of discussions of ritual and theatre at this time, see H.C. Payne, 'Modernising the Ancients: The Reconstruction of Ritual Drama 1870–1920,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 122 (1978): 182–192.

20 Cited in Payne, 'Modernising the Ancients,' 187.

21 *Ibid.*, 188.

French sociologist, Émile Durkheim into the mix, studies of ancient ritual mattered because they demonstrated that art had a social function, both in the past and potentially in the modern world through the revival of festival culture.²²

Chronophotography

'Rhythm', however, was not just alive and ubiquitous at this moment, it was also becoming analysable through developments in chronophotography. In 1893, the medical researcher and chronophotographer, Albert Londe, published the first book on medical photography, *La photographie médicale: Application aux sciences médicales et physiologiques*. Londe had been hired by the eminent neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot to record the physical and muscular movements of patients suffering from epilepsy and hysteria at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. With the help of the chronophotographic techniques pioneered by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, Londe was able to capture fleeting movement sequences never previously detectable in clinical research.

Chronophotography records a moment in a sequence of movements that makes it possible, phenomenologically, to anticipate the next moment. This was a gift to the visual artist, especially in depictions of the dancer and notably for the studies by Edgar Degas. Three years after the first medical publication on photography, the French musicologist, Maurice Emmanuel, fascinated by the new technology and aware of the experiments of Marey and Muybridge, published *La danse grecque antique d'après les monuments figurés* (1896). Appearing in the same year as the first cinematic exhibition with a projector in Paris, Emmanuel's best-selling study proclaimed, through the analogue of chronophotography, that it was possible to revive ancient dance by animating the vase frieze.²³ Greek vase-painters, it seemed, 'were chronophotographers *avant la lettre*'; and in true nineteenth-century style, Emmanuel gathered his evidence and using all available technology concluded 'that [he] held "reality" in [his] hands'.²⁴ The chronophotographic sequences captured by Marey and Muybridge consisted for the most part of the movements of naked white men and women. These figures caught on film, with their uncanny resemblance to Greek sculptures, undoubtedly contributed to the craze for re-animating Greek dancers. Isadora Duncan may well have first encountered Emmanuel's ideas during the research she conducted in the library of the Opéra in Paris,

22 Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), v–vi.

23 Naerebout, "In Search of a Dead Rat", 39–56.

24 *Ibid.*, 48.

where the archivist, Charles-Louis-Étienne Nuittier had assisted Emmanuel in his researches.²⁵ By 1903 in Duncan's Berlin lecture, 'The Dance of the Future', she indeed sounds as if she has read Emmanuel's study: 'there is not one [Greek vase or bas-relief] which in its movement does not presuppose another movement'.²⁶

Even if Britain was relatively late in coming under the 'rhythmic spell' detected by Carter on his visit to Hellerau in 1912, by the start of the new century the Greek-style dancers were ubiquitous in Britain too. These Greek dancers took their understanding of the ancient Greeks indirectly from nineteenth-century scholarship, but much of their practice was informed by Emmanuel and his extrapolations from chronophotography. The dance criticism of Marcelle Azra Hincks, the dance critic for *New Age* magazine and author of a study of Japanese dance, was very much informed by the comparative focus of the Cambridge Ritualists and by the analyses of vases by Emmanuel. She urged her (largely male) colleagues (using the language of 'primitivism' typical of the time) to take their bearings from classical anthropology and to learn to decipher all kinds of dance, 'from the crude jumpings and gestures of the savage to the formal and rigid ballet'.²⁷ For Hincks, Lucian's second-century CE treatise *On Dancing* was her guide, and she recognized that the modern Greek-inspired dance was key to understanding the 'rhythm' of the age.²⁸

