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Growing up in Nature: Health and Adolescent Dance in L.M. Montgomery's *Emily* Series

JENN MACQUARRIE

IN *BODIES OF THE TEXT: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance* (1995), Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy ask, “why is it that no one in English departments ever talks about dance . . . especially with all the discussion of gender, bodies, fluidity, performance, sexuality, popular culture, and multiculturalism animating literary studies?” (ix). Although their demand has created interest in the fields of American and British literature, there is a distinct paucity of dance exploration in Canadian literature. At the broadest level, this article will demonstrate how the relatively new field of dance studies — the theoretical and critical study of dance in its various forms and functions — can enrich Canadian literary criticism, in this case in the relationship between adolescence, movement, and health in L.M. Montgomery’s works, through her influence from the modern dancer Isadora Duncan.

When allied with an understanding of the particular dances themselves, the close analysis of dance in literature can produce startling new avenues of literary investigation. This work examines textualized dance from a perspective rooted in cultural studies, looking at how representations of dance reflect the assumptions of the text and its culture. This reading is not simply a thematic treatment of dance in the texts but involves a semiotic reading of dance itself and of its figuration within the text. Working within dance studies to understand the historical and cultural production of dance, its specific functions, and various attitudes toward it, the literary researcher can find a new historical entry point into literatures of adolescence, and new tools with which to explore the texts.

In her fiction, L.M. Montgomery engages with the twentieth-century discourse about health and movement in childhood and adolescence. As the 1890s came to a close, a new vision of dance was being formed in North America, one which would attempt to counter the

connections between dance and illness seen in ballet; modern dance, as envisioned by dancers such as Isadora Duncan, would create a nation of healthy, strong bodies. Indeed, modern dancers advocated dancing as the means to moral and spiritual health in addition to physical freedom. As modern dancers rebelled against the strictly regulated movements of ballet, the discourse surrounding freedom and artifice in dance led to a discussion of the importance of movement in its most natural form. This philosophy of dance was addressed almost exclusively to women and children, and became inextricably linked with women's social and political reforms. The physical, mental, and spiritual health of women could be accessed and strengthened through rejecting the formal hypocrisy of nineteenth-century movement and returning to the creative, instinctive movement of nature.

The same vision of a creative, empowering nature permeates L.M. Montgomery's fiction and has been commented on by many scholars. What has gone unremarked thus far, however, is how this vision is articulated through the contemporary language of dance and movement. Emily Starr's rebellious desire to "dance and sing and laugh through the old parlour as no Murray, not even her mother, had ever ventured to dance and laugh before" (*Climbs* 81) and her penchant for "dancing alone by moonlight" (*Quest* 99) are just a hint of the fascination Montgomery appears to have had with the capacity of movement to free the soul. By first examining the contemporary dance philosophies about movement and children, and then turning to the *Emily* series, we can see that ideas about the freedom of dance and the inspirational power of nature are integral to the construction of adolescent health in Montgomery's texts.

This philosophy about nature and movement was articulated most clearly through the iconic modern dancer Isadora Duncan. Born only three years later than Montgomery, in 1877, in California, Duncan was fond of saying she first danced in her mother's womb. Certainly, she was dancing from a very early age, and started to teach neighbourhood children to wave their arms gracefully in what the six-year-old Duncan informed her mother was her "school of dance" (Terry 20). As a young adult dancing in private salons and small theatres, Duncan took her audiences by storm. The reactions of other dancers and artists were astounding: Edith Wharton claimed "that first sight of Isadora's dancing was a white milestone to me. It shed a light on every kind of

beauty”; the dancer Ruth St. Denis maintained that “For Isadora, I would do battle. To reject her genius is unthinkable”; and the sculptor Auguste Rodin asserted that Duncan was “the greatest woman I have ever known . . . [and] sometimes I think she is the greatest woman the world has ever known” (qtd. in Gottlieb 550). These reviews were typical of the ecstatic superlatives bestowed on Duncan throughout her life; while some traditionalist ballet critics denounced her style, even her most bitter detractors did not attempt to deny the level of impact she had on the artistic community. While it is unlikely that Montgomery saw one of Duncan’s performances — her journal never mentions such an incident, though Duncan was performing in New York when Montgomery visited — it would have been nearly impossible to avoid hearing about Duncan’s philosophy; Helen Thomas notes Duncan’s “enormous influence” (61) on the North American public, which reached even to the corners of Prince Edward Island, as we will see.

