

**DANCING ICONS  
OR THE SYNCOPATION OF THE UNSAYABLE.  
GRAHAM'S *LAMENTATION* AND THE CULT  
OF THE MATER DOLOROSA**

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Once, after seeing this dance, a woman came to Martha backstage, weeping bitterly. Some months before, the woman has witnessed her child being struck by a car and killed. She had been unable to shed a tear. *Lamentation* released the terrible restraints. "I realized," she told Martha, "that grief was a dignified and valid emotion and that I could yield to it without shame." And she mourned in Martha's arms. Martha related that this dance had on several occasions worked the same kind of catharsis."

Agnes de Mille, *The Life and Work  
of Martha Graham.*

**Graham's** bare and bold rewriting of the Catholic tradition of the Mater Dolorosa was sharp and radical: lamentation did not mean desolation, grief did not mean weakness.<sup>1</sup> The message was

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that my analysis of Graham's *Lamentation* does, indeed, leave some areas of a great interest uncovered. See, for instance Elizabeth Kendall's analysis of the pieces in terms of New York's aesthetics of the 1920s: "The dance is a powerful one not only because it was rhythmically well-constructed but because it abstracted the densities, rhythms, and shapes of New York, 1930. The jersey pyramid recalled the grandeur of an Art Deco tower rising its triangle base; a skyscraper reeling. The heavy stretch material resembled something of another property, stone or steel, rather as the piano melody resembled percussion. Moreover, since the industrial shape of *Lamentation* was actually a woman, the dance stood as a final fantasy on the fashionable woman-as-tube; the long tubular line of

painfully understood by the woman in the story. Graham's belief in the honesty of the body had this time proved true<sup>2</sup>.

This article will address the intimate connection of Graham's conception of the ritual and her attempt to speak the unspeakable through dance. In order to do so, it will focus on Martha Graham's *Lamentation* as a paradigmatic example of one of her life-long projects: the production of dancing icons of femininity for the stage<sup>3</sup>. The main aim of the paper is to highlight the re-readings and re-writings of Marian iconography implicit in *Lamentation*.

Martha Graham's *Lamentation* challenges the patriarchal split between the Mater Dolorosa and the Maria Regina, between motherhood and queenship. The multiple masquerade of the Virgin Mary as the most influential feminine archetype in Western culture, her interchangeable yet exclusive roles as virgin, queen, bride, mother and intercessor are reshaped in *Lamentation* in order to create a new secular icon that embodies the all-inclusiveness of paradox.

Paradox and tension are, indeed, key concepts in Graham's use of female mythology and her new vocabulary of movement; likewise, *Lamentation* is a key piece in Graham's work. *Lamentation* is the crystallization of Graham's most emphasized obsessions: the effectiveness of expressive restraint, "artistry lies in restraint as much as in expression" she would say, and the belief of a return to the

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sheath-dress and sportclothes was stretched in the costume to an extreme degree. The whole dance in a sense was built on Fashion's originally witty conception of a tube that is really a living torso, and so it won't stay still and remain a perfect tube. It juts out in different places". (Kendall, 208-9).

<sup>2</sup> As Marian Horosko points out Martha Graham never forgot her father's insight on the nature of the body: "A yardstick used to determine a dancer's success in becoming a character, as well as the yardstick Graham used for her own choice of movement, is her oft-told story about her father catching her, when she was very young, in the telling of a lie. Her father, an alienist -- as doctor's whose patients had nervous or mental disorders were once called (they would be considered psychiatrists today) -- told her that the way he knew she was lying was because of the way she moved. He had learned from his patients that if the words and movements were inconsistent, the patient was lying. Graham never forgot the lesson. 'Movement doesn't lie,' she repeated emphatically, applying the rule to almost everything. 'Either a performance is honest, or is not.'" (Horosko 9)

<sup>3</sup> I would argue that the reason why critics have often read the innovation of Graham's production in terms of plastic arts (mainly Cubism and Expressionism) is the iconographic qualities of her choreographies -- her characters could always be translated into pictorial images or religious icons.

