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DEGAS

JUST as a half-idle reader will scribble in the margins of a book, producing—as absent-mindedness or the pencil dictates—tiny figures or vague branch work around the mass of print, so I propose to follow my own fancy in writing around these drawings by Degas.*

My text to these illustrations may be left unread, or read discontinuously, since the connection and relationship between it and the drawings is of the loosest and least immediate kind. This will be no more than a sort of monologue, incorporating my memories as they occur to me, along with a variety of ideas which for me crystallized around a unique personality, a great and austere artist, basically strong-willed, and of a rare, vital, penetrating, and restless intelligence; a man who, beneath the rigor of his judgment and the absolutism of his opinions, concealed I know not how much self-doubt and despair of ever satisfying himself—feelings whose great bitterness and exaltation were nourished by his subtle appreciation of the masters, his longing to possess the secret knowledge he credited them with, and his continual awareness of their mutually exclusive perfections.

Art, for him, was simply a series of problems in a more subtle kind of mathematics than the real one, a kind that no

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one has ever been able to expound, and whose existence is known to very few. He was always ready to talk about the *science* of art: he would say a picture was the result of a *series of operations*. . . . To a simple eye, pictures may seem to have been born of a happy conjunction of the subject and the painter's gift; but an artist of Degas' profound perception—more profound perhaps than it is wise to be—has to defer enjoyment, create difficulties, and shrink from every short cut.

Degas rejected *facility* as he rejected all but the precise object of his researches. All he could wish for was to please himself, which meant satisfying the severest, most difficult and incorruptible of judges. No one more positively than he despised honors, advantages, wealth, and the kind of glory that writers can so lightheartedly hand out to the painter. He was harsh in his mockery of those who entrust the fate of their work to the discretion of opinion, established prestige, or commercial interests. As the true believer keeps his mind on God, in whose sight no subterfuge, negligence, contrivance, or collusion, no attitudes or appearances can avail, just so did Degas remain impervious and inflexible, exclusively devoted to the absolute idea of his art which possessed him. He wanted nothing but what he considered the most difficult thing to require of himself.

No doubt I shall come back to this subject. . . . After all, I am not certain of what I shall say next. Quite possibly, in speaking of *Degas*, I shall wander on to the subject of the *Dance*, and thence to *Drawing*. There is no question of this being a regular biography; I do not think too highly of biographies, which only proves I was not made to write them. A man's life, after all, is nothing but a series of chance events—and the way in which he, more or less precisely, *responds* to them. . . .

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Besides, the *accidents* of a man's life are not what matters to me; neither his birth, his loves, his struggles, nor almost anything else that is observable, can be to my purpose. They throw not the smallest *real* light on what gives him his value, his deep distinction from other men and from myself. I will not deny that I am often curious about details that teach us nothing of solid value; *what interests me is not always what matters to me*. And that goes for everyone. But one must beware of what is merely *amusing*.

Many of the characteristics of Degas that I shall recount are not due to my own memories. I owe them to Ernest Rouart, who knew him intimately from childhood, grew up in awe and admiration of the eccentric master, was brought up on his aphorisms and precepts, and, at his imperious behest, carried out a number of experiments in painting and engraving, of which he has kindly written a humorously precise account for me, which I shall include in the text.

So, no aesthetics; no *criticism*—or as little as possible.

Degas, with little tenderness for anything, was not apt to be indulgent of criticism, or of *theories*. He was always ready to assert—and later in life he would harp on it—that there is no arguing among the muses. They work all day, very much on their own. In the evening, work finished, they get together and dance; *they do not talk*.

Yet he was a great arguer himself, merciless in retort, particularly excitable where politics or drawing were concerned. Unyielding, he would quickly reach the stage of shouting, using the harshest language, and then would break off abruptly. By comparison, Alceste would have seemed complaisant and easygoing.

But, on account of the Neapolitan blood in him which made him excitable to the highest pitch, one might wonder

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at times whether he did not choose to be intractable, and to have the reputation for being so.

He could be charming too at times.

It was in the household of M. Henri Rouart, about '93 or '94, that I made Degas' acquaintance. Introduced into the family by one of the sons, I was soon the friend of all four.

From the front door to the topmost room, their house in the Rue de Lisbonne was hung with an exquisite selection of pictures. Even the concierge, won over to the passion for art, had covered the walls of his lodge with pictures, some of them good, bought by him at the sales, which he followed as eagerly as other domestic servants study racing. When he made a really lucky buy, the picture would be quickly promoted from the lodge to the drawing rooms, repurchased by his employer.

In M. Rouart himself I admired . . . I was awed by the amplitude of a career in which nearly all the virtues of character and intelligence had been combined. He was untroubled by ambition, by envy, by any thirst for appearances. True value was all he cared for, and he could appreciate it in several kinds. Among the first connoisseurs of his time, a man who admired —and made early purchases of—the works of Millet, Corot, Daumier, Manet . . . and El Greco, he owed his fortune to machine construction, to inventions which he carried through from the purely theoretical to the technical and thence to the stage of industrial application. This is no place for the gratitude and affection I owe to M. Rouart. I will only say that he is among the men who have left an impress on my mind. His researches into metallurgy and mechanics, as an inventor of thermodynamic machinery, went side by side with an ardent passion for painting; he was as much at home with it as an

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artist, and indeed practiced it himself as a true painter. But owing to his modesty, his own output, with its curious preciseness, remains almost unknown, the possession only of his heirs.

