



Pages from the Goncourt Journals

Edmond de Goncourt, Jules de Goncourt, Geoff Dyer (Foreword by), Robert Baldick (Translator)

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No evocation of Parisian life in the second half of the nineteenth century can match that found in the journals of the brothers Goncourt

The journal of the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt is one of the masterpieces of nineteenth-century French literature, a work that in its richness of color, variety, and seemingly casual perfection bears comparison with the great paintings of their friends and contemporaries the Impressionists.

Born nearly ten years apart into a French aristocratic family, the two brothers formed an extraordinarily productive and enduring literary partnership, collaborating on novels, criticism, and plays that pioneered the new aesthetic of naturalism. But the brothers' talents found their most memorable outlet in their journal, which is at once a chronicle of an era, an intimate glimpse into their lives, and the purest expression of a nascent modern sensibility preoccupied with sex and art, celebrity and self-exposure. The Goncourts visit slums, brothels, balls, department stores, and imperial receptions; they argue over art and politics and trade merciless gossip with and about Hugo, Baudelaire, Degas, Flaubert, Zola, Rodin, and many others. And in 1871, Edmond maintains a vigil as his brother dies a slow and agonizing death from syphilis, recording every detail in the journal that he would continue to maintain alone for another two decades.

Pages from the Goncourt Journals Details

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From Reader Review Pages from the Goncourt Journals for online ebook

Buck says

People died differently in the nineteenth century, and they took a long time doing it. The appalling deaths described in the *Goncourt Journal* are enough to make you get down on your knees and thank God and Pasteur for antibiotics. Henri Murger, author of the source novel for *La Bohème*, contracted something called ‘senile gangrene’ and literally rotted to pieces; when his attendants tried to trim his moustache, his lip came off. The journalist Robert Caze punctured his liver in a duel and spent months dying in a fourth-floor apartment. And then there’s Jules de Goncourt himself, who by his late thirties was showing symptoms of advanced syphilis: memory loss, aphasia, paralysis and dementia, each stage being scrupulously recorded by his brother in the journal they had shared.

Why do I keep coming back, year after year, to this cynical, malicious, death-haunted book? Or did I just answer my own question? And while I’m on the subject, why are all my favourite books cynical, malicious and death-haunted? Why are they so freaking French, in other words? But let’s not talk about that now.

You know how they say every generation thinks it discovered sex? Well, maybe it would be equally true to say that every generation thinks it invented modernity. Already the fashions and gadgetry of the 90s—remember flannel shirts? The Discman? The ‘information superhighway’?—must seem ineffably lame to the smug fifteen-year-olds I see on the subway blasting that hippity hop racket out of their so-called ‘cellular telephones’.

On the evidence of the *Goncourt Journal*, though, the signifiers of hipness—irony, urbanity, a disaffected pose—were well in place long before Lou Reed first put on sunglasses and a sneer. Historically speaking, the brothers may have been stranded among the plush and gaslights of the Second Empire, but spiritually they were already living in their own private twentieth century. It’s not included in this translation, but there’s a passage in the original where the Goncourts and a bunch of their Boho friends are sitting around and bitching about how disgustingly modern they feel. When someone or other disagrees, good old Théophile Gautier gets up and declares himself so modern he wants to puke.

That’s another thing about the journal: it’s funny. The Goncourts knew all the leading writers of the day and used to host glorified piss-ups for them at a chi-chi restaurant in Paris. So you had all these impossibly witty guys hanging out and totally burning each other over oysters and champagne. You get the impression the Goncourts spent the whole night jotting one-liners down on napkins and muttering to themselves, ‘Oh man, this is gold.’

And what did they talk about, these assembled geniuses? Women, mostly. Sure, every once in a while there’d be a screaming match about prose style, but they always came back to women. Women and sex. It’s almost sweet, in a perty, French sort of way. (At one point, Zola confesses that he fantasizes about pubescent girls: ‘Yes, it frightens me sometimes...I see the Assize Court and all the rest of it.’)

With Jules’ death in 1870, some of the youthful piss and vinegar goes out of the journal, but if Edmond was a little more decorous than his brother, he was definitely the bitchier of the two. I don’t think I’ve read anything as eloquently catty as this tremendous putdown of Hippolyte Taine and his wife:

The stupid walk of that potbellied clergyman, with his sly, hypocritical gaze hidden behind his spectacles,

and the swarthy, unhealthy ugliness of the horrifying wife, who looks like a diseased silkworm which a schoolboy has daubed with ink, make a truly dreadful sight for the eyes of an aesthete.

I have no idea what a diseased silkworm might look like, but it sounds really, really mean.

I've nattered on shamelessly but I don't know if I've managed to convey just how awesome the journal is. That's the problem with trying to talk about a book that's a whole lot smarter and funnier than you are: it ends up judging *you*.

Sam says

Miniature portraits of the great French writers of la belle époque, no less wonderful for being ruthlessly satirical, jealous, and petty. The Goncourt brothers were friends with all that age's preeminent realists, and their lack of success in comparison to their famous friends makes them ideal windows into this particular overheated milieu; everybody is always getting better or worse in health and talent, and the terror of death by venereal disease is always mentioned. Particularly notable is the Goncourt's scabrous attitude towards the opposite sex; several passages read almost as parodies of a hateful misogynist. Quotable lines every page. Totally unimportant that much of their writings happen to be outright lies - the characters are what matter: bear-like Flaubert, with his excessive appetites; wily, calm Turgenev, always getting the last word; the nervous, pompous Saint-Simon, who the Goncourt brothers treat worse than anyone, providing him with the deathbed scene to end all degrading deathbed scenes. The end, after younger brother Jules' death, becomes briefly, luridly emotional in a fascinating way - see how the jealous man grieves! - but eventually cools off into something much less than the beginning, as older brother Edmond loses touch with literary society and bemoans the success of Zola, who he claims stole his ideas. But the first two hundred pages are highly recommended. Endless laughs.

