American Dryad

Agnes de Mille

DANIEL MARK EPSTEIN

The playwright Edward Sheldon—author of *Salvation Nell* featuring the legendary actress Minnie Fiske, and *Romance* starring Greta Garbo—lay blind and paralyzed with arthritis in his New York penthouse in 1945.

"To his couch, set high like a catafalque in the large living room above the New York skyline, came hundreds as to royalty. A hierarchic still figure, waxen and shiny-skinned, masked and blanketed in brocade, he received and counseled the creative, the searching, the ambitious, the learned. . . . To all he was first audience and discerning enthusiast: Otis Skinner, Charles MacArthur, Ruth Draper, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Helen Hayes, Ruth Gordon, Katherine Cornell, Thornton Wilder."

Thus recalls the late Agnes de Mille, who first visited Sheldon because of his friendship to her mother. When calling upon the blind man she always wore silk, so that he would hear the rustling of the material and know she had dressed up for the occasion.

"Tell me about Martha Graham," he asked, in a sepulchral voice. "I've heard yesterday's reviews, but how does she really move?"

And without stirring a hand or foot in the dusky room, Agnes de Mille would start talking, attempting to describe in detail, and dynamically, exactly what Martha Graham had wrought.

"But what does she do with her feet in these contractions?" he demanded. "And her neck?" He insisted upon hearing precisely.

According to Agnes de Mille, this search for the mot juste to conjure up for the blind Edward Sheldon a living image of Graham, or Markova, or Alonso, was the way in which de Mille herself learned to describe dancing. It is a charming story that reduces the complex evolution of a writer to a single dramatic setting; she may even have been putting us on. Her reports to Edward Sheldon tuned a verbal instrument that was adequately seasoned, if not mellow, by the late 1940s when Agnes de Mille, already famous as the choreographer of *Oklahoma!*, started writing her first book of autobiography, *Dance to the Piper*, which begins:

> This is the story of an American dancer, a spoiled egocentric wealthy girl, who learned with difficulty to become a worker, to set and meet standards, to brace a Victorian sensibility to contemporary roughhousing, and who, with happy good fortune, participated by the side of great colleagues in a renaissance of the most ancient and magical of all the arts.

From the beginning of her writing life Agnes de Mille affected a peculiar humility. Extravagantly proud of her choreography, her amazing family, and the ancient tradition of dance, she stubbornly guarded her amateur status as an author, while producing fourteen books. The foreword to her first book continues:

> My book was neither planned nor intended. Rather it accumulated out of memoranda jotted down haphazardly, intermittently and furtively. The diffidence I felt in attempting expression in a field strange to me, and one in which the men in my family had so distinguished themselves, was understandably extreme. For years I hid what I wrote.

De Mille says the manuscript consisted of scraps of letter paper, wrapping paper, ballet programs, anything that would take the im-

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print of a pencil. "I have polished off a paragraph or two while doing a barre, a practice which I would heartily condemn in young dancers." Again she reduced the difficult business of literary composition to a fabulous, if not apocryphal image: Agnes the dancer at the barre, scribbling prose even as she perfects her plié. The resulting scraps of paper she stuffed into hatboxes until "at last, feeling the time had come for either bettering or burning," she delivered the unsorted cargo into the capable hands of her editor, Edward Weeks, at the Atlantic Monthly Press, who bought the lot. And she would have us believe that Weeks alone made literature of her jottings in the cutting room. He gets the glory, as if he had delivered the book, *Dance to the Piper*, into the world by Caesarean section.

In 1951 Agnes de Mille was the most prominent "modern" choreographer in America, having provided the movement for *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and her full-length ballets *Rodeo*, *Fall River Legend*, and *Three Virgins and a Devil*. The American public rewards expertise and hasn't much patience with the multi-talented. Only the specialist deserves our undivided attention, particularly in the arts. The dance director who writes imposing books is suspect not only as a dilettante writer but as a distracted choreographer. De Mille was a major choreographer who would not risk being regarded as a dilettante, so she has played down her writing. If her works were not so transparently autobiographical, it is almost certain she would have offered them to the public in demure anonymity.

Her mother, Anna Angela George, was the daughter of the economist Henry George, the most illustrious American intellectual of his day. His "single tax" theory, that land alone should be taxed, had worldwide influence. Long after his death in 1897, de Mille recalls, Henry George's disciples made pilgrimages to pay their respects to his daughter Anna. She and her daughters attended conferences of the Georgists, as they were called, as far away as London, where Agnes recalls being treated with the awe and reverence owed to royalty.