I like a man who can master different kinds of work, and can set himself widely dissimilar problems. At times, when a problem defied the mathematics he remembered from school, he would appeal to some of his old comrades who, since their days at the Polytechnique, had never given up the pursuit of research in Analysis. He would consult Laguerre—a great geometrician, one of the fathers of the theory of imaginary numbers and the inventor of a remarkable definition of distance—and would propound some differential equation to be solved. But when it was a question of painting, it was Degas whom he would consult. He admired and adored him.

They had been school friends at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, had lost sight of each other for years, and met again by an astonishing coincidence. Degas was always ready to recount the details of their meeting. In 1870, when Paris was besieged and M. Rouart, doubly employed in its defense, was commanding a battery emplacement in his role of graduate of Metz and manufacturing cannon in his role of metallurgist, Degas had quite simply enlisted in the infantry. Sent to Vincennes for rifle practice, he discovered that he could not see the target with his right eye. It was confirmed that this eye was almost useless, a fact which he blamed (I heard all this from his own lips) on a damp attic which for a long time had been his bedroom. Unusable as a foot soldier, he was turned over to the artillery—and his new captain proved to be his school friend, Henri Rouart. They never lost sight of each other again.

At dinner every Friday, at M. Rouart's, Degas would be

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the soul of the evening; a constant, brilliant, unbearable guest, spreading wit, terror, and gaiety. A piercing mimic, with an endless fund of whims, maxims, banter, anecdotes, brilliantly unfair in his attacks, infallible in his taste, narrow-mindedly yet lucidly passionate, he was always throwing mud at writers, at the Institut, at the aloof poseurs, and the artists who were bent on *getting there*—quoting Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Racine, and the weird pronouncements of "Monsieur" Ingres. . . . I can still hear him. His host, who worshiped him, listened indulgently, admiringly, while the other guests—young people, ancient generals, speechless ladies—listened with varying degrees of enjoyment while this prodigious aphorist exercised his irony, his aesthetic acuity, and his vehemence.

I was always struck by the contrast between two men so remarkable in their different ways. I sometimes wonder why the intellectual differences between individuals, both the clashes and the coincidences of understanding that occur, with equal power and activity of mind, have so rarely been put to literary use.

So it was at M. Rouart's table that I came to know Degas. I had formed my own idea of him from a few works of his that I had seen, and a few of his remarks which had gone the rounds. I am always greatly interested in comparing a thing or a man with the ideas I had formed of them in advance. If there was any accuracy in the idea, we can learn something when we actually confront it with the subject.

Such comparisons can give us an estimate of our ability to imagine anything on the basis of incomplete data. And they show up, too, all the futility of biography in particular and of history in general. Nevertheless there is an even more instructive factor: the astonishing degree of *probable inaccuracy* in di-

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rect observation, the errors invented by our own eyes. To *observe* means, very largely, to imagine what one was expecting to see. A few years ago, someone I know—who is, besides, fairly well known—having gone to Berlin to give a lecture, was unanimously described in a number of newspapers as having dark eyes. He has very light eyes. But he comes from the South of France: the journalists knew this and saw accordingly.

The idea I had formed of Degas was of a character reduced to the strict lines of a hard drawing—a Spartan, a Stoic, a Jansenist of art. A certain brutality, of intellectual origin, would be the dominating trait. A short while earlier I had written "An Evening with Monsieur Teste," a little sketch for an imaginary portrait which, though made up of details and circumstances all verifiable and as precise as may be, had been more or less *influenced*, as people say, by the kind of Degas whom I had imagined. Quite often at about that period my mind was haunted with the notion of various kinds of monsters of intelligence and self-awareness. Vagueness was a source of irritation to me, and it amazed me to think that perhaps no one, in any order of thought, was prepared to push his speculations to their limit.

Not everything that I had imagined about Degas proved to be fantastic. But the man himself, as I might have guessed, proved to be more complex than my anticipations.

He was kind to me, in the way one is to people who scarcely exist. I was not worth his shot. But I could see that the young writers of the time inspired no affection in him; he particularly did not like Gide, whom he had met under the same roof.

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He was much better disposed toward young painters. Not that he showed any mercy for their pictures or their theories, but he carried out his demolitions with a sort of tenderness that blended very oddly with his ferocious irony. He went to their shows; took note of the smallest sign of talent; and if the artist was about, he would pay him his compliments and give him a few hints.

Parenthesis

Histories of literature and of the arts are as naïve as history in general—a fact which is due to a strange deficiency of curiosity on the part of the authors. They seem devoid of the faculty of asking questions, even the simplest. For instance, inquiry is rarely made into the nature and importance of the relations subsisting at any particular period between the *younger* and the *older* generation. The admiration, envy, and misunderstanding; the coincidences of views; the precepts and practices handed on or repudiated; the mutual evaluations and the mutual negations, contempt or the reaction from it . . . all this, which *could* be one of the liveliest aspects of the Intellectual Comedy, is of too much value to be passed over in silence. There is no hint in any history of literature of the fact that a certain number of *secrets* of the art of verse were passed on from the end of the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, and that one can easily distinguish, throughout that period, between the poets who followed and the poets who ignored that tradition. And what could be of greater interest than the mutual judgments I mentioned?

