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Edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter

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Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century

Hillel Schwartz

Between 1840 and 1930 the dance world in Europe and the United States had, by seduction and then concussion, suffered a shift in attitudes toward physical movement. The date 1840 is not chosen haphazardly, for by that year François Delsarte had begun his lectures in Paris, a *Cours d'esthétique appliqué*. Delsarte taught a system of relating gesture to expression, expression to the soul. There were Orders and Laws of Movement, and a Law of Correspondence: "To each spiritual function responds a function of the body; to each grand function of the body corresponds a spiritual act." Delsarte's system was religiously colored and highly trinitarian, and its later exponents made heroic efforts either to explain the intrinsic psychic connection between his theology and his original science of gesture, or to divorce the two entirely.¹

Delsarte's lectures, designed to help actors, singers and musicians understand the relationship between gestures, sentiments and the senses, were as catholic and enlightened as they were French and Catholic. He drew implicitly upon Enlightenment and early Romantic critiques of eighteenth-century actors perambulating through sequences of consciously histrionic, unfelt postures on a badly framed, poorly composed stage. Like Diderot, Rousseau and Goethe, Delsarte meant to reinvigorate theatrical — especially operatic — convention so that, as in the very best of political and pulpit oratory, voice and movement would together become an integral expression of that newly furnished entity, the self.²

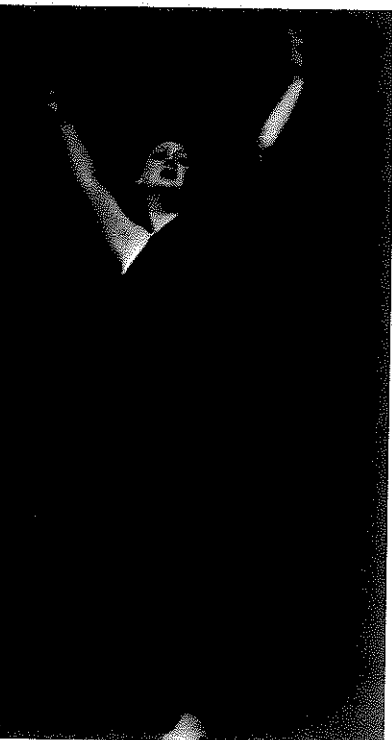
More the exuberant Illuminist (and illusionist) than the dispassionate *illuminé*, a young American named Steele MacKaye was drawn to study with the Old Master shortly before his death in 1871. The American became a favored disciple, scheduled to appear under Delsarte's auspices at the Théâtre Français, an honor never before granted to a foreigner — and honored only in the breach, the Franco-Prussian War intervening. The disciple had however the fortune to attend the Old Master's last set of classes, in which, according to a visitor, Delsarte depicted "the various passions and emotions of the human soul, by means of expression and gesture only, without uttering a single syllable. . . . You were forced to admit that every gesture, every movement of a facial muscle, had a true purpose — a *raison d'être*." MacKaye

returned to the United States to produce and stage plays where “each incident lived in the memory as a vivid picture,” where “the tempo and flux of [a revolutionary mob’s] rhythmic sound-surges” were vital but dialogue almost incidental, gesture and theatrical machinery all. He would patent a sliding stage, an elevator stage, a floating stage, and he would, literally, electrify his theaters. At the (premature) end of his life, he conceived a vastly kinematic Spectatorium with twenty-five telescopic stages on six miles of railroad track, in full view of nine thousand people watching a six-act historical drama, *The Great Discovery, or the World Finder*, performed essentially without spoken words, for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Unfinished, the Spectatorium was compromised into a small Scenitorium and passed away with MacKaye himself in 1894, but others did follow through on one of MacKaye’s less magniloquent projects — his Harmonic Gymnastics, a series of Delsartean exercises “to so train and discipline the body that it would become a responsible and expressive instrument through which fluid movement could pass without the obstacles of stiff and unyielding joints and muscles.”³

That last quotation is from Ted Shawn, who, with Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, pioneered modern dance in the United States. Shawn had studied with Mrs. Richard Hovey, a pupil of Delsarte’s other favored disciple, his son Gustave. The mothers of Duncan and St.

Denis had also studied with disciples of the Frenchman. In 1898 Duncan herself lauded Delsarte as “the master of all principles of flexibility, and lightness of body,” who “should receive universal thanks for the bonds he removed from our constrained members.”⁴

Ignoring his rigid equations of specific gestures with specific meanings, American dancers took from Delsarte his concern for the absolute integrity of gesture, his attention to the expressive power of the torso and his desire for movements liberated from highly mannered codes of motion. Duncan called for the initiation of movement from the lower torso, from some physical/spiritual center akin to the solar plexus, and for the free elaboration of movement out of that center — uninhibited by corsets, heavy skirts and narrow shoes. One used the whole foot, the whole torso, the whole body to move. Gertrude Colby, among the first of modern dance instructors, later wrote, “The arm positions grow out of the body movements and follow the life and sway of the body. They do not move independently but grow out of and continue the trunk movements.” Helen Moller, western tomboy turned modern dancer, insisted in 1918 that



Isadora Duncan died in Nice, September 14, 1927 while test driving a Bugatti she planned to buy. Her trailing scarf caught in the wheel in its first revolution and broke her neck.