Agnes de Mille's father, William, was the son of playwright Henry de Mille, David Belasco's first collaborator. Henry died of typhoid at age thirty-nine, leaving his Jewish wife, Beatrice, to care for their two sons. She made ends meet by improvising a career as the second American female play broker. Her son William, at twenty-five, wrote a Broadway hit, followed by several more in quick succession. His younger brother, who had nothing but bad luck in the New York theater, went to Hollywood, where he became Cecil B. DeMille.

It is not surprising that, coming from this family, Agnes de Mille would be impelled to perform onstage or write serious books—or that, as a woman, she should also feel daunted by either prospect. In the de Mille home, the women did—along with childbearing—the physical work, housekeeping, and cooking; men worked with their minds. Yet Agnes's childhood ambition to become a dancer was so repugnant to the Victorian family that they praised her intellect, hoping she might give up the dance for a literary career.

Anna de Mille was frugal, strict, and austere in everything from dress to time management. She had no understanding of, or patience with, pure aesthetics: "She could not permit herself to do anything pleasant unless she felt she was doing it for someone else's sake. I have known her to eat a bunch of grapes over a period of days and never have a sound one, keeping exact pace with the mold." This was not the sort of sensibility that would support her daughter's theatrical ambition; no more was Agnes's father's. "My father," she wrote, "considered dancing at best exhibitionistic acrobatics, and certainly a field that offered neither intellectual nor spiritual challenge."

Her parents would never have enrolled Agnes in a ballet class except that her sister's arches collapsed, "providentially." The orthopedist advised ballet dancing. Thirteen-year-old Agnes was sent to accompany her younger sister Margaret to the Kosloff School of Imperial Russian Ballet. Theodore Kosloff told Agnes that her knees were weak, her spine curved, she was too heavy for her age, and her "muscles were dry, stubborn and unresilient." He said she was a bit old to start training, at thirteen.

With these words ringing in her ears, Agnes began the arduous task of making her dancer's body, the task that every ballerina must undertake regardless of age or natural aptitude, the labor that she has described from the inside out as no dancer has ever done.

I bent to the discipline. I learned to relax with my head between my knees when I felt sick or

faint. I learned how to rest my insteps by lying on my back with my feet vertically up against the wall. I learned how to bind up my toes so that they would not bleed through the satin shoes. But I never sat down. I learned the first and all-important dictate of ballet dancing—never to miss the daily practice.

I seemed, however to have little aptitude for the business. . . . I strained and strained. Nothing perceptible happened. A terrible sense of frustration drove me to striving with masochistic frenzy.

Ballet technique is arbitrary and very difficult. It never becomes easy; it becomes possible. . . . Unless a certain satisfaction is derived from the disciplining and punishing, the pace could not be maintained. Most dancers are to an extent masochists.

Most dancers are to an extent masochists. In the post-Freudian theater, this is now an *idée reçue.* But in 1951, Agnes de Mille's stark confession of the dark side of the dancer's psyche was shocking. In a chapter called "Ballet and Sex," from *Dance to the Piper,* she calls dancing a complete if unconscious substitute for physical love, observing that in the lives of most famous dancers it usually assumes this function. Great dancing is essentially erotic, but for the moment of exhibitionistic glory the dancer "pays dearly. . . . She is forced to relinquish her unique womanly power: her grasp of reality. She is rooted in air. The fruit of her womb is gestures. Dedicating her life to her own body, she sacrifices the reality of her children's bodies and in effect that of her husband's."

Everything about modern dance might seem shocking to the children of Victorians. They wanted to regard the ballerina as the idealization of all that was pure and estimable in the physical woman. In a half century things had changed very fast, first with Isadora Duncan dancing barefoot in a nightgown, and then Martha Graham's maenads celebrating god-knows-what indecencies, rolling around on the stage. And now the most articulate voice of the modern movement, our foremost dance historian, announced to the world what they already feared: that ballet, the epitome of human lightness and ease of movement, was actually founded upon a painful and even vulgar discipline rooted in sweat and blood and dark, distinctly un-Christian impulses.

In *Dance to the Piper,* de Mille told how she became a dancer against the odds, against her parents' and teachers' advice, her classmates' scorn—against, indeed, her own body. At the Kosloff school she excelled in nothing but mime, where her genius for comedy was, from the first, undeniable. Mime is the purest evidence of that kinetic memory which is essential to choreography as well as dance criticism. But de Mille wanted nothing less than to be a prima ballerina. Discouraged, at sixteen she hung up her ballet shoes. She enrolled at UCLA, to the relief of everyone in her family. There her talent for writing and scholarship was immediately recognized and praised as her dancing had never been. Yet in her sophomore year she was invited to dance some bergerettes in a college revue; the applause was pleasing, and this performance led to others. Although she graduated from the university with academic honors, de Mille had made up her mind to go on the stage after all.