Shortly before his death, Claude Monet told me how, at the beginning of his career, while he was showing a few pictures at a gallery in the Rue Laffitte, the art dealer saw someone stop at the window, along with a companion, both of

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them dignified, almost majestically bourgeois in demeanor. Confronted with Monet's pictures, the gentleman could not contain himself; he went in and made a scene; said he could not conceive how anyone could exhibit such horrors. . . . "I know who it was, too," added the art dealer, when he saw Monet again and told him the story. "Who?" Monet asked. "Daumier," the art dealer told him. Shortly afterwards, when the same works were showing in the same window, and Monet this time happened to be present, someone unknown stopped, like Daumier, took a long look, blinked, pushed the door and went in. "What fine paintings," he said. "Who is the artist?" The art dealer presented Monet. "Ah, monsieur, what talent . . ." and so forth. Monet, confused and full of gratitude, wanted to know his admirer's name. "Decamps," the man said as he was leaving.

THE DANCE

Why not, since we are concerned with the painter of the *Danseuses*, turn to the art of the dance for a while?

I should like—and shall try my best, in front of my audience—to define my idea of the dance as precisely as may be.

Dance is an art based on all those human movements which can be *consciously willed.*

Most of our conscious movements have some exterior aim in view; they are directed at a place or an object, or toward modifying a perception or a sensation at some particular point. As St. Thomas Aquinas very justly remarked: *Primum in causando, ultimum est in causato.*

Once the object is attained or the action completed, our movement—which in a way was *dictated* by the relationship

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between our body, the object, and our purpose—comes to an end. Its achievement involves its extinction; it could not have been either conceived or carried out without the prompting and the presence of the idea of an event which was its aim and end.

Such movements as this are always carried out in accordance with a law of economy of effort, which may be complicated by a variety of conditions, but which cannot but control our expenditure of energy. One cannot even imagine some exterior act as accomplished without restricting it to a certain minimum in our minds. If I think of going from the Étoile to the Louvre, it would never occur to me that I could *also* achieve my purpose by going via the Panthéon.

But there are other movements whose evolution cannot be prompted or determined, motivated or fulfilled, by any exterior object. There is no *thing* which, once arrived at, brings these movements to an end. They can only cease with the intervention of something foreign to their motive, their character, and their kind; and, far from being conditioned by the economy of effort, they seem on the contrary to aim directly at squandering it.

The jumps and gambols of a child, for example, or a dog—*walking for its own sake*, *swimming for its own sake* . . . are all activities whose only purpose is to modify our feeling of energy, to create a certain condition of that feeling.

Acts of this nature can and must continue until the intervention of some circumstance quite other than the completion of their evolution in a changed external condition. With regard to these acts, the arrest in question may have *any* motive: *fatigue*, for example, or a *convention*.

Such movements, containing in themselves their own end, which is to create a *condition*, arise from the need to be carried

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out, or from some exciting cause, but these impulses do not determine any direction in space. They can be quite unregulated. An animal, weary of being confined to immobility, dashes off snorting—in flight from a feeling, not from a thing; it *lets itself go* in gallopings and wild courses. A man in whom joy, anger, anxiety, or a sudden uprush of ideas releases an energy that cannot be absorbed in any precise act or used up by its motive, will get up, set off at a restless pace, without noticing what is around him, in obedience to the spur that comes from that access of power. . . .

But this expenditure of energy exists in one particularly remarkable form, which consists of ordering and organizing the movements that release it.

Space, as we have said, is only the background to movements of this kind; *it does not contain their object.* In this case it is Time which plays the dominating role. . . .

By Time I mean organic time, such as exists in the ordering of all the alternating and fundamental functions of life. Each of these is effected by a series of muscular acts which reproduces itself, as if the end or fulfillment of each series brought about the beginning of the next. On this pattern, our limbs can carry out a set of figures that are all interlinked, and whose repetition brings about a kind of exhilaration, ranging from languor to delirium, from a sort of hypnotic abandonment to a sort of frenzy. In this way the *condition of dancing* is created. No doubt a more subtle analysis would see it as a neuromuscular phenomenon with some analogy to *resonance,* the function of which is so important in physics; but for all I know, no such analysis has been attempted.

The intimate connection between the World of the Dance and the World of Music is felt by all, but no one so far has shown the reason for it, or how it functions.

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Nothing is more mysterious than *equality of duration*, equal intervals of *time*, the observation of which can be so simply stated. How is it we can decide that sounds follow each other at *equal* intervals, and can tap out sounds "equidistant" from each other? And what is the meaning of that equality which the senses recognize?

The Dance generates a whole plastic world; the pleasure of dancing releases and radiates the pleasure of seeing the dance.

Out of the forming, dissolving and re-forming patterns created by the same set of limbs, as out of the movements which echo each other at equal or harmonious intervals, comes *decoration in time*, just as the spatial repetition of motifs, or their symmetry, gives rise to *decoration in space*.