“All true physical expression has its generative centre in the region of the heart... Movements flowing from any other source are aesthetically futile.” Katharine Edson, national director of the Denishawn schools, would conclude, “The art of gesture must come first to a dancer because his gesture represents himself as a whole.” She too had studied with Mrs. Richard Hovey, the Delsartean.⁵

As Duncan and a long line of more modest Epigoni returned to Greek models, as St. Denis and Shawn looked farther east, they began to foster a new kinaesthetic. This kinaesthetic demanded sincerity, the loving accommodation of the force of gravity, fluid movement flowing out of the body center, freedom of invention and natural transitions through many fully expressive positions.⁶

About the time that Duncan, Shawn and St. Denis were releasing the human torso that had been so rigorously confined by the costume and choreography of stylized ballet, another European master arose, a Professor of Harmony at Geneva, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. In 1910 in a village outside of Dresden, he established his own college of Eurythmy, of “music made visible.” At Hellerau (“bright meadow”), “they taught you an alphabet and a grammar of movements. With your arms you kept the time; a set of movements for three-part time, another for four, and so on. With your feet and body you indicated the duration of notes. It was a kind of rhythmic gymnastics,” wrote Sinclair Lewis in *World's End*, and it was “not only beautiful but healing, a way to train the young in grace and happiness, in efficiency and co-ordination of body and mind.” Rhythm was all important; sensitivity to one’s personal physical rhythms was necessarily prior to the mastery of musical rhythms, but ultimately one sought a classical “Grecian” grace and its complementary spiritual measure. “The special merit of gymnastics based on rhythm,” claimed Jaques-Dalcroze, “is that it unites the body and soul in education.... What is rhythm? Is it spiritual or corporeal? Assuredly it is both.”⁷

Americans first read about Jaques-Dalcroze in an article by an English devotee in 1911, but much more influential were two students of, and rebels from, the master: Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban. Wigman spent years with Jaques-Dalcroze but eventually felt oppressed by his strict emphasis upon the melodic line in physical responses to music; she, like another young Dalcroze teacher, Suzanne Perrottet, was “looking for dissonance, in order to express my character, and that was not possible with [Jaques-Dalcroze’s] altogether harmonious structure.” Perrottet in 1912 transferred her allegiances — and her love — to the seductive Laban, a man of aristocratic bearing who, after spending the year of 1899 in officer training



Eurythmy

at the behest of his military father, had left for sophisticated Paris only to become enamored of mysterious landscapes, country folk, and incantatory, whirling dervish dances. From Paris to Munich, where Laban orchestrated pageants and festivals, culminating in a “sorcerer’s apprentice” vision which would have aroused the envy of Steele MacKaye: eight hundred performers costumed as giants, witches and demons transfusing a big-city Witches’ Sabbath with the spirit and spirits of “unmodified nature.” Mary Wigman, desperate to express her own unmodified nature, met Laban through the wife of the painter Emile Nolde, whose canvases were beset by human bodies of extreme nervous compression. Wigman would soon recreate his images of motion, beginning with her *Hexentanz* (“Witch Dance”) of 1913 performed at Monte Verita, the Mountain of Truth, above Ascona. Laban was spending his summers now at that extraordinary countercultural settlement in Italian Switzerland; there he urged Perrottet, Wigman and other exuberant dancers to speak with their entire “festive being” Meanwhile, between 1914 and 1917, he worked as Jaques-Dalcroze’s assistant, shaping a *Eukinetik* more spacious and more irregular than Dalcroze eurythmics, making use of rhythm by its dialectics of tension and relaxation, strain and impulse, with movements unwound and outflung from the center of the body/soul. The work of Laban and Wigman (and Perrottet at the Laban school in Zurich) reached the United States in two forms: first, as a dance discipline demanding high energy and focus — adapted by Hanya Holm and by Martha Graham, a Denishawn graduate; later, refined and subdued, as a system of dance notation (Labanotation) whose categories of movement continue today to determine ideas about dance instruction and improvisation.⁸