Duncan hated the artificial constraints of classical ballet, which was the only acceptable form of artistic dance at the time, claiming in her autobiography, “I am an enemy to ballet, which I consider a false and preposterous art, in fact, outside the pale of all art” (521). Lillian Loewenthal explains that by the beginning of the twentieth century, new forms and ideas were already emerging in the other arts, while “ballet alone remained a complacent, insular institution of archaic forms and constraining movements floundering in a maze of intricate artifice” (4). Duncan believed that ballet ignored art’s highest mission, to express the inner soul; she deemed exterior physical action without interior motivation unacceptable for a true dance art. Ballet’s causal relationship to ill health also became one of her primary cases against it as a violation of the human body. She passionately denounced the crippling of the dancers’ bodies, claiming that the audience

see no farther than the skirts and tricots [tights]. But look — under the tricots are dancing deformed muscles. Look still further — underneath the muscles are deformed bones. A deformed skeleton is dancing before you[;] . . . the ballet condemns itself by enforcing the deformation of the beautiful woman’s body! No historical, no choreographic reasons can prevail against that! (qtd. in Kurth 31)

Duncan thought that ballet's physical influence on the dancer's body could only result in harm. Her emphasis, here, on the deterioration of a specifically female body, is significant; like Montgomery, Duncan's philosophy was almost exclusively directed toward women.

While Duncan was not as deeply concerned as other commentators with the immorality of ballet, she did recognize a spiritual lack that exacerbated the physical damage for the dancer. She wanted to free dance from its fetters of artificiality and excess, and return it to a state of natural movement; Andre Levinson, a ballet critic who deplored many of Duncan's innovations, softened his tone to describe her form of dance after her death, noting that she represented the theme that has so often captured "humanity in dark hours: the return of the golden age, the promise of paradise regained, that 'state of nature' which had been fallacious fiction when imagined by J.J. Rousseau" (541). He points out that Duncan deplored hypocritical constraint — both in dance and in life — and that her dance sought to free one's natural instinct from civilization's stifling control. Instead of submitting to ballet's rigorous discipline, she "would dance as the bird sings, according to her heart's impulses, the emotion of her body, the inspiration of the hour that passes, and without knowing how, listening to nothing except her spirit" (540).

Duncan believed that this kind of instinctive, natural movement would provide humanity with a connection to the natural world that had been lost. In an essay from 1902, she asserts that the movement of "the free animals and birds remains always in correspondence to their nature, the necessities and wants of that nature, and its correspondence to earth nature. It is only when you put free animals under false restrictions that they lose the power of moving in harmony with nature, and adopt a movement expressive of the restrictions placed about them" (qtd. in Kurth 104). Although Duncan advocated naturalness, Susan Au observes that Duncan did not intend to abolish formal structure or order; instead, she believed that the forms of natural objects reveal design. Some critics charged that her dance portrayed only mindless self-expression, but Duncan claimed that "even in nature you find sure, even rigid design. Natural dancing should only mean that the dance never goes against nature, not that anything is left to chance" (qtd. in Jowitt 76). Duncan did advocate a dance discipline, and a technique

that could be taught; she simply wanted the discipline to be a healthy, natural exercise, and the technique to be based on innate rhythms.

