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book review of

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The Letters of Edgar Degas edited by Theodore Reff
Reviewed by Michelle Foa

Theodore Reff, ed.,
The Letters of Edgar Degas.
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"I see you're not much more of a writer than I am. Why didn't you write to me, even just a couple of words? In the mornings, when the mail arrives, there are rarely any letters for me and I can't get used to it" (vol. III, 28).

Edgar Degas's reproach of his close friend Henri Rouart for not writing during the artist's stay in New Orleans in 1872–73 and his dismay over the dearth of letters from other friends in Europe offer a window into the profound value he placed on written communications. Despite his professed aversion to letter writing, expressed in the passage above and on many other occasions, Degas was, in fact, a rather prolific correspondent, as shown by the authoritative new edition of his letters. Edited by Theodore Reff, this three-volume, bilingual edition is a monumental achievement, constituting a tremendous contribution to the field of Degas studies as well as a valuable resource on the history of later nineteenth-century French art and culture more broadly.

Reff's publication will no doubt supplant the previous standard French and English editions of the artist's correspondence, edited by Marcel Guérin and published in 1945 and 1947, and it represents a dramatic improvement over the earlier compilations in every respect.^[1] For one, the new edition is far more comprehensive, containing approximately five times as much correspondence. Letters by Degas that surfaced since 1947 were published in a range of sources, making them somewhat difficult to find and limiting scholars' ability to evaluate his body of correspondence as a whole. One of the many contributions of the new edition, then, is the consolidation of Degas's previously published communications into a single definitive

work. It also contains a few hundred previously unpublished letters (though most are very short), and it features more accurate and complete dating. A good portion of Degas's correspondence lacks full dates, and some of those ascribed by Guérin in the previous editions were incorrect (in one striking example, a letter referencing the fire that destroyed the Opéra on the rue Le Peletier was given a date prior to that of the event).^[2] Through painstaking research, Reff was able to determine the correct dates or sequence of much of the artist's known correspondence. The decision to produce a bilingual edition ensures that the new publication will supersede the Guérin volumes, with English translations that are superior to those of the 1947 text. Even seemingly minor features of the publication, such as the identification of the location of each letter, if known, and indicating if they were written on letterhead or mourning paper, as well as the inclusion of reproductions of a few of the autographs, enrich readers' experience by conveying a sense of the letters' physical specificity and reminding us of their material basis in paper and ink.

The extensive footnotes constitute one of the new edition's most impressive features, containing a true wealth of information and context that dramatically enhance readers' comprehension of the correspondence. Despite the modesty of their form, these notes are a remarkable scholarly achievement, with Reff bringing an enormous amount of knowledge about the artist's life, work, and personal and professional contacts to bear on the letters. People, events, works of art, and other kinds of references and allusions are identified or explained, enabling readers to draw far more from the letters than they otherwise would have been able to. The inclusion of biographies of figures who were frequently mentioned by Degas likewise helps flesh out the world in which he circulated.

In the lengthy introductory essay, Reff skillfully mines the letters to create an overview of diverse facets of Degas's world, thereby demonstrating the value of the artist's correspondence for gaining insight into topics as varied as his relationships with dealers, friends, and colleagues, his persistent health concerns, his travels, his attitude towards corresponding, and the particulars of his letter writing practice, among others. Reading the introduction and the artist's communications, one comes to realize that eliciting responses from his interlocutors was among his chief motivations for writing. In an 1886 note from Naples to his close friend Ludovic Halévy, for example, Degas cheekily asserted: "I've just written a lot, I'm tired, I have nothing left to say. Now I want to be written to from France with the attention I piously believe I deserve" (vol. III, 98). The importance that Degas placed on his relationships with those close to him and on the written exchanges that linked him to them is amply and sometimes movingly expressed. Writing in 1895 to his sister Marguerite and her family in Buenos Aires, he proposed that "we must make a solemn commitment to take up the pen on the fifteenth of every month, whether it wants to move across the paper or not. . . . Otherwise, we'll be as distant in sentiments as on the map, and we'll end up very far from each other" (vol. I, 37). His body of letters also definitively refutes his long-standing reputation as a misanthrope, revealing the vibrancy of his social life and the depth of his relationships with close friends. When illness or travel prevented Degas from seeing them in person, he treated letter writing and reading as substitutes that provided a meaningful sense of companionship.