Even if Isadora Duncan had no direct knowledge of Emmanuel's research, Auguste-François Gorguet's sensuous line drawings of her capture her movement patterns sequentially—of awakening, stirring from the ground, and rising into powerful action (figure 1). Emmanuel's imprint can also be detected behind the so-called 'moving Greek frieze' of Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*; and his animated Greeks lie too behind Ruth St Denis' comment that 'all I had to do was take the best poses [of ancient works of art], the most meaningful ones and set those poses dancing'.²⁹ A photograph of the rather risqué Maud Allan, the Canadian-born American dancer, who was Duncan's main

25 Ibid., 49.

26 Cited in Naerebout, "In Search of a Dead Rat", 50.

27 Marcelle Azra Hincks, *New Age*, August 25, 1910. For details about Hincks, I am indebted to Susan Jones for sharing with me her chapter, 'Dance, Modernism and the Female Critic in the *New Age*, *Rhythm*, and the *Outlook*', in *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1890s–1920s*, eds. Faith Binckes and Carey Snyder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 106–119.

28 Marcelle Azra Hincks, 'Dancing and Anthropology,' *Revue archéologique* (1909).

29 Cited in Naerebout, "In Search of a Dead Rat", 52.



FIGURE 1
Auguste-François
Gourget, 'Les Danses
d'Isadora Duncan,'
L'illustration, 1909
REPRODUCED
COURTESY OF APGRD

rival in London from 1908 onwards, appears to capture the slippage from demure to wanton maenad as the viewer's eye is pulled down the image to the dancer's lithe lower limbs glimpsed, on closer inspection, through the translucent *chiton* (figure 2). Allan's maenadic dances were very much influenced by the time she had spent time in the German-speaking world, where she had initially gone to train as a pianist, but where she had worked with Max Reinhardt's company in Berlin and learned much from Jaques-Dalcroze's experiments at Hellerau. But it was Allan's dangerously erotic maenadic dance in her infamous performance as Salome for which she gained notoriety, and which ultimately proved problematic for Greek-style dance in Britain.³⁰

30 Fiona Macintosh, 'Dancing Maenads in Early Twentieth-century Britain,' in *The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World: Responses to Greek and Roman Dance*, ed. Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 197.



FIGURE 2
 Postcard of Maud Allan, c. 1908
 REPRODUCED COURTESY OF
 APGRD

Natural Bodies

The pursuit of the 'natural' body at this time, variously through retreat from the urban, bodybuilding and what was dubbed 'Natural Movement',³¹ grew out of this constructed idea of 'Greekness' and the theory of eugenics. The ableism at the heart of modern western culture stems, in large measure, from the theories and practices developed at this time.³² Whilst it is now impossible to separate the utopian origins of Modern Dance from its appropriations under Fascism

31 Rachel Fensham and Alexandra Carter, *Dancing Naturally: Nature, Neo-classicism and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Dance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

32 Hannah Silverblank and Marchella Ward, 'Why Does Classical Reception Need Disability Studies?,' *Classical Receptions Journal* 12, no. 4 (2020): 502–530.

and Nazism in the 1930s, the paradigms that led there have still not received systematic scrutiny, nor has their imprint on the present been fully acknowledged. As we have heard, Nietzsche's thinking was underpinned by ideas developed within nineteenth-century classical scholarship. These had both idealized the ancient Greeks and constructed dangerous genealogies that associated whiteness with so-called natural bodies (despite the originally polychromatic ancient sculptures) and had located the descendants of the ancient Greeks in northern Europe (as Nazi ideologues, backed by pseudo-scientific evidence, readily promulgated). Nietzsche's paradigmatic dancers were largely confined to Greek vases, whereas it was real-life dancers from India, East Asia, Africa and Latin America who provided the global examples that shaped embodied practice in western 'Modern Dance'.

