

KATHLEEN HEIL
The Denby Sonnets

1.

A tradition is not a police regulation
every kind of oddity of device or
accent, square as a cover of mature
suburbanites down in the rumpus room.
When you listen closely, there is nothing
everyday about art. A life of enormous energies
keeps pouring itself according to its fate into
the imaginative world of dance. An expressive
play of changing proportions shocks
sensitive persons; they are not treated as
pictorial possibilities. They retain their weight.
The art of dancing must be a real thing
to some people some of the time:
the trouble of keeping in balance.

2.

The trouble of keeping in balance
may be compared to lifting a table
by one leg and keeping the top horizontal;
a fine art of understatement, she throws
up the leg in a flash, a formal limitation
of movement. The extra power is like
a sense of transport. People are so
to speak their better selves. A step
action can also be a magic emblem.
Dancing became exhilarating not only
to do, but also to watch, to remember,
to think about. A voluntary, a purely
human attentiveness. Unless you catch it
in motion, you don't catch it at all.

3.

In motion, you don't catch it at all—
she seems to watch over her integrity
with too jealous an eye. You often look
at a free meter and listen to a strict one,
the difference between getting the ideas
and following. Rationally it seems odd
to confuse the metrics of music with
musicality, as pleased as a hen
who has just laid an egg. What
are all those bison floating on
if not on a steady beat? The risk is
part of the rhythm, a single revolving
vibrating shape which kept changing
in the air, a prehistoric pleasure.

4.

In the air, a prehistoric pleasure,
a kind of crooning. Painful
situations, strokes of wit,
hallucinating contradictions—
there is nothing comfortable
to rest on. The glamour of momentary
success is no solid foundation. But
dancing that makes sense is so rare
it is worth being serious about,
power and unction in her hips,
knees, and instep, her elegance
of motion, her private integrity.
A bit of insanity, it has been
doing people good for a long time.

5.

Doing people good for a long time:
classic steps turned inside out and
upside down—retimed, reproportioned,
rerouted, girls dancing hard and boys
soft; the victim has been struck square.
Some people complain such dancing is
mechanical. It seems quite the opposite
to me. American ballet is like a straight
and narrow path compared to the pretty
primrose fields the French tumble in
happily. A certain sanctimonious decentness,
a note of expensively meretricious tastiness—
I felt again the homeyness of the first time,
like a party where everybody acts nice.

Note: All text is borrowed from the dance criticism gathered in *Dance Writings and Poetry* by Edwin Denby, Robert Cornfield, ed. Yale University Press, 1998.