After fifteen years of struggle at the barre, in audition studios and on stages in New York, Paris, and Brussels, Agnes de Mille succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations. Then, in the late forties, she warily began her career as a writer, proposing to explain the mysteries of dancing to herself and the public.

She was what we might call an "odd Brahman," the wealthy, well-educated granddaughter of Jewish immigrants, English intellectuals, and theater gypsies. De Mille wintered in New York and summered in the Catskills, until Hollywood beckoned her father in 1914. There she went to school with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Joel McCrea, and the children of Louis B. Mayer. Charlie Chaplin and Fairbanks, Sr., came to dinner. Geraldine Farrar sang in her parlor and played their piano. Agnes was showbiz aristocracy, like Eugene O'Neill and Cornelia Otis Skinner and the Barrymores. Like her father and grandfather, she might be capable of anything, any outrage against the status quo in art and letters, notwithstanding the limitation of being born a girl-child in 1905—the daughter of a proper Victorian mother.

Anna de Mille had a program for Agnes. "She wanted me above all to be a fine, gentle, sweet-mannered, pure girl and this was what I was being raised as against every inclination in my nature."

What, exactly, was Agnes de Mille's nature? As it emerges in her more intimate writings,

her character is a distillation of certain virtues more familiar to us from pagan sources, Greek and Roman, than from any Christian paradigm—ferocious strength, sexual candor, and mystical intuition. It is fitting that her name has become linked with her colleague Martha Graham's. These distinctly different personalities shared a primitive vigor, even a savagery, that expressed itself in defiant images. As dancers they may have appeared onstage as angels of the erotic imagination—but both were angels with claws. Capable of great generosity, they never put kindness before self-protection or liberty. De Mille was bold in the exposition of her most primitive impulses. "My little sister Meg would get in my way," she said mischievously. "I used to *strangle* her!"

Great novelists have many stories to tell; the author of significant autobiography—a Jane Addams, an Anne Frank or an Agnes de Mille—has a single story, even a single episode or incident so resonant that the larger culture adopts it. The tale becomes a chapter of collective memory, an essential part of understanding ourselves.

Agnes de Mille's theme, as it evolves in her most intimate autobiographies, is the loss of innocence. Her central story is the tragedy of a late Victorian marriage, her parents' marriage. In her autobiographical novel *Where The Wings Grow* (1978), she describes how her parents strolled together hand in hand through the forest of Merriewold where they had their summer home.

> That mother and father were in love I knew as I knew that the woods were green and budding. . . . The whole forest quickened for me. The world thrilled. Everything was beginning and good, free summer lay ahead. . . . Mother and Father loved absolutely. This was the meaning of the place, of Merriewold.

She was then seven. Her father was a famous playwright, a dapper, witty young man with a mustache and the profile of a Spanish grandee. He wrote plays in a shack in the woods, and played tennis, while his beautiful wife, Anna, ran the household and took care of the children. Life seemed perfect.

Ten years later the marriage fell apart. What had happened? In Hollywood, among starlets, where "all the men with power in the studio had whatever they wanted," the handsome young playwright discovered sex. This is the phrase de Mille uses, repeatedly. "Father discovered sex," an exercise his Victorian wife had been taught to endure without pleasure. Agnes blames her father, a kind and otherwise civilized man, for what she inferred was a brutal initiation in the marriage bed. She blames her mother for her inexorable rage upon learning of his infidelities. "From the morning she walked out of Father's home she never spoke to him again."

Let the blame fall where it may, it was, in de Mille's view, sexual ignorance that killed the marriage: Victorian naïveté on the one side and Victorian brutality and concupiscence on the other. For their adolescent daughter, this was the fall from paradise. She entered a period of mourning from which she did not wholly recover until twenty years later, when she married the man of her dreams and took him to Merriewold, where they lay down happily in Mother and Father's bed.

Agnes de Mille tells this story several times. She tells it obliquely in *Dance to the Piper* (published when her parents were still living). She tells it quite frankly in an essay called "The de Milles" in the 1990 collection of essays and stories called *Portrait Gallery*. She tells it lyrically, passionately, in *Where the Wings Grow*, a book she dictated into a tape recorder while recovering from the stroke that paralyzed the right half of her body. She describes her long illness in another autobiographical novel, *Reprieve*. De Mille learned to write with her left hand in order to revise the paragraphs someone else had transcribed from the tape.