The “cultured” Dalcroze emphasis upon personal and dynamic rhythms, energized by the Dionysiac bursts of Laban and Wigman, was compatible with other aspects of the emerging kinaesthetic of modern dance — itself at once an outgrowth of, and reaction to, ballet. Formal ballet had begun in the late sixteenth century as a courtly demonstration of grand manners, which proceeded from one straight-spined elegant posture to the next through, soon enough, the five standard positions of the feet. Leaving behind the masks and hooped dresses of aristocratic amateurs, professional ballerinas of the eighteenth century worked for greater elevation (on the half-toe), greater agility and more expressive visages. Once out of fashionable high heels and caught up in the throes of an arabesque, romantic, story-telling nineteenth century, ballerinas moved quickly from heel-less slippers into wooden-wedged toe shoes, encouraged toward full linear extension and the fantasy of apparently effortless flight, lighter than air.⁹ Still, this ballet remained essentially a



Hexentanz, Mary Wigman, Monte Verita, 1913.

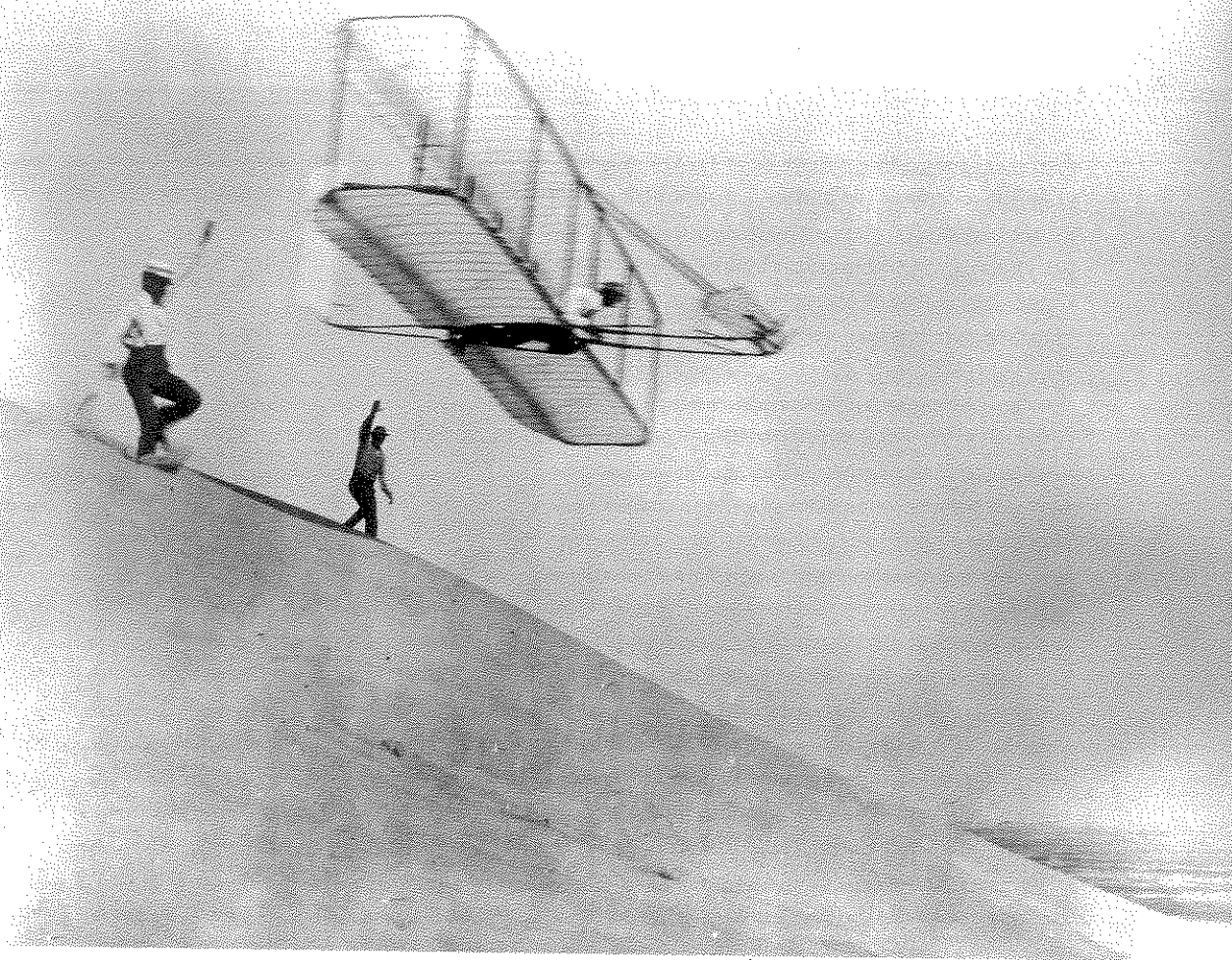
dance of faces, arms, wrists, fingers, ankles and toes, a spectacle of pirouettes, overhead lifts, set mimetic attitudes, statuesque positions and plane geometries. The center of the body remained tightly corseted; the torso, from pelvic girdle to shoulder blades, was fitted to an enduringly classical tradition of calm.