The end of the nineteenth century was characterized by anxiety about degeneration and decline in health. In Britain, in particular, concern about the unhealthy, urban male working-class youth and his lack of manliness was prompted by the geopolitical shifts attendant on the emergence of a new unified Germany. Charles Kingsley, in his lecture on physical health delivered at the Midland Institute in Birmingham in 1872, urged men and women to turn to the beauty that humans once possessed in Greek antiquity and to be:

discontented, with the divine and wholesome discontent, at their own physical frame, and at that of their children. I would accustom their eyes to those precious heirlooms of the human race, the statues of the old Greeks; to their tender grandeur, their chaste healthfulness, their unconscious, because perfect might: and say—There; these are tokens to you, and to all generations yet unborn, of what man could be once; of what he can be again if he will obey those laws of nature which are the voice of God.³³

If the physical ill-health of the nation was understood to be leading to increased ugliness and mental incapacity, the perceived lack of manliness seemed to be confirmed in the wake of Wilde's trial of 1895. Homosexuality, no less than the New Woman, was contributing to undermining family structures; and the rise of the New Woman was now posing an even greater threat as she flagrantly challenged socially constructed gender barriers and forged new paths beyond the family hearth.

33 Charles Kingsley, 'The Science of Health,' in *Sanitary and Social Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), 46.

From the outset, the revival of Greek dance was inextricably linked to other 'health' movements in Britain and Europe from the end of the nineteenth century. In 1908, when both Maud Allan and Isadora Duncan were capturing the headlines in the British press, not only were the world's top athletes on display in the Olympic Stadium in West Ham but also Baden Powell's anti-urban Boy Scout Movement was founded. The Greeks were deemed the best guides in the promotion of healthy living for all these initiatives because their early training in physical education and dance was said to have developed their ideal physiques. There was also in Britain, as there was in Germany, a belief that Britain enjoyed a privileged relationship with Greek antiquity. In the 1920s Greek dance is regularly invoked as a model for the embryonic British Dance movement on account of its 'open-air and athletic' character.³⁴ The Greeks and the British routinely become one in their alleged shared love of games and the great outdoors; and the Greeks' athletic dances are appropriated readily and effortlessly, we are told, by the English-speaking peoples of the twentieth century.

Recovery of the 'natural' Greek body was advocated through various training systems. Duncan initially learnt about the Greeks through a system of expressive action devised by the French musicologist François Delsarte, which was brought to North America at the end of the nineteenth century by Genevieve Stebbins. Here it was known as Aesthetic or Harmonic Gymnastics and was readily adopted into the education of upper-middle class American young women.³⁵ In many ways, Delsarte's method, founded upon twelve poses based on figures from classical sculpture, looked back to Emma Hamilton's late eighteenth-century 'Attitudes' in its combination of rapid movement and arrested calm, in which the living body merged with a recognisable ancient artefact. As with Duncan's performances many years later, Hamilton's 'Attitudes' were performed in the same space in which the very objects they imitated were displayed, prompting Horace Walpole on his visit to the villa in Naples to observe wryly that Lord Hamilton had merely married his gallery of statues.³⁶

Whilst Delsarte provided the bedrock for Duncan's early affinities with the Greeks, her knowledge was subsequently enhanced by her brother Raymond's tutelage in the so-called Six Greek Positions—an apparent refinement of Del-

34 F.M. Colebrook, 'Why Not a British Dance?', *The Link* 1, no. 4 (1925): 45; Ruby Ginner, 'The Athletic Festivals of Greece,' *The Link* 2, no. 2 (1926): 14–15.

35 Genevieve Stebbins, *The Delsarte System of Expression*, 6th ed. (repr. New York: Dance Horizons, 1977).

36 Horace Walpole, 'Letter to Mary Berry,' September 11, 1791, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence Yale Edition*, vol. 11 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 349.

sarte's twelve positions following his own researches into Greco-Roman material culture of Greco-Roman antiquity in the museums of European capitals.³⁷ As Stéphane Mallarmé noted of dance in general at this time with his designation *écriture corporelle*, the Duncans and their contemporaries were literally writing with their bodies; and the presumption now was that meaning was only fully realizable corporeally.³⁸

Raymond Duncan trained a whole generation of Greek dancers in the so-called Six Greek Positions, including his sister and her main rival, Maud Allan and the two main leading pedagogues of Greek Dance in Britain, Margaret Morris and Ruby Ginner. Raymond's Six Greek Positions taught physical balance through the muscle groups working in opposition. This muscular tension was in turn said to strengthen the mind. Although this so-called law of oppositions was well-known from gymnastic training, what Raymond Duncan now added was the authority of antiquity and the conviction that this muscular oppositional tension was 'nature's' way, which modern lifestyles precluded.