"That book saved my life," she says of *Where the Wings Grow*. It is her central autobiographical text. The first part is a rhapsodic memory of early childhood, the beauty of nature and her parents' bond, and her love for her cousin Elizabeth, who was five years older. The second part is a third-person narrative of the tragic history of their neighbors (relatives by marriage), the Takamines. Dr. Takamine, who discovered the formula for synthetic adrenaline, was one of the first Japanese in America to marry a white woman, Caroline Hitch of New Orleans. They lived like royalty in Merriewold, their bliss threatened only by the sin that divided the de Milles—adultery. This theme links the second section of the book to the third and last, in which de Mille narrates her return to Merriewold as an adolescent, her disillusionment, despair, and eventual healing.

At nine, Agnes left the East for California. During the years in California, far away from Merriewold and her beloved cousin Elizabeth, Agnes romanticized the forest and developed a long-distance, pre-erotic crush on her cousin. Agnes had set herself up for disappointment upon her return to Merriewold: Elizabeth, now sixteen, had turned the corner and become a woman, more interested in her young men than in communing with this adoring little girl, who had such peculiar impulses:

> I longed suddenly, overwhelmingly to go to the deer's running ground, to see those floral groves. . . . I had only once dared to go there since coming back, for down there waited my young mother, young and in love with a beloved husband. But now if I went back, I felt I would find my own life, not my mother's. And if I had a companion I could seal the moment. . . . I wanted Elizabeth to go with me into the woods.

But Elizabeth is on the back porch in the moonlight, with her young man, Jim. Approached by the little girl with her queer invitation, Elizabeth is at first politely solicitous, then perplexed. At last she becomes angered by the child's persistence. "You've been hanging around my neck all summer and I don't like it," she says. "Now let go of my dress, do you understand? I don't like it."

The effect is devastating. For Agnes this rejection by her idol, Elizabeth, following her parents' divorce, spells the end of childhood—the end of innocence. "It was finished. The woods were finished. It was all stale. Mother's young love, her impossible young love, over. The woods were emptied. The wilderness had become cement streets. It was all cement, it was finished."

The rest of Agnes de Mille's creative life will be consecrated to redemption, mourning the fall from paradise and filling the empty space with Art—clear images of a new and more vital woman. Her fresh choreography, linking earth and sky, the rich humor of the dance movement as well as the literary prose, is devoted to healing the psychic wound described in *Where the Wings Grow*. Identifying her parents' love with the forest, confounding her own innocence with her parents' harmony, completes the equation of valuables to be wrecked by Victorian ignorance of sex and nature's sacredness.

When she was a little girl, says Agnes de Mille, she knew all the trees of Merriewold as persons. Every time the woodcutters felled one of the trees with an ax, Agnes de Mille would carry on so, weeping and crying out loud, that her parents must have thought she was possessed. And one might say she was possessed, with the spirit of the forest. "I was impossible. . . . And at the same time I was the mysterious child, powerful and beautiful. I was the possible lover. When I stood in the woods alone, as I did with increasing frequency, I was capable of passion. It was the age of great heroines. I knew all sensitivity, all awareness, all terrible blinding curiosity." She had long thick hair, bright red, and eyes the color of the clear sky. She had a muscular little body taut with explosive energy, and tiny quick feet. Agnes de Mille is our quintessential American dryad, celebrating the marriage of earth and sky in the arboreal image of the dancer, mourning the death of the forests.

For all its lyric beauty and thematic drive, *Where the Wings Grow* remains unfinished. The three parts of the narrative do not quite cohere. There is too much of the Takamines and not enough continuity to the story of Agnes and her cousin Elizabeth; there is a rush to fill in the happy ending, after so much anguish. The strict vision of form that shaped her choreography in *Rodeo* and the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!*, and commands her individual sentences, somehow failed her in the planning of a book that might have been a masterpiece. Nevertheless the reader finds in it the key story of Agnes de Mille's life, the roots of the sensibility that enabled her to create her incomparable portraits of dancers.

Literary portraiture is a rare sub-genre of biography, or fiction, depending upon one's definition of these illusive terms. The writing of portraits requires great verbal concision and understanding of the subject in order to render a character precisely in the fewest pages.

Agnes de Mille's portraits of the great dancers, from Isadora Duncan and Anna Pavlova to Martha Graham and Alicia Alonso, are perfect examples of the form. De Mille's visual memory, which is the choreographer's chief resource, encompasses the whole repertory of modern dance and classical ballet. Conversing in her eighties, when I knew her, she could evoke with a gesture and a phrase the distinct

mood of an obscure Graham solo no one alive can recollect. No one had seen dancers as Agnes de Mille had seen them, and no one else had the verbal acuity to recount the movement or the spirit that cannot be recorded on film.

