

Elena Yushkova, PhD

Dance and word in the art of Isadora Duncan

Abstract

Free verse and Free Dance: Embodied Sense in Motion

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«I believe in the religion of the beauty of the human foot» [1, c. 54], - claimed the American dancer Isadora Duncan in 1903. This quite shocking statement from her manifesto *Dance of the future*, published in Germany in English and German, shows not only the new approach to the dance, but the evident poetic gift of the author.

Duncan had always felt the limitedness of dance. Although through her plastique she managed to express complicated human emotions and to create impressive stage images, but, as a rule, after the performance she often made a speech formulating the goals of her art. Moreover, Duncan constantly published essays in order to explain to her audience the content of her dance.

After her death Duncan acquired the fame of a writer, when in 1927, and then- in 1928 her memoirs were released [2]. In a subsequent 80 years, collections of her articles' and essays' fragments were published [1,3], as well as some of her poems, influenced by her favorite American writer Walt Whitman [3, c. 111; 4, c. 595]. Duncan's epistolary heritage also reveals her obvious gift for poetry. Being in love with Gordon Craig the dancer writes to him in rhythmic prose, and sometimes –in free verse, using even the method of visualization [5].

Autobiography by Duncan *My life* is written in prose, but in a very poetic and romantic way [2]. It is based on the tradition of the novel of the 19th century, having a plot, characters (sometimes they are quite mythologized compared to real people), and characterizes certain social strata (sometimes sarcastically when the author writes about the millionaires). Narrative alternates with philosophical digressions. We can find features of psychological (in particular – bildungsroman), social, adventure and sentimental novel within her writings. But mostly her prose looks like the philosophical fiction because the meaning of the heroine's life is the realization of her idée-fix: to transform the humanity using free dance, to make people more harmonic and more close to the ideal.

Interestingly enough that in her youth Duncan made her own newspaper, and wrote a novel and a diary [6, c. 20].

Poems, written by the dancer, have not been a subject of special scholarly attention yet. The most known poem is devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche – she uses a mix of English and French.

Nietzsche signed his
Last telegram
“Dionysos crucified!”
Perhaps am I La Madonne
Qui monte le Calvaire
En Dansant.
O Dionysos, Porte-Flambeau,
Light me the way in flames –
I S A D O R A [3, c.111]

Literary capacities Isadora could have inherited from her father Joseph Charles Duncan, who didn't become a prominent poet, but published his poems. In the collection of Duncan works *The art of the dance* we find his poem devoted to the revived Ancient Greece – this theme had always been actual for his daughter [1, c. 144].

Probably the love to poetry was a reason of deep connection between Duncan and the Russian poet Esenin in her last years. Not comprehending Russian words, the dancer felt the powerful energy of Esenin's poems and loved to listen to his reciting. The secretary of Duncan, Lola Kinel, recalled that each dance of Isadora's 'was like a little, rounded-out composition or poem, charged with emotion and meaning' [7, c. 86].

Thus, the literary work by Duncan could be divided into four parts:

- Essays,
- Memoirs,
- Letters,
- Poems (free verses).

This deserves special attention from modern scholars.

Although the perception of the American dancer as a writer is yet to be formed, but, paradoxically, the literary work by Duncan was kept thanks to paper unlike the dance which hadn't been recorded and became a myth.

Free dance which was invented by Isadora Duncan, was considered by her contemporaries as Greek, but its relation to the Ancient Greece was quite disputable – the dancer had never aspired to reconstruct the archaic dance. Even borrowing poses and costumes from vases and other antique artifacts, Duncan refracted the movements through the prism of Italian Renaissance and German Romanticism, combined them with 'serious' symphonic music by Beethoven, Gluck, Wagner, Chopin and other composers which had never been used for the dance before. Her intention was to create 'the dance of the future' – spiritual art of the new human being with new moral and aesthetic value.

She aspired to reassess the understanding of dance, to reconsider it as a high art, to express spiritual content with the means of motion. The ideal of Duncan, a

dancer of the future, lives with harmony with Nature, Soul and the Cosmos. Beautiful movement of this dancer must express the noblest impulses, and must fit the forms of his/her body.

The principal new approach to the dance, declared by Isadora Duncan, lies in her intention to make dance more than just a dance, but a ‘non-vocal manifestation of the human psyche and an affirmation of the human spirit’ [8, p.160], a kind of religion, which allows people to pray with their bodies.

Duncan was not only a great dancer, but a dance theorist, a writer, a philosopher and a scholar – this became obvious a century later for contemporary scholars.

“She was the forerunner... She let dance out into our world with the firm conviction that she had created something great and true... Was this art? It was something. It inspired people...It freed the minds... When one saw her dance, thoughts were taken upwards, as if with the flow of fresh air,” wrote Gordon Craig [9, p. 158].

Free dance outlived its creator more than for a century and became a part of modern culture. We can suppose that by the beginning of the 21st century there are several ways of the free dance development;

- ‘Canonic’ free dance (reconstruction) – it was kept by the students of Isadora Duncan and handed to their students,
- Free dance as part of classical ballet,
- Free dance as part of modern dance,
- Plastique improvisations – really free dance.
- Free dance was integrated into pedagogical and psycho-therapeutic practices.

Isadora Duncan managed to create the ‘unique plastique mono-theater – by the creator and performer at the same time’ and also to show ‘the new way of stage existence and freedom from canonic forms of expression’ [10, c.16]. But her literary work is the same bright as her dancer’s activity. Her recognition as a writer, working in prose and poetry, is just a matter of time.

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