The belief that the reproduction of poses from Greek vases and sculpture can enhance both the modern body and mind not only underpins Margaret Morris' method.³⁹ It is also the central thesis of a best-selling manual entitled *The Renaissance of the Greek Ideal* (1914) by the jujitsu-trained Diane Watts, which also identifies the ways in which the modern body falls short of the ancient ideal. Watts systematizes a series of movements (as with Delsarte, largely based on Greek sculpture) that allegedly enables the reader and practitioner to recover the Greek 'ideal'. Again, as with Raymond Duncan, this ideal is founded upon a tension located in the diaphragm which can result, Watts argues, 'in a complete restoration of exhausted powers, taking away all sense of fatigue and placing the body under an alert control'.⁴⁰ According to Watts, this tension in the diaphragm is not only detectable in the poses of Greek sculptures, but also delineated in the *Iliad* (v.529), where Agamemnon reviews his troops and tells them 'Hold up your mind; strength is but strength of will'. As the author of an article in *Classical Philology* (1919) points out, Watts here is citing from George Chapman's 1611 translation of the *Iliad*. Watts erroneously insists that Homer's word for *phrenes* (mind or faculty) means diaphragm and

37 Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Bonni and Liveright, 1927).

38 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Autre étude de danse: Les fonds dans le ballet d'après une indication récente,' in *Igitur; Divagations; Un coup de dés*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 201.

39 Margaret Morris, *My Life in Movement* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1962).

40 Grace Harriet Macurdy, 'The Diaphragm and the Greek Ideal: The Treachery of Translations,' *Classical Philology* 14, no. 4 (1919): 389–393.

‘that on the strength of the diaphragm depends the strength of the spirit, that unquenchable flame of conscious will-power, etc. [*sic*]:’⁴¹ Philological insecurities notwithstanding, Watts’ manual clearly had considerable reach: not only did it prompt a critique in a mainstream classical journal, it also received wide endorsement in medical circles, including amongst ophthalmologists, who maintained that failing eyesight could be stemmed by an improvement in posture in accordance with the Watts method.⁴²

Even as late as the 1960s, when Ruby Ginner published her second book on Greek dance entitled *A Gateway to the Dance*, which grew out of her practice and research during visits to Italy and to Greece in the interwar period, it includes a medical endorsement in the preface by Professor A.P. Cawadias, Professor of General Practice. According to Cawadias, Greek dance is a way to counteract ‘the general restlessness, exaggeration and neurosis of the world today.’⁴³ For Ginner, ancient Greek dance led to a ‘healthy and beautiful physique, to a perfectly controlled expression of mind and soul’, which the modern world with its ‘rush and hurry’, its ‘too much mechanism’ and ‘loss of mental and physical control’ denies. In a world in which ‘jerk and loss of rhythm’ has become the norm, there is a consequent ‘loss of healthy vitality and joy.’⁴⁴ Professor Cawadias praises Ginner for ‘insisting on pure Greek dancing’ and having thereby ‘stopped [dance] deviating towards Dionysiac disorder and gymnastics.’⁴⁵