Before our dazzled eyes she flashed with the sudden sweetness of a hummingbird in action too quick for understanding by our gross utilitarian standards. . . . Her trunk was small and stripped of all anatomy but the ciphers of adolescence, her arms and legs relatively long, the neck extraordinarily long and mobile. All her gestures were liquid and possessed of an inner rhythm that flowed to inevitable completion with the finality of architecture or music. Her arms seemed to lift not from the elbow or the arm socket, but from the base of the spine. Her legs seemed to function from the waist. When she bent her head her whole spine moved and the motion was completed the length of the arm through the elongation of her slender hand and the quivering reaching fingers. (Pavlova: From *Dance to the Piper*)

Her foot was long for her height, but very slender, strongly arched and as delicate as a bird's claw. On the end of this delicate parenthesis she alighted and hung poised like the crescent moon, a stillness in the movement of time.

The dark lashes rested tranquilly against the wax-pale cheek, a Mona Lisa smile was fixed on the noncommittal lips until she suddenly glanced up in childlike wickedness and chuckled with a tiny sound like something very valuable breaking. Always about her there was an aroma of sadness, a hint of death in the moment of consummated effort. This was her Jewish heritage, as it was Anna Pavlova's. (Alicia Markova: From *Portrait Gallery*)

Her hair is black and straight as a horse's tail. Her voice is low, dark and rusky, clear and bodyless like most dancers'. Her speech—who shall describe Martha's speech? The breathless, halting search for the releasing word as she instructs a student. . . . The gentle "You see it should be like this," as her body contracts with lightning, plummets to the earth and strikes stars out of the floor. "Now you try it. *You* can do it." Thus Diana to the rat catchers. (Martha Graham: From *Dance to the Piper*)

The most salient strength of the portraits is this physical specificity; but beyond the physical, they are also profound, soul-searching. After reviewing Alicia Markova's life in a few pages, her birth to a Catholic Irishwoman and a Jewish engineer, his death when Alicia was thirteen, her training under a tyrannical ballet mistress—de Mille sets about to explain Markova's aloofness, mystery, and unworldliness:

From the time she was eight she was treated as someone apart, a conditioning usually reserved for young lamas or queen bees. . . . The girl who did exactly as she was told for over twenty years, who remained as passive as a baby, as cherished, as self absorbed, grew to be the perfect instrument for more aggressive forces—but herself initiated nothing.

De Mille knew Alicia Markova, as she has known most of her subjects. And her observations do not stop at the door to the dressing room:

I have seen Alicia stripped. She had no body at all. She had no bust, no stomach, no hips, no buttocks; she had two long supple arms and two long strong legs, joined by a device that contained in the most compact manner possible enough viscera to keep her locomotive. She was utterly feminine but incorporeal as a dryad. Her slenderness, her lack of unneeded flesh was a rebuke to everything gross in the world.

De Mille explains that the great Markova never married, was never even engaged. She was never interested in anything but becoming the greatest ballerina in the world, which she accomplished at great emotional cost. De Mille sums up this devil's bargain in the epigrammatic phrase: "Outraged nature must have backed up on her from time to time and taken blackmail payments."

The conflict between nature and artifice rages from the beginning to the end of de Mille's monumental portrait of Martha Graham, published in 1991, after the subject's death. Paradoxically, Graham freed the dancer from one form of artifice, classical ballet technique, only to replace it with a technique even more punishing to the dancer's body.

Ballet had long denied the woman's sexual center of gravity, her connection with the earth, and the religious nature of this connection. It was Graham's inspiration to reclaim this. In her famous essay "Ballet and Sex," Agnes de Mille blames the decline of dance since the first millennium on the Christian Church. "For one thousand years there has

been no dancing in the Christian religion and it is the only great religion that has had none. It is obvious why—a religion that is based on the mortification of the flesh is not going to find the flesh and its attendant heats a suitable medium of expression." De Mille shows us how Martha Graham's enterprise, her technique, her school, and the great dance dramas, took on the ultimate seriousness of a new religion, with Graham herself as high priestess.