Sometimes these two systems can change from one into the other. In ballets there are moments of immobility when the grouping of the whole ensemble offers a picture, stilled but not permanent, a complex of human bodies suddenly arrested in their postures, giving a singular emphasis to the impression of flux. The dancers are as if transfixed in poses very remote from those in which the human physique can maintain itself by its own strength . . . with the mind on other things. As a result, we are left with this remarkable notion: that in the World of the Dance, there is no room for repose; immobility is a question of force and restraint, a transient and almost violent pause; whereas leaps, measured pacing, toe-dancing, *entrechats*, and vertiginous rotations are the natural modes of being and action. But in the ordinary, everyday world, physical acts are merely transitional, all the energy we sometimes put into them being used simply to finish some task, without any renewal or regeneration of itself by means of physical *exaltation*.

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Thus, what is the most *probable* condition in one of these Worlds occurs in the other only by the rarest of chances.

This distinction once made can give rise to many analogies.

A condition which cannot last for long, which takes us *out of* and *remote* from ourselves, and yet in which we are maintained by *instability*, whereas *stability* can only occur in it by accident . . . such a condition evokes the idea of another existence, fully invested with the rarest moments of our own, entirely made up of the supreme values of our faculties. I am thinking of what is commonly known as *inspiration*. . . .

What could be more improbable than a form of discourse which could charm and dazzle the mind with each entry of the images and ideas it prompted, whilst the succession of aural symbols and articulations that brought it to the ear had the power to rouse, sustain, and prolong the emotive value of Speech?

Mallarmé said that a danseuse is not a woman dancing, because she is not a woman and she does not dance.

A remark not only profound, but true; not only is it true in the sense of confirming itself more and more with reflection, but it can be demonstrated, and I have seen a demonstration of it.

The freest, the most supple and voluptuous of all possible dances, was one which I saw in a film of giant medusas; they were not women, nor were they dancing.

Not women at all, but beings of an incomparably translucent and sentient substance, flesh of furiously sensitive glass, domes of floating silk, hyaline wreaths, long thongs traversed by rapid unfolding; while they whirl, unshape themselves and shoot away, as fluidly as the tremendous fluid which harries,

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embraces and sustains them on all sides, yielding to their slightest inflections and restoring them their forms. There, in the irreducible volume of water that seems to offer no resistance, these creatures can enjoy the ideal mobility, expanding and contracting their radiating symmetry. No base, nothing solid to support these supremest of dancers; no boards, only an element in which they press on all the yielding area allowing them passage where they will. Nothing solid, either, in the crystalline elasticity of their bodies; no bones, sinews, no inflexible ligatures or segments that can be distinguished. . . .

No woman dancer, inflamed, exalted by the rhythm, the toxic force of her own overwrought energy, and by her consciousness of the ardent charge of desire in the eyes of her audience, ever expressed the imperious oblation of sex, or mimed the challenging urge to prostitution, like the great medusa, transforming herself into an erotic phantasm, with an undulating shudder passing through the scalloped flounces of all her skirts, which she lifts and lowers with a strange and shameless insistence; and then, suddenly flinging back all her shivering finery, her robes of severed lips, inverts and exposes herself, laid furiously open.

But suddenly she recovers, thrills, and spreads up through her space, rising like a montgolfier balloon to the forbidden, luminous region, the domain of the sun and the mortal air.

37, RUE VICTOR-MASSÉ

Degas could be charming or frightful. He possessed—and affected—the worst possible disposition; yet there were days when he was quite unpredictably delightful. Then he could

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be really amusing; with a winning blend of mockery, fun, and familiarity, in which there was an element of the art student of former days, and some indefinable Neapolitan ingredient.

I would be feeling dubious enough of my welcome, sometimes, when I rang at his door. He would open mistrustfully, and then recognize me. It was one of his good days. He would take me into a long attic room, with a wide bay window (not very clean) where light and dust mingled gaily. The room was pell-mell—with a basin, a dull zinc bathtub, stale bathrobes, a danseuse modeled in wax, with a real gauze tutu, in a glass case, and easels loaded with charcoal sketches of flat-nosed, twisted models, with combs in their fists, held around thick hair gripped tight in the other hand. A narrow shelf ran under the window where a ghost of sunshine lingered; it was piled with bottles, flasks, pencils, bits of pastel chalk, etching needles, and all the nameless odds and ends that may come in handy one day. . . .

It sometimes seems to me that the labor of the artist is of a very old-fashioned kind; the artist himself a survival, a craftsman or artisan of a disappearing species, working in his own room, following his own homemade empirical methods, living in untidy intimacy with his tools, his eyes intent on what is in his mind, blind to his surroundings; using broken pots, kitchenware, any old castoffs that come to hand. . . . Perhaps conditions are changing, and instead of this spectacle of an eccentric individual using whatever comes his way, there will instead be a picture-making laboratory, with its specialist officially clad in white, rubber-gloved, keeping to a precise schedule, armed with strictly appropriate apparatus and instruments, each with its appointed place and exact function. . . . So far, chance has not been eliminated from practice, or

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mystery from method, or inspiration from regular hours; but I do not vouch for the future.

