

Pages from the Goncourt Journals

by Molly Young '08

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Edmond and Jules de Goncourt epitomized the aristocratic dilettanti of nineteenth-century Paris. Two brothers who floated by on a family fortune, they nixed conventional jobs and devoted their lives to the appreciation of fine things. Opposites in demeanor, and born eight years apart—in 1822 and 1830 respectively—the brothers were nonetheless identical in matters of taste and judgment. Their joint journal is the result of two minds "so alike, so identical, so homogenous, that [their] confession may be considered as the effusion of a single ego, of a single I." Theirs was a tautological relationship, equal parts complementary and redundant. In 22 years, they spent just two days apart.

The original manuscript of the journal is two million words long and takes up 11 notebooks. It was published in expurgated form beginning in 1887 but wasn't released in full until 1956. Now, a new edition—pruned to 450 pages and a modest 14 ounces—has been released with enlightening introductory notes. Balzacian in breadth and crammed with literary gossip, the journal is a document, mostly, of "that hard and horrible struggle against anonymity" that all writers feel and few succeed in articulating.

I. We are spoilt and willfully indiscreet

The work is chatty, acid, raunchy; and the style fits the subject. Paris in the 1870s was by no means a stainless milieu. The Goncourts lived a life of extremes, rotating intellectual pursuits with brothel excursions. They were typical of the nineteenth-century man of letters: lusty, coarse-grained, smelling of hashish and absinthe. They debauched more vigorously than their contemporaries in England and America, who were busy writing about whales, orphans and fog. The principle interests of the Goncourts and their friends were, in ascending order, prostitutes, fine arts and the company of geniuses. These last included Flaubert, Baudelaire, Hugo, Balzac, Zola and Turgenev, which makes the diary a bonus trove of anecdotes for literary biographers.

The late nineteenth-century was a key period in the development of Paris literary culture. While the eighteenth-century literati (Voltaire, Diderot) were social prizes coveted by the upper crust for their erudition, their successors came of age in a newly bourgeois society that eschewed novels for newspapers. The businessman with his sentimental wife and well-behaved children turned his back on the world of seedy theaters and cocktails.

This was duly noted, but no loss to the Goncourts, who collected their material at wild dinners with defiantly bohemian companions. Some of the observations read like Page Six blind items: there's the writer who stinks like an omnibus, the Princess who can't tell fresh fish from rotten, and some uncensored opinions on the depilatory habits of 'Oriental' prostitutes (unfavorable).

II. We are furiously anxious and vigorously amusing

Gustave Flaubert, in particular, is one of the journal's winning presences. Listening to the writer hold forth on metaphor, assonance and other rhetorical niceties, the Goncourts felt as though they were "listening to an argument between grammarians of the Byzantine Empire." One imagines the two held rapt in semi-comprehension, quickened by Flaubert's explication of technique in some dim Paris café.

Of that writer we also learn that he vomited twice from exertion while writing the finale to *Madame Bovary* and had to break for clean handkerchiefs. He gave his servant strict instructions to speak to him only once a week, on Sundays, and then only to say, "Sir, it is Sunday."

The brothers were good at observing such behavior, perhaps, because method proved a less elusive quarry than inspiration. They were not born creators, as they wished, but born collectors, with keen perceptive facilities and honed aesthetic compulsions. Quick-witted in flashes and frequent dispensaries of acute character judgments, they described one man as having "the lassitude of a hippopotamus" and a woman as resembling a diseased silkworm.

When it came to their own public output, which included plays, novels and criticism, the general public found it labored and pretentious. Reception of their works ranged from lackluster to abusive: one novel was released without a word of critical acknowledgment, and an earlier play was booed off the stage. "We thirst for approbation," they wrote, "The only sin is limitation."

Smarting from what they believed was unwarranted treatment, the Goncourt journal occasionally comes across as the shrill outcry of a whistleblower—a disclosure of the flaws undergirding that enigmatic archetype, The Artist. "Oh yes, it annoys these Academicians to have their humanity exposed to the public gaze," observed Edmond. "They would like to go on being little tin gods, but they are not going to have their way."

III. We are badly organized and easily tired

It was the Goncourts' knack for assembling good company, however, and chronicling the resulting pyrotechnics, that was unmatched. Neither patrons nor parasites, they set about recording "life itself with its entrails warm and active, its guts palpitating." Rather than attempt to alchemize the historical moment into literature, they simply recorded fastidiously, prying the reader to such minutiae as the liqueur most conducive to loosening bodices and the torturous icy hydrotherapy they endured for headaches.

Now and again the brothers took to scribbling under the haze of a few tankards of beer, and it has been suggested that the dinner-table transcriptions of the journal are less than reliable. Stenographical accuracy, however, will strike a contemporary reader as secondary to the conservation of a general camaraderie. No one could accuse the brothers of failing in this regard.

Like the best diaries, the journal is a chronicle of a place and a time as well as of characters. History, after all, is the gradual (and selective) accretion of such details. The creation of a compelling historical document--insightful, pungent--is no small feat, even if the Goncourts wouldn't know it. "A book is never a masterpiece," they wrote, "it becomes one. Genius is the talent of a dead man."

And always, the brothers were at odds with themselves, reiterating the tragedy of ambition outstripping ability. "Criticism is the enemy and the negation of the genius of an age," they wrote. "That ephemeral sheet of paper, the newspaper, is the natural enemy of the book, as the whore is of the decent woman."

IV. In the end it is better to speak the truth

The frothier entries are interlarded with devastating ones. When Jules de Goncourt suffers from syphilis in 1870, Edmond documents his brother's decline with a precision that often seem uncharitable. We see the slippage of judgment, the slurring of words, the mask of imbecility that obscures a once-intelligent face. One night the brothers are out to dinner and the failing Jules behaves clumsily with a soup bowl. As the other diners begin to stare, Edmond reprimands his brother and invokes a wash of tears. "It's not my fault, it's not my fault!" the younger one cries, seeking his brother's hand across the tablecloth. It's a rare loss of composure when they dissolve, sobbing, into their napkins. Edmond notes the spasms, panic and sweat of a syphilis death, and is devastated when Jules dies. The diary is maintained in memoriam, and there is no discernible alteration of style.

Like any generation worth remembering, this particular era of writers was both self-aware and self-mythologizing. The Goncourts must have annoyed the hell out of the Paris writers by deflating their cultivated mystique, and yet they were also preservationists, sealing the historical moment like an organism in amber, with its flaws and merits intact. Perhaps the writers aren't remembered the way they'd like to be--Zola with his potbelly, George Sand with her scatological jokes--but anything, they'd agree, trumps obsolescence.

The key to the journal is its tension. A book, by nature, is public; a diary, private. We understand that the Goncourts intended their work to be published, and yet the content of the book is so self-effacing (a prostitute snipes that Edward "looks like a little boy staring at a jam sandwich") and so corroborative of every accusation leveled at the Goncourts, that it seems an unimaginable act of self-exposure. None but a masochist would want such dirty laundry aired, and the Goncourts were neurotics, not exhibitionists. Their motives are baffling, but this, perhaps, is the best explanation we have for the diary's graceful flow: injuries be damned, they couldn't stop themselves from writing.