In 1926 Ginner had proclaimed Greek dance as the ‘most beautiful, the sanest type of movement’, and a necessary antidote to ‘the neurotic movements that monopolize theatres and ballroom dances to the hideous and nerve-tearing din of jazz bands.’⁴⁶ Jazz is regularly cited in the 1920s by Ginner and other exponents of the art of Greek dance (notably Duncan) as the decadent art form, against which their own art form is being routinely defined. Jazz with its roots in African American culture is deemed primitive and exotic—a kind of drug which caught the war-torn western world when it was at its most vulnerable and which induces ‘imbecilic’ movement and often promotes immoral-

41 Macurdy, ‘The Diaphragm and the Greek Ideal,’ 390.

42 See, e.g., W.H. Bates (MD), ‘A Lesson from the Greeks,’ *Better Eyesight: A Monthly Magazine*, June 1920.

43 Ruby Ginner, *Gateway to the Dance* (London: Newman Neame, 1960), vi.

44 Ruby Ginner’s Lecture in Leamington, December 17, 1922, ‘The Position of Dancing in the Education of Ancient Greece: An Address Read by Miss Ruby Ginner at the Last Dancers’ Circle Dinner,’ Ginner Papers at the National Resource Centre for Dance (NRCD), University of Surrey (BB/N/10).

45 Ginner, *Gateway to the Dance*, vi.

46 Ginner, Lecture in Leamington (BB/N/10).

ity.⁴⁷ The dance critic, Mark Perugini, husband of Ginner's colleague and close friend, Irene Mawer, proclaimed that what is necessary in the postwar period is for the western world 'which has known the exalted calm of classic Greek art, the orderly logical, yet virile mentality of Latin culture and Anglo-Saxon progress' to shun alien non-western influences so as to recapture the 'idyllic classic days, for inspiration . . . beauty, joy and—sanity'.⁴⁸ Indeed, detecting 'joy' in Greek dance was widespread. According to *Lady Pictorial* in 1917, both Margaret Morris and Ruby Ginner should be praised for teaching 'the eugenics of joy'.⁴⁹

However, Ginner's insistence on the link between Greek dance and a 'healthy and beautiful physique, to a perfectly controlled expression of mind and soul'⁵⁰ did not pass without comment.

A clear note of caution was sounded against Ginner's emphasis on physical beauty as the goal to which all should aspire. It came from the Christian Socialist, the Reverend Stewart Headlam who reminded Ginner and the members of the 'Dancers' Circle' in 1922 that reverence for the Greeks needed some qualification: Christianity, he cautioned, had gone one important step further in pointing out that bodily deformity did not necessarily preclude beauty.⁵¹ As a fierce champion of the theatre generally and dance in particular (against its opponents in the Church), and a staunch and unorthodox Anglican supporter of the pilloried (it was Headlam who had raised bail for Oscar Wilde), Headlam's voice was one not easily dismissed. Moreover, his important intervention serves to highlight the interconnections at this time between 'The Revived Greek Dance' and the theory of eugenics.

Margaret Morris is in many ways the exception who proves the rule amongst the practitioners of Greek Dance in her attitude to the so-called 'natural' body. In her memoir published in 1969, she clearly distances herself from the eugenicist underpinnings of Greek dance. As a trained physiotherapist, Morris insists that the Margaret Morris Method (MMM) combines both aesthetic and remedial value.⁵² The Americans, she points out, are more advanced in curative dance practice than in Europe, partly she suggests because of the 'great mix-

47 See, e.g., *The Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, August 10, 1923; *The Bedfordshire Standard*, October 26, 1923. Ginner Papers, NRCD.

48 Mark Perugini, 'On Decadence in Art,' *The Link* 3, no. 3 (1948): 29.

49 *Lady's Pictorial*, October 20, 1917. Ginner Papers NRCD.

50 Ginner, Lecture in Leamington (BB/N/10).

51 *The Morning Post*, December 18, 1922; *The Telegraph*, December 18, 1922; *The Era*, December 24, 1922. For Headlam, see Richard Foulkes, *The Church and State in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166–186.

52 Morris, *My Life in Movement*, 134.

ture of races, and through them the many ethnic influences that are present'.⁵³ Diversity, for her, is a source of knowledge and creativity, not a sign of decadence and morass.