She believed that children would be most receptive to this technique; according to Joseph Mazo, Duncan wanted to teach children to dance “by making them feeling human beings who would express their emotions in movements natural to them” (48). Since she rejected the tension and artifice of society, Duncan’s dance necessitated a return to “such basic patterns as walking, skipping, running, falling, and turning” (Foster 154) — movements performed naturally by children. Duncan’s aim, in her own dance, was to replicate the innate movements of the child; after observing her young niece dancing by the sea, she came to the following realization:

[It] or [She] seems to me to contain in little the whole problem on which I am working. It seems to reflect the naturally beautiful motions of the human body, in the dance. She dances because she is full of the joy of life. She dances because the waves are dancing before her eyes, because the winds are dancing, because she can feel the rhythm of the dance throughout the whole of nature . . . can the dancer suggest all this and remind men of it in winter time, in cities? (qtd. in Terry 57)

The youthful joy in natural movement suggested, to Duncan, a means of recapturing the essential harmony of life lost in decadent urbanism.

Duncan was not interested in creating theatrical performers but spiritually rich and healthy children; she argued that instead of forcing dance technique on young dancers, one must first “teach little children to breathe, to vibrate, to feel and to become one with the general harmony and movement. Let us first produce a beautiful human being” (qtd. in Loewenthal 35). She founded a succession of schools in Germany, France, and Russia, in which students were taught an alternative physical training method. She believed that “the healthy, mentally and physically alert child must have a holistically regulated environment” (36), including fresh air, clean surroundings, wholesome food, medical checkups, supervised academic activities, and an exercise regimen. The students at her schools were exclusively female; as Amy Koritz points out, while Duncan would occasionally comment on the appropriateness of her instruction for boys as well as girls, her theories of dance and education were based on the assumption of the dancer as

female. She legally adopted and supported some thirty or forty children during her life; the six Isadorables, her premier students who toured the world with her, were among these.

This focus on the connection between natural movement and health is both prevalent and prominent in the *Emily* series; Montgomery's figuration of the dance theory is intriguing, as it shows how integral interdisciplinary ideas about dance were at the time, resonating even in the story of an orphaned girl on Prince Edward Island. Montgomery was born into the ferment of this modernist dance moment, in Clifton, Prince Edward Island, in 1874. Her novels, like Duncan's dancing, privilege female autonomy, the natural world, and a focus on health in childhood. In *Emily*'s story, the female protagonist must forge her own healthy community; Emily Starr is an orphan reduced to living with the constriction of well-meaning but overly conservative elderly aunts. The lonely girl embodies Duncan's nature-based dance theories as she turns to nature — and movement within nature — to find both health and companions.

Emily's natural instincts of movement and artistic expression echo Duncan's. Her deep love of nature, like Duncan's, shows her to be "the most obvious and pure inheritor of a Wordsworthian temperament" (Steffler 88). Emily's receptivity to the mysterious forces of the universe, as evoked often by the *Wind Woman*, has been noted by several critics, as have the intriguing issues surrounding Emily's health as the daughter of a consumptive. What many have missed is the connection between Emily's physicality and her health; the more Emily is attuned to the natural movements of an outdoors and innocent Duncan-style dance, the healthier she grows. While several critics have observed the depiction of nature in the *Emily* series, noting its significance for ecocritical and feminist approaches, my interest here is not in the depiction of nature itself, but in its relation to the language of dance.

Like Isadora Duncan, Emily relates the beauties of the natural world to dancing; the three novels of the *Emily* series are replete with references to "the dancing friendliness of well-known stars" (*New Moon* 57), rain "like fairies' feet dancing over the garret roof" (180), and waves "dancing over the harbour" (*Quest* 210). It is worth noting these moments of figurative language about dance, as well as scenes of literal dancing; in Montgomery's work, the metaphoric use of dance imagery is significant, as it is based on the philosophy articulated by Duncan

which argued that the universe was literally dancing. The spiritual movement of the universe was thought to be made manifest in everything, including trees, stars, and waves, and one's connection to the dance of the natural world indicated a unity that was intrinsic to the growth of one's soul. These are not mere clichéd phrases, but convey more than just conventional description; due to the connection with Duncan's Theosophist ideals about nature's movement, Montgomery's figurative dance language is pertinent for analysis.

