ABSTRACT

MARTHA GRAHAM AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

Rosella Simonari, Italian Society of Women in Literature
(Società Italiana delle Letterate- SIL)

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Primeraly Martha Graham (1894-1991) has been a dancer and has expressed herself through dance. Nevertheless to fulfill this need, she has become a 'goddess' of the field creating a dance universe of her own and producing a substantial amount of groundbreaking masterpieces, among them Lamentation, a short piece on pain and the oppression of the (woman's) body, Letter to the World on Emily Dickinson's poetry, Errand into the Maze on the legend of Ariadne and the Minotaur and so on.

The figure of Martha Graham has been highly undervalued by Women's Studies, this is possibly due to the medium through which she expressed herself, as dance is still today a marginal field of study which, for its transitory and bodily rooted nature, easily 'escapes' critical debates.

My research is in-progress and is mainly based on the deep relationship there is between some of Martha Graham's works and literature, in particular between Graham and Dickinson. My aim is to show how Graham's work Letter to the World (1940-1941) has preceded of decades an interpretation of the New England poet as a self-willed woman conscious of her creative power that has been emphasised in the 1970s by feminists such as Adrienne Rich.

Graham's technique is also at the core of this approach as it is rooted on the awareness of a woman's pelvis and on the rhythm of breathing. Her technique, developed between the end of the 1920s and the 1950s, seems also to answer in advance to another feminist landmark essay, namely "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous.

My intention is to underline the importance of Graham's world in relation to Dickinson and Cixous' essay. As I said the research is still in-progress as the territory where I move is barely existent at both academical and non academical level.