archaic. Graham's dances can, indeed, be seen as efforts to find archaic words, movements, and shapes that would articulate what was already unsayable in the idioms of modernity. Graham danced *Lamentation* before she was granted a Guggenheim to go to Mexico. However, while spending the summer of 1930 in Santa Barbara, she had already been intensely struck by the rituals of the sect of the Penitents and their mixture of Catholicism and Indian nature cults. It would seem that, in the same way that the Cubists were already looking for abstraction when they "discovered" African art, Graham already felt a deep fascination with the ritualistic and the archaic before she actually had any knowledge of anachronistic religious rites.<sup>4</sup> Once again, Graham had managed to make a move towards tension: her immersion in New York's modernist avant-garde was the background for her untimely quest of the primitive --modernity and primitivism would have to share the stage.

Form and content belonged, thus, in the same space, contraction and release, the tension of contradiction. The choreography for *Lamentation* is an extraordinary example of how tension and paradox are crucial to Graham's innovations: one part of the body working against another, the whole body working against its costume, and movement working against an assumption of stillness derived from the dancer's sitting position.

*Lamentation* infuses Catholic reified and ritualized iconographies with new meanings by staging a tension that had remained hidden. *Lamentation* rewrites the Mater Dolorosa as a powerful matronymic. Graham explores precisely that chapter of the Virgin's myth in which Mary is sacrificing and sacrificed, priestess and mother, goddess and earthly woman; the moment in which Marian iconography is closest to the myths of antiquity of which Graham was so fond. Maria Warner articulates this inherent contradiction within the icon of the Mater Dolorosa in her *Alone of All Her Sex*:

Under the aspect of the Mater Dolorosa, Mary most resembles the fertility goddesses of antiquity. For she receives the broken body of her son in her arms and gazes upon his features with such avidity not only because she mourns her loss for she knows, as theology states most clearly, that he will raise from the dead but also because she

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<sup>4</sup> Graham's biography provides some clues to this fascination. Martha Graham recalled at ninety five how her parents would read mythology to her and how it would fill her with "wonder and fright". (Horosko 9). Another early source for her Martha's interest in certain ritualized religious experience were the Graham's Irish Catholic nurse. (Kendall 184)

is propitiating those same forces of sterility and death that the sacrifice of her son is attempting to appease. He is the blood offering, she the principle of the abiding earth. The tears she sheds are charged with the magic of her precious, incorruptible, undying body and have power to give life and make a whole. (Warner 221)

Theology and Catholic orthodoxy, however, were careful in disguising the potential exhibition of female strength in which this Christian Hera could result. The cultural and historical accretion of the cult of the Virgin Mary<sup>5</sup> reflects faithfully the necessity of a disguise or a split: milk, blood, breasts could not be attributes of a goddess, they were too human and humanized. The weeping mother of the Mater Dolorosa, the nurturing mother of the Madonna tradition, and the troubled woman of the Annunciation had to become isolated fragments of a larger icon, that of Maria Regina, the female image of power. The crowned virgin could not weep. The physicality of motherhood was, therefore, opposed to the empowered abstraction of the queen.

With *Lamentation*, visceral pain and grief, in the form of spasms of percussive force, occupy the stage once again. The originary violence of motherhood exhibits her archaic and ancestral nature, ancient as a legend.<sup>6</sup> Graham's sexual and maternal "pelvic

<sup>5</sup> "Whether we regard the Virgin Mary as the most sublime and beautiful image in man's (sic) struggle towards the good and the pure, or the most pitiable production of ignorance and superstition, she represents a central theme in the history of Western attitudes to women. She is one of the few female figures to have attained the status of myth - a myth that for nearly two thousand years has coursed through our culture; as spirited and often as imperceptible as an underground stream. (Warner, 15)