In all of these cases, and literally dozens more, we can see that Emily recognizes the connection between nature and dance. Further, as in Duncan's philosophy, Emily understands the link between her interior soul and external nature, and seems to be unable to resist expressing that connection through movement. In utter happiness over finding paper for her writing, she comes "dancing down the garret stairs," crying, "I feel as if I were made of star-dust" (*New Moon* 94); her desire for artistic expression — in the form of writing — seems also to require a physical outlet of "dancing" down the stairs. It is significant, as well, that her happiness manifests not only as childlike dancing but also as a connection to the world of nature, as Emily feels as if she were "made of star-dust."

Furthermore, Emily displays what Duncan describes as the natural desire for freedom of all living things; running from her punishment of being locked in the spare room, she says, "I feel as if I were a little bird that had just got out of a cage," and "she danced with joy of it all along her fairy path to the very end" (112). As we have seen, Duncan believed that it is "only when you put free animals under false restrictions that they lose the power of moving in harmony with nature, and adopt a movement expressive of the restrictions placed about them" (qtd. in Kurth 104). Emily is responding to the situation with what Duncan would consider an appropriate response — an escape from that restriction, and then an expression of her "joy" through her "danced" movement. Montgomery's heroines, as a general rule, chafe against the restrictions and constraints of their rural community; in Emily's case, such restrictions are exemplified by her Aunt Elizabeth. Carole Gerson points to this trend, arguing that by creating "both her major heroines, Anne Shirley and Emily Byrd Starr, as orphans, Montgomery implicitly frees them from overbearing patriarchal interference" (27). When they rebel against the strictures of their overbearing and elderly guardians,

these young heroines are seen as natural and courageous, rather than in need of discipline.

Emily's connection with dance is not that of the well-bred social dancer; she has not been instructed in any form of dance, and when asked in the schoolyard, "Can you dance?" (in addition to the questions "Can you sew?" and "Can you cook?") flatly answers, "No" (*New Moon* 80). But formal instruction in partner dancing, to which the young girls refer, is not necessary for Emily to move to the natural rhythms of her body. Like Duncan, she is primarily a solo dancer; while she does later dance with partners at the respectable "dinner-dances," she is known for her solitary movement. By the time Emily is a teenager, it is "whispered that she had been seen dancing alone by moonlight among the coils of a New Moon hayfield"; indeed, "she loved a twilight tryst in the 'old orchard' better than a dance in Shrewsbury" (*Quest* 99). These "whispers" denote Emily's difference from the placid young girls of Shrewsbury; at this age, she thinks less of finding a male partner at an indoor event than of expressing her inner soul. Whether in the "New Moon hayfield" or the "old orchard," Emily seeks some connection with nature, conveyed through movement, that most of her peers cannot understand.

Emily's only partner in many of her youthful, natural dances is her best friend, Ilse Burnley, whose kindred spirit responds to the same instinctive desire; their childlike, feminine dance is very unlike Montgomery's depictions of mature partner dancing. When the children are still very young, Teddy draws "pictures of Ilse and Emily dancing hand in hand around it [the fire] like two small witches" (*New Moon* 144); the magical quality inherent in their innocence, which Teddy sees when he depicts them as "witches," or in Emily's many references to "fairies dancing," is clear to the reader, even if not to Emily's aunts. Emily retains the sense of wonder at her surroundings, and the need to express that wonder through dancing, as an adolescent; she informs her Aunt Ruth that "there is nothing more wonderful than dancing around a blazing fire" (*Climbs* 158). The hidebound and prim Ruth is scandalized by the thought, but Emily only feels sorry that Ruth will never hear the call of the wild rhythms evoked by the fire.