In her acknowledgments, de Mille states that the writing of *Martha* took between twenty and twenty-five years. Actually she had been writing about Graham since the 1940s. In *Dance to the Piper,* Graham has a fifteen-page chapter all to herself, and in the 1958 sequel to de Mille's autobiography, *And Promenade Home,* there are several flattering paragraphs about the great innovator. Graham had been like an older sister to de Mille since the 1930s. When an editor at Random House in the 1960s proposed the idea of a biography of Graham by de Mille, it was with the sense of a *fait accompli.* The book virtually existed, in Agnes de Mille's memories and impressions, like a powerful secret that cannot be kept. It was inevitable, if the author outlived her subject, and found the narrative strength, that the book would emerge. *Martha* would be not only the story of the greatest modern dancer, but the epic of modern dance in America.

Martha Graham alive had been feted, worshipped, and feared; alive she seemed to have superhuman powers of self-protection, even of vengeance if crossed. She was surely the greatest dancer America has produced. But she was also furious, refractory, impossible—the gossip about her in later life was outrageous. Who could sort it all out? I have myself repeatedly heard the tale of the time Miss Graham, impatient with a student's careless execution of a contraction, grabbed her from behind by the shoulders, put her knee in the small of the woman's back, and broke it. True or not, the anecdote conveys the incidental ruthlessness in dealing with students, performers, and patrons that has a real source in the facts. No one alive knew the facts as did Agnes de Mille, who, late in life estranged from Graham, was known to speak her mind.

"This is the story of a genius," de Mille's book on Graham begins, "a woman who made a greater change in her art . . . than almost any other single artist who comes readily to mind." Having gotten this judgment out of the way, de Mille explains her problem: "Martha always wanted to leave behind a legend, not a biography. To this end she deliberately and industriously made the way of any biographer difficult. She destroyed personal documents, letters, records. . . . The past was to be obliterated and reshaped according to Martha's will." De Mille's main sources were her interviews with company members and her own prodigious memory.

Strictly speaking, the portrait is more of a memoir than a standard biography.

> I knew Martha mainly as an adoring younger sister might, and worshipped her surprising and authentic gifts. I came to lean on her strength and often in the early days of our friendship begged her opinion after each of my own concerts. . . . She was kind and helpful, and not just on professional matters.
>
> I can, I believe, indicate the forces and demons that drove this small, bewitching creature to her unmatched achievement. And I can portray her life and achievement in the context of the history of dance.

This is not a modest or scholarly claim, but an announcement that the book is intended to be a work of art.

Martha opens, novelistically, in the narrative voice of the "younger sister" Agnes. She recalls her first impressions of Martha Graham seated beside her lover, the portly pianist Louis Horst, at dance concerts in the late 1920s. De Mille had gotten to know Horst earlier, as they traveled together for the Ballet Intime. In an opening scene, de Mille humorously recalls: "One night, conversationally, and without warning, Louis dragged me by the hair of my head right into the privacy of his bed." His bed was the lower berth of a rattling Pullman en route to Chicago.

That day Horst was suffering from a lover's quarrel with Graham. He poured out his soul to the wide-eyed young de Mille. Flattered by the older man's confidence in her, she accepted the role of confessor, but not without a sense of shame. Horst was married. Martha had left him and gone to another man's bed, because Horst would not leave his wife. Young Agnes, still very much the Victorian mother's child caught up in these bohemian intrigues,

was shocked. Her relationship with the pianist helps to define the narrative point of view.

In time Horst introduced Agnes to Martha, a meeting the younger woman approached warily. "There she was, small, dark, practically famous, the basilisk, the femme fatale. . . . Whew! And there I was, our Edwardian girl, totally without worldly experience and cocooned still in my mother's nursery of cambric tea and childish civilities." De Mille stands on the threshold of the modern experience and its "contemporary roughhousing." It looks as if the leader of the orgy is going to be this mysterious femme fatale, with her "grave sweet dignity, her absolute fastidiousness of manner and speech." Every inch a lady, Miss Graham is about to shatter the image of Victorian femininity forever.

The narrator digresses briefly, backing and filling. Information about Graham's childhood is meager, the stuff of press releases: "a sixth generation American with a line of Scotch-Irish antecedents on both sides. . . . There was money in her background." Her father was a doctor who specialized in mental disorders. She grew up in Santa Barbara, one of three sisters. De Mille hurries on to 1916, when Graham studied with Ruth St. Denis, and devotes fifty pages to the movement that spawned Graham's technique, the lives and work of Isadora Duncan, Ted Shawn, and Ruth St. Denis. De Mille's portrait of the odd couple that came to be known as Denishawn—ethereal Miss Ruth and her androgynous husband, the narcissistic poseur Ted Shawn, is a marvelous balance of humor and informed respect for dance pioneers who made a virtue of eccentricity. Their technique she describes as pseudo-ballet, pseudo-Duncan, and pseudo-Oriental, but with a pith of seriousness, "the centering of concentration and personality of one's highest instincts before proceeding into any exercise."