Fittingly, one of the main topics of the introduction is the artist's relationship with language, both spoken and written. During his life, Degas was renowned for his commanding verbal

acuity, famously clever and cutting in his remarks. Describing the Friday evening gatherings in the home of Henri Rouart that the artist faithfully attended, Paul Valéry wrote that “Degas would be 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.”^[3] This same mastery of language is evident in his written correspondence, as Reff elaborates in his essay. Another important facet of the artist’s relationship to writing that is only briefly addressed is his enduring aversion to art criticism. It was, in part, his intense sense of privacy that led him to view art criticism as a form of trespassing. One extreme manifestation of this attitude was his severing of relations with the writer George Moore after he published an essay about Degas that the artist felt was too personal.^[4] But, more fundamentally, Degas seemed to consider art criticism an inherently flawed, even futile, enterprise, and he repeatedly asserted a basic incommensurability between visual art and language. For example, one of his models recounted a conversation in which he disparaged “all these writers [who] believe that they can take up art criticism as if painting weren’t the least accessible thing.”^[5] Daniel Halévy, the son of the Degas’s close friends Ludovic and Louise Halévy, recalled remarks made by the artist in 1890 affirming his belief in the emptiness of criticism: “We say more in a stroke than a writer can in a whole volume. And that is why I avoid these phrase-mongering critics and all these painters who are taken in by their words.”^[6]

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the artist tended to avoid writing in depth about his work or his thoughts on art. His extant correspondence contains surprisingly few lengthy reflections on either his own production or that of others, though these topics are certainly not absent from his communications. Important information about his photographic practice, for example, is found in several letters written in 1895 to Guillaume Tasset, who provided him with photographic equipment and technical advice. Likewise, a letter sent to James Tissot while Degas was in New Orleans includes a relatively substantive description of his two *Cotton Office* paintings, but this kind of commentary is more the exception than the rule (vol. III, 29). Despite the abundance of his surviving correspondence, insights into the artist’s views on art need to be gleaned from his more succinct remarks. The general distaste he felt towards other people’s writings about art extended, it seems, to his own written observations.

Despite the decades-long effort by Reff to gather all known surviving correspondence, there are still significant gaps in the record, many of which are addressed in the preface and introduction. It appears, for example, that Degas had a substantial correspondence with Mary Cassatt that hasn’t been located or that no longer exists (vol. I, 13). His published letters thus bear little trace of a relationship that was professionally and personally significant to him. Similarly, the artist must have corresponded with his father and brothers René and Achille over the course of his life, but very few of those letters have been found. These conspicuous gaps are unfortunate, but they’re also valuable in so far as they underscore the inevitable incompleteness of this corpus of letters and help us recognize that it can’t be treated as anything close to a full accounting of the artist’s life. Acknowledging the existence of lacunae can also lead the reader to productively reflect on the various reasons why certain figures are or aren’t represented in the correspondence. Is an absence or paucity of letters from Degas to particular people simply the result of them or their descendants not preserving the documents? Might a lack of written communications with someone indicate that Degas didn’t necessarily correspond with everyone whom he considered a friend? Or

should it be treated as evidence that certain people didn't, in fact, play a meaningful role in his life? These questions come to mind when considering the meager quantity of known correspondence between Degas and other major Impressionists (vol. I, 44). Despite the uncertainties that the lacunae generate, the surviving record makes clear that the artist's world was filled with people who had little or no connection to the Impressionist circle or who were associated with it through Degas. His letters might prompt us to consider the limits of the Impressionist label and the potential role that his many close relationships with figures outside of the group might have played in how he thought about and produced art.

In these dark days of the pandemic, this publication is a particularly welcome bright spot for those interested in Degas and his world. In his communications, the artist repeatedly referenced the pleasure that reading letters brought him; likewise, readers today will find much to enjoy as they work their way through these landmark volumes.

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Notes

- [1] Marcel Guérin, ed., *Lettres de Degas* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1945); *Degas Letters*, trans. Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1947).
- [2] Guérin, *Degas Letters*, 35.
- [3] Paul Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, trans. David Paul (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 9–10.
- [4] George Moore, "Degas: The Painter of Modern Life," *Magazine of Art* 13 (1890): 416–25.
- [5] Alice Michel, "Degas et son modèle," *Mercure de France* (February 16, 1919): 624.
- [6] Daniel Halévy, *Degas parle* (Paris: de Fallois, 1995), 100.