In another episode, when the two girls are much older, but still tempted by the beauty and movement of the ocean, Emily and Ilse go bathing in their petticoats in the moonlight. Ilse points out that there

isn't a soul for miles and says, "I can't resist those waves. They're *calling* me" (*Climbs* 75). Emily admits in her diary:

I felt just as she did, and bathing by moonlight seemed such a lovely, romantic thing . . . we undressed in a little hollow among the dunes — that was like a bowl of silver in the moonlight — but we kept our petticoats on. We had the loveliest time splashing and swimming about in the silver-blue water and those creamy little waves, like mermaids or sea nymphs. . . . Ilse took my hands and we danced in rings over the moonlit sands. (75)

Emily, like Isadora Duncan, has a deep connection with the sea, and is drawn by its powerful rhythms into physical movement. Both Ilse and Emily feel the "call" of the waves, and strip down to a light Duncanesque costume appropriate to the occasion; their hand-in-hand dancing "in rings" evokes images of playful children, not of sexually mature partner dancing. Thus, even as she is growing up, Emily retains her spirit of youth and wonder at the world around her, and feels bound to express her exuberance in dance. Her adolescent dance floats between the childhood world of dancing around the fire and a more mature reaction to nature's power. In fact, Emily's insistence on the Duncan-style dances as opposed to the partner dances could be seen as a refusal to accept post-World War Two realities, a reluctance to literally embrace growing up as symbolized by male-female partner dancing; her natural dancing roots her in a naive and endless innocence.

Nature in the *Emily* series is seen not only as inspiring but also as healing, both spiritually and physically. Montgomery is explicit about its cleansing powers for the youthful soul; after an experience with "the flash," Emily feels "a wonderful lightness of spirit — a soul-stirring joy in mere existence. The creative faculty, dormant through the wretched month just passed [when she has been quarrelling with Ilse], suddenly burned in her soul again like a purifying flame. It swept away all morbid, poisonous, rankling things" (*Climbs* 133). Here, we see nature not only reviving Emily's "dormant" creative abilities, but also "purifying" her soul, sweeping away the doubts about her friendship with Ilse. Emily feels bound to express this spiritual connection to nature through her art; she feels compelled to write when seeing "the flash" — a moment of connection with the universe — when she is attuned to the rhythms of the world around her, and life seems "like a wonderful instrument on which to play supernal harmonies" (177). In language reminiscent of

Duncan's discussion of natural "harmonies," Emily is moved by Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoting full passages of his poetry in *Emily Climbs*,¹ and wondering if she could "dare try to carry some of the loveliness of that 'dialogue divine' back to the everyday world of sordid market-place and clamorous street" (177).

The focus on the artist's goal of accessing some secret wisdom hidden in nature, and translating that "flash" into art intended to remind the urban "everyday world" of what they have lost, is common to both Duncan and Montgomery. Indeed, Emerson's philosophies, as quoted by Emily, are strongly linked with the emergence of modern dance; Myron Nadel and Marc Strauss explain that the expression "of a new self-awareness in all the arts, influenced by religions and philosophies such as Christian Science, Theosophy and spiritualism" (116), charged the spirit of modern dance. Ideas from Eastern philosophies such as naturalism and transcendentalism, professed by thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau and Emerson, were influential in the choreographic vision of dancers from Duncan to St. Denis and Graham.

With the new century's increasing emphasis on the health of children and women came a corresponding emphasis on healthful and aesthetic dance as part of education. Physical culture classes of the kind which Anne Shirley takes from Miss Stacy might be mistaken for regular gym classes by today's reader, but Montgomery's audience would have understood that these classes were dance classes, based on an international movement of physical education. A wide-ranging and popular development, physical culture included physical training such as gymnastics and calisthenics, as Kaija Pepper notes, along with "the belief that fitness, posture and physical poise affect a person's emotional and spiritual state" (18). Indeed, the word *gymnastics* is itself misleading for current readers: "aesthetic gymnastics" or "Delsartian gymnastics," which swept North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, were very different from today's gymnastics. Francis Delsarte (1811-71) was a music teacher and movement analyst from France who created a new system for analyzing movement, based on the belief that human physicality directly manifested human spirituality. Susan Foster explains that Delsarte's system was used in the growing physical culture movement "to inspire self-expression by cultivating relaxation, equilibrium, and flexibility — the attributes of a natural body — so that the body would immediately make clear a person's sentiments" (156). The

Delsartian system stressed freedom and harmony of movement, but it was essentially a system designed for actors and musicians; the American disciples of Delsarte expanded the philosophy into a woman-centred, health-based dance class.