As is more than apparent, Ginner's Greek Dance, still practiced in Britain, was developed against the backdrop of the widely endorsed theory of eugenics during the 1920s and 1930s. As for Böhme and others in Germany for whom 'Dance is a race question', Ginner's practice was also founded upon a body of nineteenth-century racial theory. Her debts to racial readings of Greek antiquity are very much in evidence in her first book of 1933, where she argues that 'The evolution of the Greek dance follows the history of the race' and is 'affected by climate, by racial characteristics'.⁵⁴ The twentieth century, she maintains, has recovered this Greek dance, not in high-kicking or the skirt-dancing of the Moulin Rouge, which are 'bewitched, bedevilled, a frenzy of agony of movement without a parallel except in maniacal'.⁵⁵ According to Ginner, Greek dance was the perfect 'admixture' of two racial groups: one the indigenous, Pelasgians, 'a short, dark-haired race, with all the passionate, superstitious, imaginative, and artistic qualities of the Southerner'; the other from the North, 'fair-haired, tall and warlike, with the stern repression of passion peculiar to the Northerner', one sub-group of which, the Achaeans, were 'blue-eyed . . . of a magnificent physique . . . brave, chaste, self-controlled and law-abiding'.⁵⁶ Not only does this sound remarkably similar to contemporary racial theory (the 'Southerners' sounding identical to Matthew Arnold's Celt as well as widely held stereotypes of the so-called 'Jewish character', and the Northerners becoming synonymous with the Aryan ideal of Nazi ideology), it also draws much of its detail from Ginner and her colleagues' reading of Karl Otfried Müller's *The Dorians* (1824, English translation 1830) and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The Ginner-Mawer School of Greek Dance provided a rounded 'education', and throughout the late 1920s it consolidated its reputation, both within Britain and across Europe and the British Empire. In 1924 the school introduced exams to standardize practice within this relatively new area of dance. Not only did the curriculum include dance, it also involved, in the more advanced stages, the study of the visual arts, literature and myth. Both Ginner and Mawer thus granted to their pupils with their formalized curriculum not just movement training but also an idealized view of ancient Greece shaped by racial theory.

53 Ibid.

54 Ruby Ginner, *The Revived Greek Dance: Its Art and Technique* (London: Methuen, 1933), 1.

55 Ginner, *The Revived Greek Dance*, 17.

56 Ibid., 1, 3.

Throughout the late 1920s, the Ginner-Mawer School consolidated its reputation, both within Britain and abroad. They travelled to Italy with students in 1924, 1926 and in 1927. Ginner greatly admired Mussolini's reconstruction of the ancient theatre at Ostia and considered the Syracuse Festival a model for the Anglo-Saxon world: 'We still look forward to a time when, in England there shall be no division between the Theatre Arts, when dancers, actors, musicians, poets and designers shall unite to produce a great national festival'.⁵⁷ In 1929 Eva Palmer visited the Ginner-Mawer School in London and invited them to participate in the second Delphic Festival in 1930. During the 1930s, the school organised numerous large-scale, spectacular events in England—notably outdoors in Hyde Park; and with the festivals of Syracuse and Delphi as models, they went on in 1936 to stage a vast spectacular one-day event in the Albert Hall with some five hundred performers and were making plans to perform in Wembley Stadium in 1937 with eight hundred dancers as part of the National Festival of Youth.⁵⁸

Conclusion

As Carter explained in 1912, the 'rhythmic spell' cast across Europe remained more an aspiration than a reality in Britain. But what is striking is how short-lived this aspiration was. The new corporeality in the British theatre became increasingly associated with moral decadence and above all dangerous 'cosmopolitanism', once anti-German feeling became endemic as the hostilities within Europe became an increasing likelihood. When Allan brought her ground-breaking solo dances to London from Germany in 1908, she introduced a new freedom of expression that teetered (especially with her Salome dance) on the brink of decadence. In this sense, her performances at the top of the bill at the Palace Theatre continued the risqué tradition of *poses plastiques* that provided the standard fare at the Palace. But with the imprimatur of Edward VII, who had been responsible for bringing her over from Marienbad, Allan became a star in popular and high cultural circles that secured her rivalry with Duncan absolutely.