<sup>6</sup> Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother* is revealing in connection to Graham's conception of the feminine in her dances: "(...) the spiritual aspect of the feminine transformative character, which leads through suffering and death, sacrifice and annihilation, to renewal, birth and immortality. But such transformation is possible

only when what is to be transformed wholly enters into the Feminine principle; that is to say, dies in returning to the Mother Vessel, whether this be earth, water, underworld, urn, coffin, cave, mountain, ship, or magic caldron. (...) encompassed in the all-embracing physic reality" (Neumann 292). Graham's dances can be read as the embodiment of one or more of the principles listed by Neumann, her construction of a female mythology had some of the enthusiasm of the archeologist in her reconstruction of a figure of the Great Mother.

truth" evokes an almost ungraspable materiality that defies explicitation. Her dancing icon challenges Christian hermeneutics. "Life does not have to be interpreted", Graham said, "and the dance is life."<sup>7</sup> Graham's "post-virginal" Stabat Mater is a radical expression of a female bodily nature being trapped in the abstraction of her representation — her dress acting as a metaphor for that trap. Graham's *Lamentation* has the density of an icon and the body of a woman. As Julia Kristeva puts it,

A woman will only have the choice to live her life either *hyper-abstractly* ("immediately universal" Hegel said) in order thus to earn divine grace and homologation with the symbolic order; or merely *different*, other, fallen ("immediately particular," Hegel said). But she will not be able to accede to the complexity of being divided, of heterogeneity, of the catastrophic-fold-of-'being' ("never singular," Hegel said). (Kristeva 249)

Graham's *Lamentation* achieves exactly that complexity. By showing her audience a particular body, her body, trapped in a sacrificial robe<sup>8</sup> that, in its symbolism, attempts to erase the physicality of Graham as a dancer, as a woman, Martha Graham is speaking the unsayable through the movement of her body; showing an unnamable grief trapped in the symbolic and linguistic order of its representation: a purple robe.

Indeed, the Virgin is the only mute figure in the New Testament. She is all image. The Virgin expresses but never speaks. She is the embodiment of a never-solved paradox: virginity and motherhood, the Immaculate Conception. No narrative can account for such an unspeakable paradox. The Virgin occupies a blank space with no signature oscillating between the choice of an always incomplete showing or telling, icon or scripture. The figure of the giver of time, the mother, has to be outside time, outside the system of language. The unspeakable and the unnamable are her territory. "Belief in the mother is rooted in fear, fascinated with a weakness—the weakness of language." (Kristeva 251) or Graham's "there is a necessity for movement where words are inadequate."

<sup>7</sup> And she went on: "It has to be experienced, not taken apart and dissected. Dance affects the body, not just the mind. Dance is not a mirror, but a participation, a voicing of hidden but common emotions."

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Marian Horosko, Martha Graham alluded to the importance of costumes in her artistic performances, "the costume has to be designed around the physical aspect of dance," she said.

The oracular nature of Graham's *Lamentation* emphasizes the link between the priestess and the mother through the figure of the intercessor, the medium. Graham's repetitive upper-body movements towards the sky resemble the rituals of a threshold figure, an intermediary between the human and the sacred. A female genealogy is established through an effort to connect and impersonate the different masks of femininity, the particular and the general, the earthly and the sacred, the linguistic and the unsayable. Graham's mother weeps and cries. Her grief, however, does not make her weaker but stronger, suffering is an affirmation and not a negation, as is in the Penitents rituals; by connecting the earthly and the sacred, the mother's power becomes visible: her grief is now an instrument, a sacrifice, a gift. The mother becomes a priestess and still retains her humanity.

Graham reestablishes the religious mystery as the only category able to incorporate paradox and contradiction without breaking to pieces<sup>9</sup>. *Lamentation* embodies passion in all its possible meaning—enthusiasm, devotion, sacrifice. The sacrificial passion of the mother's dance haunts the stage with a desire for meaning. And meaning for Graham is movement. The spasmodic and syncopated rhythm of Graham's movements and Kodaly's music, their percussive quality and their play on variations, make sentences and narrative virtually impossible<sup>10</sup>. By negating the relationship between one sound and the following, one movement and the next, *Lamentation* reproduces the fragmentation of experience;<sup>11</sup> an experience that can never be fully integrated in a story because it cannot be told, only reenacted through dance. Words, movements and figures are in Graham's dances instances of solipsism. Martha Graham's words are revealing of her artistic projects and give us the measure of her achievement in *Lamentation*:

<sup>9</sup> Revealingly, dances explicitly entitled *Primitive Mysteries*, *Primitive Canticles* and *Dolorosa* were soon to follow *Lamentation*.