Private schools of oratory and elocution, as well as women's colleges, adopted Delsartian content and techniques in the late nineteenth century. Wagner observes that advocates of the Delsartian system of physical culture urged its healthful advantages; the new century's concept of a healthy, athletic woman, enlarged by popular journals and the new psychology cultivated by G. Stanley Hall, stressed the critical importance of regular exercise. Hall, in 1904, maintained that "right dancing can . . . serve both as an awakener and a test of intelligence, predispose the heart against vice, and turn the springs of character toward virtue" (qtd. in Wagner 236). The combination of physical and metaphysical worlds allowed dance to transcend its late descent into disrepute; leaving the music hall behind, dance, as imagined by Duncan and the Delsartian system, seemed to offer women an escape from the Victorian handicaps of femininity, an escape that Emily eagerly uses in her desire to overcome the outmoded restrictions imposed on her by her aunts.

Duncan absorbed the message of Delsarte's work, specifically the connection between body and soul; although she later denied any influence from Delsarte, it would have been difficult, Jowitt notes, for a "bright serious young person with theatrical aspirations growing up in America in the 1880s and 1890s *not* to have been influenced by Delsarte" (89). Most historians of dance take for granted Duncan's exposure to Delsarte, based on her own system of movements and her early recorded comments, including her observation in the *New York Herald Sun*, in 1898, that "Delsarte, the master of all principles of flexibility, and lightness of body, should receive universal thanks for the bonds he has removed from our constrained members" (qtd. in Jowitt 78).² Delsarte had given the public a framework in which to consider new forms of dance; Isadora stretched that framework while still working with the heart of Delsartian science: "strength at the centre; freedom at the surface" (Jowitt 81). The combination of spirituality and science held a strong appeal for both Duncan and Montgomery, as emphasized in the American interpretation of Delsarte by Steele MacKay and Genevieve Stebbins, which held that a woman's body was not to be repressed.

Deborah Jowitt claims that the physical culture movement aligned itself with other movements concerning the liberation of women: liberation from corsets and tight, heavy clothing; from unbalanced diets; and from a lack of fresh air and exercise were all part of its emphasis on a wholesome moral climate. More similar to rhythmic improvised calisthenics with musical accompaniment than a rigidly disciplined ballet class, the physical education curriculum was the model for women's colleges, public schools, and girls' schools such as those of Isadora Duncan. Most commonly taught by women — like Miss Stacy in *Avonlea* — these classes were felt to integrate the capabilities of mind, body, and spirit. They were also closely related to expressive techniques such as elocution and oratory, as well as tableaux vivants, or "living statues," which were a popular pastime for women; Emily's success in these realms mirrors her abilities with movement. In volume one of *Montgomery's Selected Journals*, the young Montgomery records going "with Perle to the Assembly room to watch the calisthenics exercises" (144), and Rubio and Waterston note that the Montgomery scrapbook has a cartoon of this gymnastic physical culture class — two girls exercising, to the horror of an elderly aunt — labelled "Vassar, '94, doing calisthenics" (404).

In fact, a source even closer to home provides a connection to both Duncan and Delsarte: Bliss Carman was one of the poets who was influenced by dance and helped to shape dance philosophies. Montgomery notes her admiration for Carman in her journal; she acknowledges him "the foremost American poet of the present," although she cynically adds that "that, to be sure, is not a dizzy elevation. There are no master singers nowadays" (*Vol. 2* 35). However, she is much taken with the "very beautiful book" which he wrote with Mary Perry King, *Making of Personality*. Montgomery describes this as "one of the most helpful books I have ever read and has done me a vast amount of good — I feel better, braver, more hopeful, more encouraged, more determined to make the best of myself and life since I have read it" (*Vol. 1* 347). The essay that is intriguing for our purposes is on the meaning of personality, with which Montgomery engages in her journal. It is worth quoting her meditative passage in full:

Carman insists on the tri-une cultivation of soul, mind, and body — and he is right. The great lack of Christianity — its cardinal mistake — lies in the fact that it has over-emphasized the spirit-

ual — taught that the body must be mortified — or at best, disregarded as of no importance — a false and ugly — yea, and a blasphemous doctrine — blasphemous because it lowers the “image of the Creator” below the brutes. Mind and soul can express themselves only through the body and therefore we should try to make it and keep it as perfect an instrument for their expression as possible. (347)

Carman’s theory of personality is strikingly like that of Delsarte, with its emphasis on the cultivation of the trinity of “soul, mind, and body.” Montgomery agrees with Carman that the body as an “instrument for expression” is not unholy or base, but an essential part of the human soul; Emily battles against the “false and ugly” accusations about her dancing, furious at the hidebound congregation of Blair Water, who “is so scandalised about” her innocent dance with Ilse by the seashore (*Climbs* 75).

Carman’s “very beautiful book” reads like many of the American Delsartian treatises; more interestingly, Carman’s work with Mary Perry King did not stop at theories of the body but extended into actual dance creation. With King, who was a devotee of Delsartism herself, he co-wrote *Daughters Of Dawn: A Lyrical Pageant or Series of Historic Scenes for Presentation with Music and Dancing* in 1913, and *Earth Deities And Other Rhythmic Masques* in 1914. These two books express the theories of unitrinianism, the principles of which are remarkably similar to Delsarte’s movement theories; the dances depicted in the texts are Greek in sentiment, and clearly influenced by the tenor of Duncan’s performances.

These philosophies are replayed continuously in the *Emily* series; the importance of a creative connection with the universe is one of Montgomery’s strongest priorities. Critical attention has previously focused on Emily’s position as the daughter of a consumptive, with Susan Meyer in “The Fresh-air Controversy, Health, and Art in L.M. Montgomery’s *Emily* Novels” noting a connection between the imagination and health. Meyer points out the strong link between Emily’s well-being and her creativity, noting that the *Emily* novels “repeatedly associate Emily’s bodily and artistic health . . . [insofar as] a threat to one is a threat to the other” (213). Emily must contend with the forces of narrow-minded conventionality, from her well-meaning but elderly Aunt Elizabeth to her Aunt Ruth, who is suspicious of all things she

cannot understand. Emily must teach those around her to embrace the imaginative powers of nature; as in Duncan's educative philosophy, healthy movement out of doors is essential for both a healthy body and a healthy artistic capacity.

Meyer examines the "fresh-air controversy" in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which "physicians advocated exposure to fresh air as a means of combating rampant and deadly airborne diseases, particularly pneumonia, influenza, and tuberculosis" (209). Leaders of this public health movement had to contend with earlier beliefs about the dangers of night air; Aunt Ruth typifies this outdated mode of thinking, telling Emily that she "can air it [the room] in the daytime but *never* have the window open after sundown. *I* am responsible for your health now. You must know that consumptives have to avoid night air and draughts" (*Climbs* 97). Meyer argues that these hygiene rules were "already beginning to be outdated by the 1880s, and, from the perspective of the 1920s, they looked distinctly and lethally outdated . . . as Emily is believed to be consumptive, and, indeed, has had a lot of opportunity to contract the disease, Aunt Elizabeth's closed windows and airless room, seen from the perspective of the 1920s, threaten her very life" (212). By the 1920s, Victorian ideas about "night air" were overturned, and advocates of fresh-air treatment for tuberculosis moved into the mainstream; inhabitants of Prince Edward Island, which had the highest rate of tuberculosis in Canada, were certainly aware that patients with tuberculosis were instructed to rest in the fresh air, sleeping outside in exterior porches. Indeed, Dr. Burnley recommends fresh air for Emily, overruling Aunt Elizabeth; he argues not only that Emily "ought to be in the open air all the time," but also that "she ought to sleep out of doors" (*New Moon* 219).

