

ARTS & LETTERS

he maintains, eventually turned their writing stale, their plots into formulaic success stories.

Ironically, Wilson contends, the naturalists introduced into American literature "a nascent consumer culture's fascination [with] 'image' over reality, [with] credibility over truth."

A Dead End For Dance

"Postmodern Dance and the Repudiation of Primitivism" by Roger Copeland, in *Partisan Review* (No. 1, 1983), Boston Univ., 121 Bay State Rd., Boston, Mass. 02215.

Performers and choreographers of modern dance—Martha Graham, for example—have long stressed the "primitive" elements of their art. But a new generation is abandoning primitivism, and possibly dance itself.

So says Copeland, an Oberlin College theater teacher. Primitivism, he notes, arose around the turn of the century in reaction to the "neurotic character" of modern life. Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, and other modern dancers, drawing inspiration from primitive tribal rituals, sought to restore the spontaneity, emotion, and unity of mind and body that, in their view, industrial society suppressed.

Music, dance, and stage scenery were woven into one dream-like spectacle, enveloping both performer and audience. As French poet Paul Valéry noted, "part of our pleasure as spectators (of dance) consists in feeling ourselves possessed by the rhythms so that we ourselves are virtually dancing." The primitivists distrusted the intellect: "Motion and not language is truthful," Loie Fuller declared.

The revolt against primitivism began during the 1950s, when dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, a former student of Graham, established his own "postmodern" dance troupe in Manhattan. Influenced by the "cool, cerebral qualities" of contemporary art, Copeland says, Cunningham deliberately choreographed works in which movement, sound, and decor were dissociated. Dancers were accompanied by narrators, not music; physical barriers were erected between the audience and performers to encourage critical detachment.

Unlike the primitivists, the postmodern choreographers—Cunningham and such disciples as Trisha Brown, Kenneth King, Twyla Tharp—make full use of language. Sometimes, Copeland observes, they go to extremes: During the early 1970s, King gave some performances in which he simply read aloud to the audience. Indeed, Copeland says, in their overreaction to the primitivists' anti-intellectualism, the postmodernists often appear to forget that dance is a physical art. One notable Cunningham pupil, Yvonne Rainer, has already abandoned dance for film-making, a more "detached" art form.

Cunningham and the other postmodernists long ago established themselves as the avant-garde of dance. Yet their colleagues may be reluctant to follow them, Copeland warns, if they pursue their transformation into dancers who do not dance.