The story of Shawn and St. Denis, thorough history in itself, is a mini-drama that earns its place in the larger narrative, which is about Martha Graham, modern dance, and sex. It locates young Martha in the current of innovation, while it telegraphs a crucial feature of de Mille's method:

> In her autobiography, Ruth stresses that they (Ruth and Ted) were lovers. We will never know for certain, but it matters, because both of their lives were warped by their relationship and by the overpowering effort of trying to conform to the regular marital pattern of Western Christianity. Miss Ruth was a devout Christian Scientist. Ted was an avid hedonist and a deep-rooted homosexual.

Ruth, de Mille adds, was very likely frigid. None of this does she offer by way of pandering to gross appetites for gossip. *It matters*, says de Mille flatly, because dance is an expression of sexuality. The sex of these great dancers is fate, the way character is fate. And we are not likely to understand the character of the great choreographer without some insight into her sexual disposition.

The next two hundred pages of *Martha*, the heart of the epic, is given to Graham's rise to fame, the creation of the technique that bears her name, and the great dance dramas. In 1926 Graham quit her job in the Greenwich Village Follies. With a small income from teaching, she opened her own studio on the sixth floor of Carnegie Hall and began experimenting, in her own movement variations, "studies of pure movement, the very essence of emotion."

De Mille never loses sight of the private personality which is the source of Graham's prodigious output.

> She was in love with an older man who was married and who was trying to free himself. . . . She was working in constant crisis, she attempted daily to maintain her aplomb, to show love, to receive love.

But it was impossible with Horst. Indeed, giving and receiving love will be difficult for Graham, until it becomes impossible. Martha Graham emerges from the de Mille portrait as a classical heroine whose preternatural power forces her into isolation.

> Martha stood for the outraged individual. She was herself a hurt girl, lonely and probably frightened. She advocated free love, though she wanted marriage. . . . Her dancing grew ever more fierce, bound up, iron. . . . She would break opposition. She developed a technique of hitting out and hitting in. The movement was rock hewn.

The force of her personality was so great that her dancers became slaves rather than collaborators. In de Mille's language, the sadomasochism of the rehearsal process is unmis-

takable. The life-giving, revolutionary Graham technique, which focused attention on the torso, and "stripped off the chassis of the body and exposed the motor," was painful and taxing. "All of it was hard to do and punishing to the girls' bodies . . . the constant pelvic drive, the hammering of the organs." This is not to mention the insane floor exercises, such as walking for hours on one's knees, which was so damaging to dancers' legs that no one, except under Martha's lash, could ever be forced to make the sacrifice.

She began to realize that she could rule, she could create a mystical relationship with an audience or, alternatively, that she could destroy. She had power. She grew to love the magic word: Power.

Power brought Martha Graham fame and glory, as the press discovered her at last, the intellectual audience, and patrons such as Bethsabee de Rothschild. In 1936 she met the dancer Eric Hawkins, fifteen years her junior. She invited him to join the company. He inspired her to create roles for the male dancer, and erotic pas de deux. She fell in love with Hawkins, and he became an obsession. "It was plain to the girls and even to Martha herself that Eric's brutality stirred something in her." He began to dominate the notorious *dominatrice.* De Mille says that the effect upon Graham was basically humanizing, making her vulnerable to affection; but the lovers' violence was such that their erotic connection could never evolve into conjugal generosity or harmony—it was a constant battle of wills.

Graham used to call herself "doom-driven." Eric was her doom. Their long affair is the turning point of the tragedy. Married in 1948, the two immediately began to destroy each other. She was the greater artist, and would rule him onstage; but as a younger man he could manipulate her emotionally, "praising the younger girls, the pretty ones." The relationship, born in erotic passion, ended in physical violence.

She was fifty. Martha Graham would live for another forty years after her failed marriage, years of artistic growth and public triumph. But those who knew her watched helplessly as the lonely woman descended into alcoholism, suicidal depression, paranoia, and isolation unrelieved by her growing coterie of sycophants. Without ever forgetting or ceasing to love the younger Graham, who had been a true friend and had given so much to her and to others, de Mille frankly describes the great woman's descent.