But it is not merely fresh air that benefits Emily; Meyer's argument regarding the significance of the fresh air debate as a metaphor for the enclosure and suffocation of Emily's creative talent can be extended to encompass the need for movement in that air. Emily's artistic creativity, borne on the wings of the Wind Woman, necessitates her own movement; she cannot sit idly waiting for it. Dr Burnley's recommendation is that Emily not only be exposed to fresh air, but also remain active in it, as he orders Aunt Elizabeth to let Emily go skating. While Emily retains the awareness of her position as a prospective consumptive, she rebels against the label and refuses to sit still. She goes on long walks

with her friends, noting wryly, "I shouldn't have: I should have come right home to bed, like any good consumptive" (*Climbs* 217). When visitors comment that "she probably won't live through her teens. She looks very consumptive" (68), she responds furiously in her diary, "I believe in myself . . . and I'm not consumptive, and I can write" (76). As Meyer notes, Emily links her own physical and creative vitality; this vitality is expressed not only through Emily's writing, but also through her movement. Her instinct is to dance, to "dance and sing and laugh through the old parlour as no Murray, not even her mother, had ever ventured to dance and laugh before" (81). Emily brings new life and imagination to New Moon, as her role in New Moon is to break through the cobwebs of convention; even her own mother would not have "ever ventured to dance and laugh" in the parlour, and Emily is brave enough to do both.

The change between the Victorian depiction of the consumptive feminine invalid and the modern healthy woman dancer, as we have seen, owes a debt to the movement favouring women's health and activity fostered by thinkers such as Delsarte and Isadora Duncan. Like Emily, Duncan rebelled against the idea of woman as weak; Mark Franko notes in *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* that Duncan's "demonstration of physical vitality flatly contradicted the late-nineteenth-century cult of invalidism and anorexia nervosa leading to the 'consumptive sublime'" (10). Neither Duncan nor any of Montgomery's heroines would succumb to the balletic disease, as dancing characters in Victorian novels often did; Duncan believed firmly that her own dancing addressed "not only a question of true art, it is a question . . . of the development of the female sex to beauty and health, of the return to the original strength and to natural movements of women's bodies" (qtd. in Sparshott 14). Audiences around the world responded to Duncan's display of vigour, with one critic going so far as to say that "she was physician to the spirit" (Bradley 84). John Dos Passos wrote about her that "a great sense of health / filled the hall / when the pearshaped figure with the beautiful great arms tramped forward slowly from the back of the stage. She was afraid of nothing; she was a great dancer" (qtd. in Mazo 38). It is interesting that fear and health are linked here; Emily is in good health because of her courage and determination not to be afraid of her relatives, unlike her mother before her.

Fighting both Victorian ideas about decorous movement and the encroaching danger of the jazz age, Montgomery utilizes Duncan's

philosophies of dance to articulate how her heroines can obtain health. Emily proves that dancing can be beneficial mentally, physically, and morally; she shows that movement — particularly in nature — can free the adolescent soul. Montgomery's vision of a creative, empowering nature is expressed through the language of Duncan's dance, drawing on contemporary ideas about the return to nature in dance. Modern dancing, with its emphasis on the expression of one's interior soul, and its focus on women's bodies, allows the young dancers of Canada access to new ideals of health. With modern dance, dance is seen as a means to create a healthy and strong community, this time by creating healthy female bodies and minds.

NOTES

¹ "The gods talk in the breath of the wold, / They talk in the shaken pine, / And they fill the reach of the old seashore / With dialogue divine; / And the poet who overhears / One random word they say / Is the fated man of men / Whom the ages must obey" (10).

² Duncan also preferred to omit any mentions of her ballet training; although she claimed in her autobiography to have taken only two lessons and then left in disgust, there is evidence that she studied with Katti Lanner, in London, and Marie Bonfanti, in New York.

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