

## Edwin Denby: A Great Lyrical Dance Critic . [1](#)

by

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The American dance critic, Edwin Denby (1903-83), was undoubtedly one of the premier dance critics of the twentieth century. The recent publication of the 600-page book, **Dance Writings**, reveals the imaginative scope and the analytical depth of his critical mind. [2](#)The importance of this book lies not only in mapping the geography of modern American dance culture, but also in revealing the condition of artistic culture generally. *Dance Writings* consists of dance reviews Denby wrote for the New York based *Modern Music* and the *New York Herald Tribune* between 1936 and 1945, and the dance essays written for various American and European magazines and journals like *Ballet*, *Dance Magazine*, *Mademoiselle*, *Evergreen Review* and others between 1945 and 1965. During the moment of Denby's reflections on dancing, several artistic and cultural processes were happening within a particular segment of American culture: the consolidation of the modern dance movement by Martha Graham, and its further expansion by Merce Cunningham, Katherine Dunham, Paul Taylor and others; the transplantation of classical ballet culture into the American cultural fabric and the reinvention of classicism in ballet by George Balanchine within the context of American culture; the emergence and development of a movement in painting with profound international repercussions, the Abstract Expressionism of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and others; the transition in American poetry from the modernism of Wallace Stevens to the postmodernism of John Ashbery; and the consolidation of American classical music by Aaron Copland, Vergil Thomson, John Cage, which had been founded by Charles Ives. All of these complex cultural processes impinged on the imaginative structure of Edwin Denby's dance writings.

It could be said that perhaps the primary aim of Denby's dance criticism was to formulate the poetic form of dance structure. For this to be achievable Denby had to invent and develop his own particular mode of the phenomenology of perception. The genesis of the grammar of this phenomenology of perception is evident in the essay, "Notes on Nijinsky Photographs", in which remarkably, through a study of the photographs of Nijinsky taken during his performances in the 1910s and in the 1920s, Denby attempts to retrieve and articulate analytically the nature of classical ballet culture of that era. Through a reading of the body

structure, body movements and body gestures evident in the photographs, Denby sought to locate and define the greatness of Nijinsky as a dancer. It is apparent that Denby sought to theorize the poetic form of dance movement: by studying the physiological structure of Nijinsky's body, by defining the astonishing movements Nijinsky was capable of achieving, and by revealing the status of the choreographic culture of that time. Through a reading of these, Denby states what could possibly have been the meaning and significance of the different classical ballets ranging from *Le Sacre du Printemps* through *Scheherazade* to *Le Spectre de la Rose*. This essay is not only a brilliant feat in reading photography, but it also makes clear that the choreographic structure of by gone dances can be retrieved and reconstituted.

In many ways this essay clearly shows that Denby was dissatisfied with large portions of the dance criticism of Noverre, Levinson and Valery, which had preceded his own criticism. In the essay, "Dance Criticism", he specifies the limitations of past dance criticism, though he still saw it as having been truly outstanding: the fact that the technique and history of classical ballet had not been precisely formulated, and that the principles of dance logic, which are expressive of human movement in musical time and architectural space, had not been unhesitatingly spelled out. Denby sought to overcome in his dance criticism what he perceived to be these limitations.

At the historical moment Edwin Denby was writing his dance criticism, two revolutions were being effected in American and European dance culture: the Modernism of Martha Graham in modern dance and the Classicism of George Balanchine in classical ballet. It is not accidental therefore that large sections of **Dance Writings** are devoted to these two artists: approximately one hundred and fifty pages are devoted to the choreographic work of Balanchine and approximately sixty pages are on the choreographic work and the performance style of Graham. Concerning Balanchine, Denby saw him as having overthrown the modernist counter-revolution which had been achieved by Michel Fokine against the classicism of Marius Petipa. In an essay, "A Note on Balanchine's Present Style", Denby argued that whereas Fokine had imposed psychological, social, pictorial and musical obstacles on the style of classical ballet, hence presumably distorting it, Balanchine had restored the purity of style in ballet by making the style itself to be the 'theme' of classical ballet. For Denby, the choreographic work of Balanchine achieved internal classic coherence, limpidity and gracefulness through auto-reflexivity. In a further essay, "Some Thoughts about Classicism and George Balanchine", Denby further elaborates on the

achievement of Balanchine: that he made style itself the theme of ballet, that he affirmed the inner force of ballet as its self-expression, that he made classical ballet be expressive only of subjective meaning and that he was classicizing African-American dance movement. Classicism in classical ballet centers movement on what is called 'placement': it centers it there to assure spring, balance and visibility. Denby thought that Balanchine could have only achieved the classicist revolution within the American cultural context, which already had the preconditions to facilitate such an achievement. The rest of the dance reviews of Denby on Balanchine's choreographic work was an elaboration and appreciation of these principles emanating from this revolution.

Concerning Martha Graham, Denby recognized that her choreographic work was in many ways an extension and continuation of what had been initiated and achieved by Isadora Duncan. Whilst Duncan was principally concerned with separating modern dance completely from classical ballet, Graham was more preoccupied with establishing the distinctive forms of modern dance. Though Denby was well aware of the astonishing range of Graham's choreographic work, ranging from Appalachian Spring through Death and Entrances to Letter to the World, he thought that she did not fully integrate in some of her work the differential elements of the rhythmic structure of dance and the rhythmic structure of time; and he thought also, that on occasion Graham did not fully give free reign to the spontaneity of her imagination. In actual fact, this criticism should be seen in the context of the fact that Denby was never wholly at ease with modern dance in contrast with his passionate affection for classical ballet. It seems as if Denby felt ill at ease with the structure of movement in modern dance. But on the other hand, as reflected in the essay, "Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets", Denby was conscious of the fact that dance movement is abstracted from the everyday life activity of the people. Denby seems to have been more appreciative of the performance style of Merce Cunningham: comparing the lyricism of Cunningham with the dramatism of Graham. He appreciated the non-logical and 'incoherent' structure of Cunningham's narrative dance creations. Cunningham has been crucial historically partly because through him a transition has been effected in modern dance by Tharp, Brown, Dunn and others from modernism to the present-day emergence of postmodernism.

Edwin Denby was well aware that technique was in many ways the central construct in the creative process of contemporary dance culture. This awareness runs through many of his dance reviews. For instance, in a superlative

appreciation of the choreographic and performance work of the brilliant black American dancer, Katherine Dunham, Denby theorized that technique was crucial in a context where movement is based on African dance elements but the choreographic plan is based on American modern dance school.

If today we were to specify the limitations of Denby's great writings on contemporary dance culture, it would firstly be that he never seriously attempted to integrate within his historical vision and imaginative scope the dance forms of cultures outside the spheres of European and American cultural spheres, and secondly that he was never fully aware that each cultural dominant within a particular area of art, be it modernism or classicism, possessed its own cultural logic which is interconnected to the structural processes of the society within which that dominant expresses itself. This is one of the lessons of postmodernism, which is the cultural dominant of our time.

1 The essay first appeared as "Die Tanzkritik des Edwin Denby", in Tanz Aktuell , Oktober 1988

2 Edwin Denby, **Dance Writings** , (eds.), Robert Cornfield and William mackay, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986.