This workaday studio occupied the third floor of the house in the Rue Victor-Massé where Degas was living when I knew him. On the first floor was his "Museum," consisting of a few pictures he had acquired in exchange or with his own coin. On the second was his apartment, whose walls he had hung with his favorite works, his own or other people's: a large and very fine Corot, Ingres drawings, and a study of a danseuse which always made me covetous. He had not so much drawn it as constructed it joint by joint like a puppet: a leg and arm, both sharply bent, the body rigid, the whole drawing implacably willed, a few high lights touched in here and there in red. Seeing it made me think of a Holbein drawing, at Basel, of a *hand*. Imagine a hand made of wood (like one at the end of an artificial arm) drawn by an artist before it has been quite finished—the fingers put on and half bent but not yet planed down, so that the phalanges are like elongated dice, *square* at the end. That is what the hand at Basel is like. I have sometimes wondered whether this strange study was meant by Holbein as an exercise in *opposition* to softness and roundness in drawing.

Some present-day painters seem to have discovered the necessity for constructions of this kind; but they have infallibly confused the study with the finished product, taking for an end what can only be a means. Nothing could be more modern.

To *complete* a work consists in getting rid of everything that reveals or hints at how it was made. According to this old-fashioned precept, the artist ought to betray himself only by his style, and should continue his labor until it has effaced

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all trace of labor. But considerations of the moment and of personality having slowly triumphed over those devoted to duration and the work in itself, it has come to seem as if finish were not only useless and troublesome but even a hindrance to *truth*, *sensibility*, and the revelation of *genius*. Personality has become essential, even to the public. The sketch is as good as a picture. Nothing could be remoter from the taste or. if you will, the whims of Degas.

In his second-floor apartment was the dining room, where I had many a dreary dinner. Degas had a dread of intestinal obstruction or inflammation. There was a faultless insipidity in the all-too-innocent veal and the macaroni cooked in plain water, served, very slowly, by old Zoe. After that there was a kind of Dundee marmalade, which I found intolerable, which I discovered I could bear, and which I now think is not so very detestable, *because of its associations*. Now, if I ever happen to taste that jelly threaded with carrot-colored bits of fiber, I am once more sitting opposite a fearfully lonely old man, lost in lugubrious reflections, cut off by the state of his eyesight from the work that was his whole life. He offers me a cigarette as hard as a pencil and I roll it between my palms to make it smokable—a trick that never fails to intrigue him, every time. Zoe brings in the coffee, presses her great stomach against the table, and talks. A teacher at one time, she is a very good talker; the enormous round spectacles she wears give her wide, honest, and invariably solemn face quite a look of learning.

Zoe keeps house with the help of a young girl called Argentine. One evening Argentine rushes in crazily, crying out that her aunt is dying. Degas seems quite to lose his head. I rush to the kitchen, lay the sick woman on the floor, give her some elementary *first aid*; the crisis passes, and we stand and

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witness Zoe's resurrection. Degas is amazed and full of gratitude; he has seen a miracle. As for me, I am still astounded by the complete absence of the simplest notions of the most elementary practicality, in a man so intelligent and—what is more—*classically educated.* In some ways he had no more sense than an old woman.

In the *lycées* of 1850, the curriculum must have been quite as ridiculous as that of today, though more *thorough.* Not one of the firsts in the Concours Général would have been able to point in the sky to the stars mentioned by Virgil; and as practitioners of Latin verse, they were radically unaware of the fact that French verse has a music of its own. Neither cleanliness, nor the smallest notions of hygiene, nor deportment, nor even the pronunciation of our language, had any place in the programs of that incredible system, conceived as it was to exclude carefully anything to do with the body, the senses, the sky, the arts, or social life. . . .

As for Degas' room, it was as neglected as the rest, everything in the house suggesting a man who cared for nothing beyond bare existence, and for that only in spite of everything and himself. There was some Empire or Louis-Philippe furniture. A dried toothbrush in a glass, its bristles half-stained a dull pink, always reminded me of the one to be seen in Napoleon's traveling bag at the Carnavalet, or wherever it is.

One evening, having to change his shirt for a dinner in town, Degas took me into his room with him. Without the smallest embarrassment he stripped naked and dressed in front of me.

Going into the studio, I would find him shuffling about in slippers, dressed like a pauper, his trousers hanging, never buttoned. A door standing wide open exposed all the most inward and private places in his apartment.

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And yet this was a man who could be a dandy, whose manners, when he chose, were of the most natural distinction, a man who spent his evenings in the wings at the Opéra, a frequent visitor in the paddock at Longchamp, an intensely acute observer of the human form, a cruel connoisseur of all the shapes and attitudes of woman, an expert judge of the finest horses, the most intelligent, the most reflective, the most demanding, the most merciless draftsman in the world. . . . And on top of that he was a witty guest whose *mot*, in its careful selection of the facts, its lordly abuse of any sense of fairness, was always fatal. . . .

And now he was an irritable old man, almost always gloomy, sinister at times in his somber abstraction, with sudden outbursts of fury or wit, childishly impatient or impulsive, and capricious. . . .

There were moments of recovery: gleams, hints of delicacy, profoundly touching.

If *today* is a good day, he will sing me a cavatina of Cimarosa, in Italian.

A rarity among artists, Degas was a man of taste. He prided himself on the fact.

Born though he was in the high noon of romanticism, mixing, in his early manhood, with Duranty, Zola, Goncourt, Duret, the whole "naturalist" movement, and showing his pictures along with the first "impressionists," he nevertheless belonged to that delightful class of connoisseurs who take an obstinate pleasure in their own narrow-mindedness, are merciless to any novelty that is merely new, their minds full of Racine and old music, tireless quoters, "classicists" to the point of ferocity and extravagant outbursts—people who are now, alas, a vanished race.