Now, at the turn of the century, with the advent of powered flight, dancers (the Diaghilev troupe within the ballet world, the modern dancers beyond) became enamored of torsion. A generation earlier, glider pilots had sent themselves carefully aloft from the tops of slopes and dunes, assuming a single considered position for the length of the flight. These flights were in effect isolated gestures, poses taken through space, comparable to the performances of young women practicing Delsartean or Harmonic Gymnastics during the 1880s. Like the men hanging from canvas wings and pushing off from soft promontories, Delsarteans knew enough to follow the natural momentum of their initial impulse; like the glider pilots, too, their performances were customarily short and self-consciously dramatic. But when Wilbur Wright in 1904 banked slowly over an Ohio field in his spindly biplane and — for the first time — returned full circle to his point of departure, he was the skyborn herald of a new kinaesthetic. Holding a wing-warping lever linked to a movable rudder in one organic system of control, Wilbur's command came from the peculiarly sensitive center of the structure, whose lateral balance was decided by a helical twist across its cambered wings.¹⁰

Such dynamic balance and torsion broke the seal, in the realm of heavier-than-air machines, to the same kinaesthetic toward which pathbreaking modern dancers were headed in their heavier-than-air bodies. Modern dancers insisted on effort, on weight and torque, and they consistently dissented from the balletic “delusion that the law of gravitation does not exist for them.” Indeed, Laban with his Effort/Shape studies, St. Denis with the sensuous pulsing/writhing of her bare midriff, Duncan with her earthward stamping, spinning gestures, and Graham with her contractions and releases together established a model of motion as a spiral at whose radiant center was a mystical solar plexus and at whose physical axis was the preternaturally flexible spine, bound link by vertebral link to the earth as to the heavens. Dancing, one bent one's whole body to the whole music; like Duncan or St. Denis,



Four rhythmicians — Annie Beck, Clara Brooke, Suzanne Perottet and Jeanne Alleman. Geneva, 1913.



Orville Wright, Wilbur Wright and Dan Tate, 1902.

one did not dance to single beats but to the phrase or the center line out of which flowed the rest of the music. Movement unfolded from the center of the body in the same way that music expanded (for Laban most explicitly) from the middle note of the octave, from one's personal middle C.¹¹

From Delsarte to the Bennington School inaugurated in 1934, dancers of "the modern dance" had come to insist upon a grounded human body moving nonetheless fluidly, rhythmically, naturally and, in the sense that any part of the body could be called upon, freely. Its chief pattern was the spiral; its deepest resource was torsion (from the Latin *torsio*, a wringing of the bowels). For Duncan, for the "Greek" dancers, barefoot dancers, natural dancers, and *Seelentänzer* or "soul dancers" who followed in her wake, for St. Denis and Shawn (who abandoned the ministry for dance), as for Delsarte, Jaques-Dalcroze, Wigman and Laban, physical movement was a crucial means of human expression, a form of worship. If we can find that God-Within, wrote Shawn, we can return to the primitive sources of dance, which were "the flowering of man's full self-consciousness." Wrote St. Denis: "To dance is to live life in its finer and higher vibrations, to live life harmonized, purified, controlled." A successful dance found the means to be an eloquent prayer.¹²

Prayer transforms. Dance was not only an expression, it was a reflexive experience. What happened in the century between Delsarte's public lectures and the modern dance of the 1930s was the elaboration of a kinaesthetic in which, above all, movement transforms. As early as 1856, Mathias Roth in his *Handbook of the Movement Cure* had defined "kinesiatrics" as the treatment of diseases by means of gymnastics or muscular activity. Known also as "kinesipathy" or "kinesitherapy," the treatment was ancestor to our occupational and physical therapies. The distinction between the outlook of the kinesitherapist and the modern dancer was that the former sought to treat physical diseases; for the modern dancer, dance worked upon character.¹³

Delsarte had insisted that if one moved wisely, gesture would be a true reflection of the self (or of the role portrayed, or of the lyrics sung). He had also implied that moving wisely would benefit one spiritually: to be attuned to the nuances of a raised arm or a tilted head, one had to be personally in tune. For the modern dancers, the release of the torso from the prison of classical ballet was a spiritual release as well. In their dances they often expressed this release in a flight from plot to painting, from telling a story to the music to telling the story of the music itself — what Jaques-Dalcroze called "music made visible" and what St. Denis called "music visualization." Since emotion and movement were to be intrinsically related (rather than customary and formal, as in much of classical ballet), and since there was to be high drama in movement itself, the dance must be a process of character transformation. Movement was at the same time expressive and operative.¹⁴