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used as the title of his book. "With certain presuppositions about family life, largely based on Freud, Sartre can prove his case over and over again," Ellmann writes. "The flimsier the documentation, the more he has to say."

Freud himself was a bit careless about the facts in his biographical speculations about such writers as Goethe and Dostoyevsky. And when it came to his own authorized biographer, he chose a psychiatrist (Ernest Jones) who avoided Freudian analysis of Freud and composed an old-fashioned paean to his subject. In so doing, Ellmann writes, he seemed to acknowledge that "the comprehension of genius was beyond man's powers."

Degas's Dancers

"Degas and the Dance" by Dale Harris, in *Ballet News* (Nov. 1984), 1865 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023.

The "ballet boom" of recent years has made Edgar Degas's (1834–1917) paintings of ballerinas as familiar as the Mona Lisa and Whistler's Mother. But neither ballet nor the art of Degas was always viewed so favorably, recalls Harris, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

In Degas's late-19th-century Paris, ballerinas stood barely a cut above dance-hall girls in the social pecking order. Ballet itself was considered little more than a "trivial entertainment" with overtones of



Edgar Degas's Dancer Adjusting Her Shoe (1885).

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cheesecake. In a famous incident during the 1861 Paris première of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, a group of wealthy young men who arrived too late for the "titillating" ballet portion howled the opera down. Degas apparently shared the general low public regard for ballet: In many of his famous canvases, he lavished as much attention on the spectators and their social doings as on the dancers.

Degas's 1,500 ballet pieces earned him a reputation for misogyny in his own day. As late as 1949, the *Dance Encyclopedia* described him as a "French painter of the impressionist school who painted many unflattering pictures of ballet dancers." According to Harris, it was Degas's refusal to romanticize ballerinas, his interest in their craft and physical training and in their most mundane gestures, that shaped the Victorian image of him as unsympathetic to women.

Harris cautions that Degas, while a realist, was not merely a "documentary" painter. He altered reality to meet his artistic needs; x rays reveal that, in some of his pictures, he painted entirely new characters over old ones that did not suit him. And despite the sometimes strange perspectives and realistic subjects Degas chose, it would be a mistake not to view him as a classicist, "someone for whom the claims of life were thoroughly subordinated to the claims of art."

Indeed, Harris suggests, the backstage world of ballerinas "possessed" Degas in part because, like him, the dancers had to exercise enormous discipline to create something that appears supremely light and graceful. "No art," the painter once said, "was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing."

OTHER NATIONS

*Czechoslovakia's
Jazz Rebels*

"Hipness at Noon" by Josef Škvorecký, in *The New Republic* (Dec. 17, 1984), P.O. Box 955, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737-0001.

In 1971, three years after Soviet troops toppled Czechoslovakia's reformist Dubček government, a small band of jazz aficionados asked the Czech Ministry of the Interior for permission to form a jazz musicians' union. Only in a communist society could such an event give birth to new "enemies of the state," writes Škvorecký, author of *The Engineer of Human Souls* and other novels.

Until rock 'n' roll came along during the 1950s, jazz was strictly beyond the pale in Czechoslovakia. In totalitarian states, any demonstration of mass spontaneity signals danger, Škvorecký says. But "a smokey jazz club [filled] with nostalgic middle-aged men . . . is just a nuisance." So in 1971, a careless Czech Ministry of the Interior directed the petitioning jazz lovers to form a special Jazz Section within the existing Musicians' Union, thus fatefully removing them from its direct con-