However, Allan made Greek dance appear perilously cosmopolitan (for which read alien and Jewish), and it became essential in the postwar period in Britain that it be aligned with 'healthy' Anglo-Saxon culture. In 1918, Allan

57 Ruby Ginner, 'The Athletic Festivals of Greece,' *The Link* 2, no. 2 (1926): 14–15.

58 Ruby Ginner, 'The Jubilee of the Revived Greek Dance,' *The Link* 2 (new series no. 2), March 1936 [Special Issue 'The Greek Drama Festival'], 4–7.

took a right-wing, antisemitic Member of Parliament, Noel Pemberton Billing to court in order to defend her reputation after he accused her of leading a 'Cult of the Clitoris'.⁵⁹ From her very first appearances in London with her *Vision of Salome*, Allan had sent shock waves through the establishment. But she had a very wide following, especially amongst women; and rumours had circulated about a *ménage à trois* between her and the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith and his wife, or more frequently, of her lesbian affair with Margot Asquith.

Allan's supposed Sapphic relations were not atypical of those involved in Greek dance at this time—much the same was alleged of Ruth St Denis, Loie Fuller and Duncan herself—it was just that in Allan's case her sexuality was particularly flagrantly on display. Her bisexuality posed an even greater threat because it fueled anxieties about the menace to the family and society originating from within. Allan was also perceived to emblemize what was deemed a cosmopolitan corporeality that was not only Sapphically pleasure-seeking; she was also undermining the war effort by touring in a production of Wilde's *Salome*, with a Jewish producer, J.T. Grein. Allan lost her case and her reputation, and in turn she besmirched the image of the Greek dancer in interwar Britain. When Greek dance is regularly invoked as a model for the embryonic British Dance movement on account of its 'open-air and athletic' character, the impulse clearly stems from Allan's dangerous conduct. As Ginner sought to redeem image of Greek dance in the wake of the Allan scandal, she turned more and more to the 'cleansing', Aryan-infused rhetoric of fascism.

Ginner had been a political radical in the prewar days in her involvement with the suffrage movement. But like many of her generation in Britain, she had become enthralled by a particular strand of German *Altertumswissenschaft* that was inextricably linked to spurious scientific racial theories that were to legitimize the extermination of the Jews and other minorities in Europe over the next few years. In 1936 during the Berlin Olympics, a production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* staged the trial between Apollo and the Furies in the final play of the trilogy as the victory of the Aryans over the *Untermenschen*.⁶⁰ In the same year in London, one of Ginner's supporters advocates the urgent need to sustain the ideals behind Greek dance: 'Very far away in the past our lives began in the beauty of truth of those who lived before, very far away into the future we intend to hand on this torch to the generations that will come; that whatever

59 Macintosh, 'Dancing Maenads,' 197.

60 On the 1936 production of the *Oresteia*, see in this special issue Eleftheria Ioannidou, 'Performative Mo(nu)ments: Re-enacting Classical Antiquity for the Popular Masses in the Theaters of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 117–141.

may happen in the future, wars and rumours of war, there shall yet be a vision of beauty, truth, and sanity, to hold before the world'.⁶¹

The writer is boldly, if not precariously, holding up the ideals of 'beauty, truth and sanity' as beacons in a lugubrious and morally fragile world. The tragic irony is that it was precisely the 'vision of beauty, truth, and sanity' promulgated, *inter alia*, by the proponents of Greek Dance that had ineluctably led them here.

61 Helga Burgess, 'Lessons from the Greek,' *The Era*, January 29, 1936.