

Paul Valéry

VALÉRY

Degas Manet
Morisot

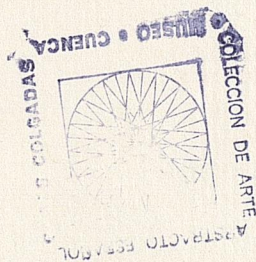
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Paul Valéry

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Feb 19/7

first read, in French, some
two years ago. Re-read on
the airplane between Manila
and San Francisco. On
the first round, "Déjà" gli-
hered; on the second it
spoke.



PAUL VALÉRY
DEGAS MANET
MORISOT

Translated by
David Paul



With an Introduction by
Douglas Cooper

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Introduction

IT IS NOT to be assumed from the title of this volume that it consists of biographical memoirs of the three artists whose names figure on its title page, or even of critical studies of their work. It is, rather, a collection of occasional essays. A few were written on a spontaneous impulse for Valéry's own satisfaction, but the greater number were produced to comply—and the *homme de lettres* in Valéry welcomed professional challenges of the sort—with some specific demand. As a group, they deal with closely related aspects of a large subject, and for this reason it has now been possible to bring them together between the covers of one book. But the reader should not expect, on this account, to find Valéry formulating here an aesthetic *credo*. Equally he will be disappointed if he looks for historical evidence or for a record of a developing sensibility appraising the art of his period, because Valéry carefully side-steps the issue of artistic innovations during his lifetime and offers only a minimum of what is considered art criticism in the accepted sense. This does not mean, however, that these essays are perfunctory, nor that it is impossible to trace a continuity or parallel in thought between one and another. Valéry devotes considerable space to evoking his personal experiences with some of the great French artists of the nineteenth century. But the more significant passages of

whereas civilized man, in response to a too deeply felt beauty or strangeness, can express himself in little but *adjectives*.

In the same case, a painter is seized with the rage to paint.

Yet not all painters—I mean among the best—are equally poetic. There are quantities of admirable paintings that impress by their mastery, yet do not “sing.”

It can even happen that the *poet* comes late to birth in a *painter* who, up till then, was simply a great artist. Such a one is Rembrandt: of the first rank in his early works, to rise later above all ranks.

With Corot, the poet appeared very early—a poet who, toward twilight, showed himself as rather too deliberately poetic. Too often talked of in conjunction with Virgil or La Fontaine, in the end he was tempted to be just the painter to whom such literary comparisons could be *unequivocally* made. Too many nymphs came all too easily to his hand, and numerous canvases were too expertly filled with vaporous groves.

Painting cannot, without a certain risk, set out to picture our dreams. I do not think *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* is the best Watteau. I find Turner's fairy visions disenchanting at times.

Could anything be more remote from dreaming than the act of drawing? In front of a picture I cannot but think, however vaguely, of that act, demanding as it does the fixity and steadiness of a certain point of view, the interconnection of moments, the coordination between hand, eye, and images (one of which is given or desired, the other made), and the use of *will*. The inconsistency between that sense of energetic labor and the dreamlike effects which the painter has meant to produce, can never give an entirely happy result.

And besides, one must always beware of falling into the common error of today, that of confusing *dreams* with *poetry*.

But black and white—pencil, lithograph, etching (though not engraving)—by the apparent easiness of the medium and the wide range of scheme and finish it allows, always lends itself, better than any attempt in color, to invoking vagueness, suggesting rather than shaping the forms, in the visual arts.

In a way, black and white is closer to the spirit and the act of writing; while painting, being closer to the perception of reality, is always more or less tempted to *deceive the eye*.

Using the abstract resources of pen and ink, lead, or etching needle, Corot can call up marvels of space and light; never did a few strokes on paper create more living trees, more mobile clouds, wider distances, or firmer ground.

Turning these astonishing pages, one feels that he lived among the sights of nature as a thinker lives among his meditations. His artist's eye can attain to almost mystic depths. Things so illumined lose their names; lights and shadows conspire to form unique systems and problems that depend on no science, refer to no experience, but receive all their existence and value from certain peculiar concords between the mind, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to discover them within him and render them for himself.

I believe there exists a sort of mysticism of the senses, an “Exterior Life,” of a depth and intensity at least equaling those which we attribute to the inner darknesses and secret illuminations of the ascetics, the Sufis, those who are concentrated on God, all those who know and practice a system of inner withdrawal, creating a whole interior life to which everyday existence can only bring obstacles, interruptions, and occasions for loss or strife—as do, also, all those images

in poetic paintings, the act of painting must disappear. The technique becomes neutral, like a glass of water (N. Tsan, P.O.R. Velizyng)

* is the only form of expressing that permits it, as well as any of the others, — perhaps better than the next, is drypoint (which he prob. confuses w/ etching)