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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Martha Graham's Beautiful, Harrowing Night Journey

Philippe Halsman, Magnum Photos
Martha Graham and Erick Hawkins in her work "Dark Meadow," 1946

By Alexander C. Kafka | SEPTEMBER 17, 2012 ✔
PREMIUM

Martha Graham transformed dance, and Erick Hawkins transformed Martha Graham. The interplay between their personal history, dance history, and history writ large is the ambitious focus of Mark Franko's ***Martha Graham in Love and War*** (Oxford University Press).

This is not a conventional trade biography of Graham, nor a prurient glimpse into her marriage to Hawkins. As the subtitle conveys, it is instead a fairly specialized deconstruction of "The Life in the Work." It charts a trajectory that begins before Hawkins entered Graham's life and ends some time after they went their separate ways. But from 1938 to 1951, Hawkins was a key influence on Graham's choreography, her mind, and her heart, often in ways, Franko persuades us, that neither of them fully realized at the time.

Franko is transitioning from a dance professorship at the University of California at Santa Cruz to Temple University, where he'll be coordinating graduate studies in dance. He had written about Graham's 1920s and 30s work with the Denishawn School and Graham's own fledgling troupe. But since the late 90s, Franko explains by phone from New York, he's been delving into the Graham and Hawkins archives at the Library of Congress. Included in those are notes relating to Graham's psychoanalysis in the 1950s with the Jungian therapist Frances Gillespy Wickes. Graham's chief biographer, Agnes de Mille, had access to those documents too, but, says Franko, "I don't think she knew what to do with them." More important was the extensive newly released correspondence between Graham and Hawkins, and Graham's libretti and notes for works in progress.

From such materials, Franko derives a rich intellectual context for this prime period of Graham's career, dividing it very roughly into three parts. First came a dramaturgical Americana phase, typified by the dances *American Document* (1938) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), in which Graham countered fascist Aryan archetypes with anti-fascist utopian

American ones (farmer husband, his bride, and so on), even as she encrypted within them, Franko suggests, progressive messages about civil rights. Then, in pieces like *Night Journey* (1948), came a period of psychoanalytically informed incitement of the viewer's subconscious around stories from Greek mythology. The third phase was a self-revealing, individuating "psychodramatic" period, Franko argues, in which Graham, through the conception of, and group choreographic process in, *Voyage* (1953), for instance, explored a persona for herself counter to her popular image as the stern, unapproachable high priestess of dance modernism.

Hawkins, Franko writes, played crucial roles in this evolution. A former Greek-civilization student at Harvard, he was both Graham's muse and fellow mind voyager as she delved into mythology, psychoanalytic theory, theater (she choreographed his role as Lear in 1950's *Eye of Anguish*), and so much more. Trained in ballet and the first male dancer in her company, Hawkins also brought to Graham's works new types of strength, line, and virtuosity, contrasts that allowed her to explore more classically feminine movement in her own roles. More practically, he helped manage and publicize her company.

Their coupledom clearly informed and enriched both of their lives and work—Hawkins choreographed too, often even around the same themes, like the Minotaur, and he went on to found his own renowned dance company. But the relationship was also a terrible, chronic struggle causing heartache and intermittent separations. Among their obstacles, Hawkins was 15 years Graham's junior and branching out as a serious artist in his own right—ultimately, in a very different East-meets-West, Zen, holistic vein than Graham's work.

In a bravura theoretical performance of his own, Franko interprets *Night Journey* in light of the psychoanalyst Otto Rank's theory of artistic performance as accomplishing "the social equivalent of dream work." As Graham and Hawkins's relationship was unraveling, "for Graham, the introspective subject of *Night Journey* was the least symbolic and most obvious (yet still hidden) part of the choreography: the anticipatory action on stage of Graham and Hawkins as doomed lovers." Particularly so, Franko reminds us, in an Oedipal construct emphasizing the guilt of Graham's character, Jocasta. Embedded subtexts of performance and performer, Franko argues, reached the audience on levels far deeper than any program-note synopsis might convey.

In just one brief illustration of how the couple's letters inform Franko's discussion, he first sets the scene for *Night Journey'*s psychodynamics. "In 1947 Graham was 53 and Hawkins 38," he writes. "Graham came to see the failure of their relationship as a result of her own insecurities about aging." In a 1950 letter to Hawkins, Graham wrote, "I think I resented the fact that you were younger than I. I did things, such as the jealousy things, to make myself out a martyr to time." That was her response to Hawkins's comment that "You have allowed yourself to keep a neurotic irrationality which has constantly broken the tender shoots of what you seemingly wanted to grow."

Over all, Hawkins receives a far more sympathetic take from Franko than he traditionally has from the modern-dance establishment. Part of his vilification by Graham allies, Franko explains, stems from the misperception that he callously ditched Graham while the

company was on a European tour in 1950. Franko says that among dance scholars, the greatest specific revelation in his book—"the eye opener," as he puts it—might be that Hawkins left Graham as a last desperate attempt to save her from her own stubbornness in the wake of a severe knee injury.

"Doctors told her," Franko quotes a former company member, Robert Cohan, as saying, that "if she danced she would never dance again. She could hardly walk after the first Paris performance. Her cartilage was torn."

"Graham was in denial, and insisted on dancing," Franko writes. While de Mille "tells the story of Hawkins abandoning Graham and the company in London out of sheer irresponsibility," Hawkins's view was that "he walked out because she violently attacked him in a taxi on the way to a news conference where he announced the cancellation of the London season, perhaps recognizing more than she the reality of her injury. Her violent rejection of his entreaties to cancel the tour catalyzed the final breaking point of their relationship." Graham wrestled with those events and their aftermath in her analysis by Wickes and in her choreography of *Voyage.* Note, though, that her knee eventually healed, and she continued to dance for some time.

Far from a trivial matter, the Graham-Hawkins split, Franko explains by phone, created a painful rift in the dance world. He thinks—hopes—that the evidence he lays out that Hawkins "left her in a sense to save her" will be "very meaningful" to the duo's professional offspring, that it will help heal still-lingering sorrows and rage.

If so, Franko comes by the role of dance healer organically. The New York City-born son of an analyst mother, he was exposed to Graham-company performances as well as the midcentury psychoanalytic milieu in his childhood. Once intimidated by the thought of writing about such an iconic figure, Franko has come to know more intimately, and appreciatively, the Graham who, as she described her *Voyage* persona, "besieged by strange and terrifying powers & visions ... enters the ... violent halls of memory."

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