<sup>10</sup> Actually even in her most dramatic coreographies, Graham tended always to depict a series of expressions of emotional states rather than the stories of her heroines.

<sup>11</sup> It is fascinating to see how Graham syncopation is paralleled in Julia Kristeva's poems on her giving birth, A spasm that spreads, runs through the blood vessels to the tips of the breasts, to the tip of the fingers. It throbs, pierces the void, erases it, and gradually settles in. My heart: a tremendous pounding. A thirst. (Kristeva 249)

The dance is an animate composition in space. Dancing is movement made significant; technique used to express spiritual content in intelligible form. What is form? form is the memory of spiritual content. When do form and content meet? Form and content meet in action. (Armitage 1)

Graham's reenactment of raw feelings and experiences through dance, however, reveals a bareness that was often felt as menacing. Indeed, the double meaning of the word passion can rarely be told apart in Graham's work. The early reactions to her pieces are relevant as contemporary readings of her aggressive portrayal of a godlike sacrifice. The mythical sacrifice and the archaic violence stated in *Lamentation* were sometimes felt as an emotional and intellectual intrusion into the audience's innermost privacy. As Neumann puts it,

(....) every magical process presupposes a ritual, and every ritual presupposes a transformation of the human personality, which makes it receptive to ritual and endows it with powers not normally at its command. (Neumann 292)

Martha Graham's early audience was not always willing to undergo such a cathartic transformation. Her mysticism was felt as aggression. Accordingly, reactions ranged from enthusiasm to total rejection. Indifference seems to have been impossible. In spite of this, Graham continued to include *Lamentation* in her programs, probably as a totem of the main premises of her intellectual and artistic project.

What for some was a shockingly atavistic violence was, nevertheless, an essential ingredient in Graham's impersonation of the Great Mother and her sometimes, negative and menacing magic. Once again, the blessing qualities of the mother have to be opposed to something equally powerful; the sacrificial violence of the priestess is, indeed, that element that makes conceptual and aesthetic contradictions possible and, thus, enables Graham to pull the strings of tension. *Lamentation* is the moving image of a mourning mother sacrificing that which she most loves, her child, being, thus, a victim of her own sacrifice; the paradox of the myth embodied in a dancing icon. Neumann's primordial goddess needs both death and life as the contradictory forces of her mythical movement, "as repository of positive as well as negative magic, as priestess and witch (Neumann 293)." The nudity of Graham's feet and hands, the only visible part of her body, recall a primitive bareness trapped into the robe of civilization, an atavistic violence straining to set itself free from the restraints of a domestic woolen material, the fetish of the civilized.

Graham's negative magic is "legendary and yet straight in the eye." Her bare and sharp movements, the theatrical mask of her made up face reminds us of our "need to see the faces hidden behind the faces, the faces theater unveils." (Cixous 152) Her artistic project is strangely coherent; it has the texture of a myth, the shape of dance and the force of theater. Her Mater Dolorosa is violent and strong but also forgiving; her body has managed to become the embodiment of an archaic paradox that incorporates the image of a perfect woman on which the cultural representations of her time are printed, an icon of modernity.

Graham's exploration of the ritual is echoed in Cixous' insights on the theater, insights in which, no doubt, Graham would have heard her own echo:

But I declare we need these temples without dogma and without doctrine (but not without a number of gods) where our dreads and above all our blindness are acted out. (...) For the theater is the place of Crime. Yes the place of Crime, the place of horror, also the place of Forgiveness. What does it give us to see? The primitive passions: adoration, assassination. All the excesses I throw out of my apartment: suicide, murder, the part of mourning there is in every passionately human relationship (....) (Cixous, 154)

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