Humorous, proud, humble, and angry by turns, de Mille in this book never loses her sense of wonder about her subject. She begins in the voice of the adoring younger sister and ends in the elegiac tone of maternal pathos. Recalling her final visits with the artist, de Mille writes:

She did not inquire about my life. . . . As I left the remote encounter with this pale, lustrous deity, I was remembering the exuberant, giggling young woman who had poked her umbrella through the shattered roof of my old jalopy and sheltered me. . . . Martha was now alone. She was going to die alone, as she had lived alone, without children . . . lover or a husband, without, God help us, old friends. She would remain alone with her work, the alter self, the presence, the aureole—penumbra which overshadowed her life.

Graham's isolation stands in contrast to the understated subplot, the romance of de Mille's own life. The "younger sister" de Mille has been happily married for forty years to a man Graham introduced to her. Perhaps de Mille has been able to have it both ways, as a successful choreographer and as a married woman and mother, because the "older sister" has blazed the path for her.

Agnes de Mille has said that she could not have succeeded as a choreographer without the example and encouragement of Martha Graham. In writing *Martha,* she paid off the debt with interest. It seems unlikely that Martha Graham will ever get a more sympathetic hearing from any biographer whose word will be credited. There are many ways to misunderstand Graham, the *monstre sacre,* as many as there are people who worked for her. But perhaps there is only one way properly to understand her—as a strong-willed dancer very like Agnes de Mille, an angel with claws, determined to destroy that nineteenth-century icon, the good Christian ballerina, and put something vital in its place.

The most perfect of the de Mille portraits, however, are the miniatures to be found in the collection called *Portrait Gallery.* Here the genre distinction between lyric prose and fiction becomes irrelevant. Along with the por-

traits of dancers, theater impresarios, Billy Rose and Sol Hurok, and the de Mille brothers, there are two autobiographical pieces so dramatically plotted and thematically resonant that they remind one of the short stories of Eudora Welty. One is the story "Allie: All For Love." This concerns de Mille's maiden aunt, a kindly Victorian lady whose pathetic naïveté about love and sex actually leads to her death, just as young Agnes herself is enjoying the adventure of her first love affair. It is an elegant presentation of the central de Mille theme. The other story, called "Avoir du Crain" is a horror story, about a female servant, a *monstre* that de Mille takes into her household. The cook is so selfish and cruel that she makes life miserable for the de Mille family, yet she exerts a strange power—de Mille cannot bring herself to fire the woman until she has nearly wrecked the family. Here we see one of the themes from *Martha* in a more personal form: the evil cook represents a part of the new woman antipathetic to family life, whose ferocity must be endured as a penance until we have learned what we have to learn from her.

On the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Agnes de Mille lived in the spacious, bright apartment she shared with Walter Prude, her husband of fifty years. He died in 1990. The stroke of 1977 confined de Mille, mostly, to the bedroom where she worked and received visitors. She sat erect on the queen-sized bed, under a lapboard strewn with papers and pens, an island of erudition in a sea of books, notes, and manuscripts. Books were piled on the bed, on the windowsill, around the room. On the bureau were photographs of her late husband, her son, a professor of history at a university, and photographs of Merriewold.

She entertained graciously, serving tea in rare china, her eyes vivid blue and piercing, her wit fresh and irrepressible. Her silver hair was pulled straight back from her face. Her hand, the right hand with no feeling, blundered against the teacup and was splashed by the scalding beverage. When her visitor expressed alarm, she tossed her head, turning up her chin, flashed the famous, haughty profile: "More concern for the *teacup*, dearie!" Questioned about her grandfather, the economist Henry George, she rummaged through a pile of books, plucking out George's collected essays, dog-eared, the book spine bulging with de Mille's notepapers. "Now you don't want to get me on *that* subject." One of the world's experts on her grandfather's theories, she was at the time in the thick of correspondence with a perplexed Georgist.

She asked me if I had read the new biography of poet Anne Sexton, holding it high. "The woman had no self-control, no self-respect," she said, with impatience, deflating all sympathy, tossing the book aside. She picked up Lytton Strachey's famous biography of Queen Victoria. "I've been rereading this," she says. "Another sort of woman altogether." From Queen Victoria to the confessional poet Sexton might seem an overwhelming transition; for de Mille it was merely another opportunity to marvel at human nature, to find yet more humor and pathos in human "progress."

At eighty-seven she was still writing, working on a new book of portraits. While her dances continue to be revived, many of her books are out of print. Dance is the most evanescent of the arts, as it is the most passionately rooted in the present moment. Literature, the most enduring of the arts, rises above the moment, with a view to posterity, upon eternity. That one woman possessed genius in these two disparate mediums seems almost a freak of nature. De Mille's stories of dancers, her brilliant choreography, elegant in itself and expressive of changes in sexuality, are vital literature, and will long endure to remind us of this modern master, who died, after a life of continuous achievement, in 1993.