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The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America

Elizabeth Francis

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In the early decades of the twentieth century, women's pursuit of freedom and independence earned both the adulation and the scorn of American modernists. Elizabeth Francis traces this unexpected, complex strain in cultural history through the stories of four legendary American figures-Isadora Duncan, Margaret Anderson, Floyd Dell, and Josephine Herbst.

The Secret Treachery of Words begins in the early 1910s, when feminism was an essential part of the "the shock of the new" that modernist art and thought introduced to American culture. Francis follows an arc of treacherous repression into the 1920s and 1930s, as feminists broke out of the mold of Victorian culture only to find themselves bound by the historical representation so central to modernism.

Francis's four portraits vividly reveal the dynamic tensions in feminist modernism: in Duncan's performances of the female body, Anderson's manifestos of self-expression and cultural outlawry, Dell's advocacy of the revolutionary potential of sex, and Herbst's insights into cultural and political marginality. Part of a new appreciation of the diversity of American modernism, The Secret Treachery of Words discloses both the centrality and the critical impasses of feminist and modernist engagements with modern culture.

Elizabeth Francis teaches American history at the University of Rhode Island.

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