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Perhaps this was a peculiarity of his old age, because, for all his cult of "Monsieur" Ingres, he had been a passionate admirer of Delacroix.

With old age, a man may sometimes begin, unconsciously, to model himself on the old people he knew in his own youth, and who, at the time, seemed to him ridiculous, impossible. . . . Gradually adopting their behavior, he grows at times increasingly solemn, ceremonious, imperious, or at other times increasingly dashing, or even hearty—far more so than he ever was in his salad days.

I can remember long since, in the provinces, seeing elderly people who had given up the style of dress they had worn during most of their lifetimes, and taken up the fashions of the old people of their youth. One marquis in particular ended up by wearing a silvery waistcoat and a *square* eyeglass.

Degas, in his refined tastes, was old-fashioned compared with some of his own generation; whereas in the real boldness and precision of his mind he was ahead of many artists of his time. He was among the first to see what photography could teach the painter—and what the painter must be careful not to learn from it.

Perhaps his work suffered from the remarkable number and diversity of his artistic pursuits, as well as from the intensity with which he concentrated on the highest but most contradictory limits of his craft.

Prolonged contemplation of any art simply deepens into insoluble problems. A long look gives birth to an infinite number of difficulties, begets imaginary obstacles, incompatible wishes, qualms and scruples, in proportion to the looker's intelligence and experience. How is one to decide between the rival claims of Raphael and the Venetians, sacrifice Mozart to Wagner, or Shakespeare to Racine? For

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the amateur or the critic there is nothing tragic about such problems. But the artist's conscience can be tortured by them afresh, every time he takes another look at what he has been doing.

While Degas hesitated, caught between the commandments of "Monsieur" Ingres and the exotic charms of Delacroix, the art of his time made up its mind to turn to the spectacle of everyday life. With this change of taste, the grand manner and subject painting began to go obviously out of date. Filling the walls left bare of Greeks, Turks, Knights, and Cupids, landscape came and demolished the problem of *subject*, and in a few years reduced the whole intellectual side of art to a few questions about *materials* and the coloring of shadows. The brain became nothing but retina; there could no longer be any question of trying to express in paint the feelings of a group of old men before a beautiful Susanna, or the high-minded resistance of a great doctor to a bribe of millions.

At about the same period, an erudite scouring of the art world brought in new material for enjoyment and questioning. New ways of seeing, unheard-of or forgotten, were given fresh emphasis. There came a decided taste for the "primitives": Greeks of the early period, Italians, Flemish, French. On the other hand, Persian miniatures, and above all Japanese prints came to be admired and studied by artists, while Goya and El Greco were brought into fashion or revived. Finally, there was the *sensitized plate*.

For Degas, who missed nothing, who enjoyed—and suffered from—everything, all this constituted the great problem.

He admired and envied the assurance of Manet, whose eye and hand were certainty itself, who could infallibly find in his model the wherewithal to convey all his force, and completely

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realize his aim. In Manet there was a decisive power, a sort of instinct for pictorial strategy. In his best canvases he attained *poetry*, the summit of art, by means of what I may perhaps call . . . *resonance of execution*.

But how can painting be put into words?

DEGAS AND THE REVOLUTION

On the 28th of July, 1904, Degas told me this reminiscence:

One day when he was four years old, his mother took him with her on a visit to Mme Le Bas, widow of the famous member of the Convention and friend of Robespierre, who shot himself on the 9th Thermidor. Philippe, Mme Le Bas' son, was an eminent scholar and had been tutor to Degas' uncles.

The old lady lived in the Rue de Tournon. Degas could remember the *red* of the polished tiles in the floor of the apartment.

The visit over, Mme Degas, hand in hand with her little boy, was leaving, accompanied to the door by Mme Le Bas, when she noticed there were portraits of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and Couthon hanging in the hallway. . . .

"Really," she exclaimed, "do you still keep the effigies of those monsters? . . ."

"Go on, Célestine, they were martyrs. . . ."

On the same 28th of July, Degas, in a reminiscent vein, told me about his grandfather whom he knew and whose portrait he painted at Naples (or was it Rome?) in 18—.

This grandfather, during the Revolution, had been a speculator in grain. One day in 1793, while conducting business at the Corn Exchange, which at that time was at the Palais

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Royal, a friend came up behind him and whispered "Clear out! . . . Run for your life . . . . They're at your house."

Without losing a minute, he borrowed all the assignats he could get hold of on the spot, left Paris within an hour, killed two horses getting to Bordeaux, and boarded a boat that was ready to sail. The boat called at Marseilles. There (according to Degas, whom I must not interrupt) it took on a cargo of pumice stone, which sounds unconvincing to me. Perhaps it was on its way to Sicily, for sulphur?

Finally M. de Gas reached Naples, where he settled. Such was his ability and integrity that, two years after his arrival, he was entrusted with the drawing up of the Grand Inventory of the National Debt of the Parthenopean Republic—a new invention of Cambon's. He married a young girl from Genoa, of a noble family, the Freppas, and took root.

Degas had kept up his family ties in Naples, and went there occasionally. On one of these journeys he was the victim of a train theft. He claimed that he must have been pricked and inoculated with some powerful narcotic while asleep, and then, thanks to this extra unconsciousness, he was deprived of his wallet.

He was fond of recalling the memories and impressions of Naples that had stayed with him. He could speak Neapolitan with the most authentic accent and fluency, and would sometimes hum a fragment of a popular song the way they sing them there in the streets.

In this account of his which I have been retailing, there was one detail of some importance.

The grandfather who, threatened with the scaffold, made off so quickly from the grain market, had been put on a list of suspects, for having been described as a fiancé of one of the notorious "young virgins of Verdun," several of whom paid

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with their lives for the welcome they gave, in 1792, to the invading Prussian army sent to restore the French monarchy. They had greeted the foreign troops—enemies to some, allies and liberators to others—with flowers and white flags.

I had forgotten all this when, a few years after my conversation with Degas, I happened to pick up some history book or other, in a shop under the arcade of the Odéon. It was about the Revolution. I was going to close it again when the name Mallarmé caught my eye. I read that a member of the Convention named Mallarmé had been instructed by the Committee of Public Safety, in 1793, to investigate the Verdun case, and to take proceedings not only against all those directly implicated in that demonstration of complicity with the enemy, but also (as is usual in any well-conducted political prosecution) against all those who were more or less closely connected with them.

This Mallarmé, whether an ancestor of the poet or not, I knew must be a member of his family.

I lingered agreeably over the delightful idea of a Mallarmé taking so much trouble to guillotine a Degas; and the relations between Edgar Degas and Stéphane Mallarmé came back to mind.

Their relationship was not, nor could it have been, a very simple one. Nothing could have been further from Degas' willful hardness, blunt to a degree of brutality, than Mallarmé's own characteristic strength of will.

Mallarmé lived for a certain idea: he was obsessed with the notion of an absolute work of imagination, the supreme aim and justification of his existence, the one and only purpose of and pretext for the universe. He had transformed and reconstructed his outer life, his attitude to people and circumstances, in order to protect and continually to clarify the elab-

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oration of this essential, pure, and sublime idea, which was the touchstone for all his values. It seems as if, in his eyes, men and their works were *evaluated* and classified more or less according to the precise amount to be sensed in them of this *truth* which he had discovered. This meant that he had to abolish mentally, to demolish ideally, many a person . . . which obliged him to treat everyone with a truly exquisite grace, patience, and courtesy, open his door to all, and reply in the most elegant terms, always with a startling novelty in their application, to any letter he received. . . . His immensely refined politeness, his systematically universal consideration were astonishing; I was sometimes naïve enough to be scandalized by them, but they constituted an impenetrable *neutral zone*, within which his marvelous pride could remain perfectly itself, keeping intact his treasured intimacy with his own strangeness.

Nothing could have been less like the explosive intransigence of Degas, the implacable mockery of his judgments, the summary and sarcastic verdicts he could never resist, his continual, splenetic touchiness, his fearfully capricious temper, and his rhodomontades, than the even, mild, delicate, and delightfully ironical manner of Mallarmé.

I believe Mallarmé was not without a feeling of awe at the idea of a character so different from his own.

As for Degas, he always talked of Mallarmé in the friendliest terms, more particularly of the man. His work seemed to him the fruits of a mild insanity which had taken hold of a wonderfully gifted poetic mind. Such misapprehensions are not uncommon between creative artists. Indeed it is conceivably a part of their function, not to understand each other. Besides, Mallarmé's writings offered generous scope for jokers and jeerers of every degree. On this point, Degas' opinion

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coincided with that of the regulars at Goncourt's Grenier, where Mallarmé himself went sometimes. The writers there found him charming, and marveled that a man of so subtle an intelligence, who expressed himself with such purity and precision, with an incomparable power of eloquence and suggestion, should produce as a writer such monstrosities of obscurity and elaboration—and above all that he should dare to defy the public whose favors and patronage they were so greedy for, themselves. How amazed that whole little group of great writers—obsessed as they were with *sales*, and furiously jealous of each other—would have been if anyone had told them that less than half a century would reduce the validity of their theories, like the fame and circulation of their novels, to a minimum, whilst this poet's slender and recondite achievement, independent of fashion and popularity because of the formal virtues so long and rigorously evolved in it, would acquire, for the most searching minds, all the potency of perfection.

One day when they were talking at the Grenier, Zola said to Mallarmé that, to his mind, dung was just as valuable as diamonds. "Yes," Mallarmé replied, "but diamonds are not so . . . common."

Degas never denied himself the pleasure of making a variety of thrusts at Mallarmé's poetry:

Victime lamentable à son destin offerte. . . .

For example he would tell how, after Mallarmé had read a sonnet to some of his disciples, the latter wanted to express their admiration by paraphrasing the poem, and each had his own interpretation, some seeing a sunset in it, and others a triumphant dawn, until Mallarmé said: "Not at all . . . it's nothing but my dressing table."

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Apparently Degas went so far as to tell this story in front of the hero of it, and Mallarmé, we are told, smiled—a rather necessary smile.

I must add that the anecdote in itself seems to me unlikely. To my knowledge, Mallarmé never read his verse to anyone. True, he read me the *Coup de dés* in 1897, but that was in private, and no doubt the extraordinary novelty of the work seemed to him to justify the experiment of trying its effect.

And then there were some curious clashes between Degas and Mallarmé, due invariably to the former's cantankerous disposition.

Mallarmé had taken it into his head to get a Degas picture bought by the Government. In the end he contrived to extract a favorable decision from his friend Roujon, at the time Director of the Beaux-Arts, and at once made off to Degas.

The latter, whom the very name Beaux-Arts would rouse to a pitch of fury, went off into an uncontrollable rage, spat out curses and insults, pacing up and down his studio like an irritable lion in its cage.

"The easels seemed to jump under his fingers," Mallarmé would say.

And he added, according to the account given me by Mme Ernest Rouart, that he would have liked to work up a really fine, well-conducted, and carefully controlled anger himself, in contrast with such coarse and noisy rage.

There were other misunderstandings between them.

Since I was well aware of this storm-tossed relationship, my chance discovery of the part played by the Mallarmé of the Convention in the flight of Degas' grandfather to Naples—and consequently in our painter's heredity—amused me a good deal.

This François-Auguste Mallarmé, born about 1756 in

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Lorraine, was a deputy to the Legislative Assembly from La Meurthe, and later a member of the Convention who voted for the death sentence. On the 9th Nivôse, Year II, he was deputed by the Committee of Public Safety to special duties in the departments of the Meuse and Moselle, "for the carrying out of measures of public safety and the establishment of the revolutionary government." That was how he came into contact with the Verdun affair, and had to pursue the fomenters of the trouble with all the rigors of the law, and hand them over to the Revolutionary tribunal. Thirty-five heads fell. In Lorraine he was replaced by the representative Charles Delacroix, who was no other than the—no doubt nominal—father of Eugène Delacroix.

François-Auguste Mallarmé was appointed subprefect of Avesnes by Napoleon in 1814; he had used his fortune to raise groups of partisans at the moment of the invasion. At the Restoration he was banished as a regicide, and he died in 1835.

I discovered all these facts about the man and his career in the *Essai sur la Révolution à Verdun*, a very interesting work by M. Edmond Pionnier (1905).

ASIDES

Degas would admit no argument when there was any question of "Monsieur" Ingres. To someone objecting that the great man's figures were like zinc, he would retort, "Maybe so! . . . But what a zinc-worker . . . a genius!"

One day Henri Rouart took upon himself to reproach the *Apothéose d'Homère*, with coldness, observing that the gods in it, frozen as they were into lofty attitudes, breathed an icy atmosphere.

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"What!" Degas burst out. "But what could be more admirable? The whole canvas is filled with the air of the empyrean."

He was forgetting that the empyrean is a region of fire.

He would quote the apothegms of the Master of Montauban at every opportunity.

"Drawing is not outside the line, but within it."

"You must follow the modeling like a fly walking on a sheet of paper."

"The muscles are my good friends, but I've forgotten their names."

Degas had known Moreau very well, and painted his portrait. One day Moreau twitted him: "Are you really proposing to revive painting by means of the dance?"

"And you," Degas retorted, "are you proposing to renovate it with jewelry?"

He would say too of Moreau: "He wants to make us believe the Gods wore watch chains. . . ."

A visit he paid to the Musée Moreau in the Rue de la Rochefoucauld made him abandon the idea he had formed of creating his own museum, which would have included his private collection (and perhaps a part of his studio). "How truly sinister," he remarked on coming out, ". . . it might be a family vault. . . . All those pictures crammed together look to me like a *Thesaurus*, a *Gradus ad Parnassum*."

Moreau had his points. His pupils, so it is said, adored him. It cannot be denied that his aims at least were lofty. He sought for poetry, but like quite a few of his contemporaries, he tried to locate it in accessories. Besides, he lacked the fundamental gifts of the painter. I can remember my immense disillusionment when, having been worked up to a pitch of excitement by Huysmans' wild and hysterical descriptions in *A Rebours*,

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I finally saw some of Moreau's works. I could not resist saying to Huysmans that they were "as dull and flat as a pavement."

Huysmans put up a very weak defense, alleging that the colors Moreau used had been a very poor quality, that the brilliance which had once fascinated him had faded, and so on.

22ND OF OCTOBER 1905

On this day Degas talked to me about Ingres and his relations with him.

He had known an elderly amateur, a M. de Valpinson—a charming name, fit for vaudeville—who was a great admirer and friend of Ingres.

"It happened," said Degas, "in 1855."

One day, paying Valpinson a visit, he found him rather annoyed.

"Ingres," he said, "has just gone. He looked very much offended. I refused to lend him a picture of his, for an exhibition he is organizing. I was afraid of a fire. The place he's chosen is far too liable to go up in flames."

Degas protested, exclaimed, besought Valpinson to change his mind, and finally persuaded him.

The next day the two of them went off to the master's studio to ask him to have the picture sent for.

While they were talking, Degas cast an eye round the walls. (At the time he was telling me this, he owned some of the studies he remembered seeing on them.)

As they left, Ingres bowed very deeply; and in doing so, he was seized with dizziness and fell on his face. When they lifted him, his face was covered with blood. Degas washed him and then hurried to the Rue de l'Isle to find Mme Ingres.

(continued...)

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