Kathrina says

Oh, my dear Edmond, we have grown so close over these pages, and after all your eulogies for your compatriots who've died so tragically along the way, I shudder at the blankness of the page after the words: "Here ends the journal of Edmond de Goncourt, who died twelve days later at Champrosay." Your greatest passion, your driving force, was to be remembered after your death, that your marriage to literature would sustain a legacy, and yet, you died on a blank page.

Few outside of a French Literature Masters even know your name, for all the name dropping and shoulder-rubbing you engaged in with "the greats." Wikipedia, if not an accredited source, is at least a palaverous one, and barely touches the immense influence Goncourt would have us believe he made on French society. It is amazing how one could be so central a figure in gossip-mongering, your Grenier the address for Parisian tabloid exploitation, and yet be so convinced of your literate sincerity, your naturalist purity -- he swears he never told a lie in all his career, but even the footnotes doubt him. Perhaps the paradoxical tragedy is, for all his ennui for his own misunderstood literary career, I am more drawn to read the works of his colleagues and enemies than his own nearly forgotten novels, the characters that he praises and maligns, sometimes both within a decade, or within a paragraph. I'm forced now to revisit Madame Bovary, perhaps the greatest book ever to be in print, according to Goncourt, and perhaps the only opinion Goncourt loyally maintained

throughout his life. I must read, not necessarily the prodigious works of Mdm. George Sand, but certainly her biography. I must read some short stories of Maupassant, and a novel or two of Zola and Balzac and Turgenev, and, if I can bear it, a tome of Dumas. (Exclamation point concerning the gossip disclosed that Maupassant could be Flaubert's illegitimate son!) And then, once all of their stories of realism, the dirty and depraved lives of prostitutes and debtors are swimming in my brain, I can imagine all these fat frenchmen (and one Russian) around a dinner table, as they often were, smoking their cigars and sipping claret, and punching each other's egos behind their backs. I'll thank the gods I wasn't a woman in any way connected with these old cronies, for if I hadn't born a son who'd proved some literary talent, there's no room for my dignity here --I'm either a hag, a tart, or, at best, a cocotte. And I'll wonder how these old men's lives seem any more enlightened than the lives we lead today -- they're just syphilitic, misogynistic, egotistical, disappointed old men, but yet they all happened to write some stories for the ages, to observe in their society what they failed to see in themselves, whose books take unassailable space on our "classics" shelves, well...apparently all but Goncourt.

Rest in peace, my friend.

Tony says

62. PAGES FROM THE GONCOURT JOURNAL. (from 1852-1896). Edmund and Jules de Goncourt.
****.

During the period listed above, the two Goncourt brothers religiously recorded the events on almost a daily basis of their lives and interactions with other French writers and painters of the period. The brothers were inseparable, and it is almost impossible to tell which one was responsible for which entry at the time. Together, they knew everyone in the arts at the time. They were particular friends with luminaries like Flaubert, Zola, Hugo, George Sand, and many many others. The style of the journals is that of a literary diary, but one which managed to reveal lots of secrets. These were the types of journals that you would suspect a Walter Winchell or a Mencken to have written had they been in the same situations. It seems that the great luminaries of the day were very jealous of each other's successes and were typically caustic in their comments. They all had secret vices that were ultimately revealed at their dinner parties that the brothers managed to put down in writing. Although the brothers hadn't planned to publish these journals, they changed their minds and published them serially over a period of years. They were – obviously – best sellers. This edition, from The Folio society, is a selection from the various journals. I'm not sure what the length of the full work was, but it had to be enormous when printing was finally completed. If you are at all interested in the private lives of the most famous of the nineteenth-century French artists and writers, this is a must read book. Highly recommended.

Emma Sea says

This is a marvellous book. Just pure enjoyment. I only wish I had a little walled garden and a daybed to lounge on while I read it, and a maidservant to bring me iced sweet tea and petit fours.

Although I have read numerous Prix Goncourt winners, and I goddamn adore Flaubert and Zola, I had never

read any of the actual Goncourt journals. Now I wish I could slap my younger self about the face and thrust this book into my hands with an admonition to READ IT!

I can hear Nana's voice in the conversation of every "tart" they record.

And the prose is so lovely *swoony thing*. Like, not technically perfect, but urk!, *the feels*. Here's one of the brothers, climbing up to the balcony of another man's mistress:

"I climbed up as nimbly and feverishly as a madman and as automatically as a sleepwalker, drawn into the orbit of that white dressing-gown. Finally I got to the top and jumped onto the balcony. I had been in love for a distance of fifteen feet. I am convinced that I shall never be in love in all my life except in fits and starts like that. It rises, takes you by the throat and delights you: a paradise that comes and goes."

And, oh, the curse I am under, being an only child. Without each other the brothers are,

". . . incomplete like a book in two volumes of which the first has been lost"

A big shout-out to the fabulous Isa, who doesn't know it, but who prompted me to buy this as I saw she was reading it. Thank you!

Geoff says

I thought this book might slow down a bit after Jules' death and the Commune of 1871 (such striking descriptions of a Paris embattled by the siege!), but it turns out that Edmond was perhaps the more sensitive observer of the two brothers, and his later years are perhaps richer in detail and painterly subtlety than the time when the journal was a product of two minds. I found myself mentally comparing it to Pessoa's Book of Disquiet, in the way that through fragmented recollections, scene-paintings, thoughts on literary theory, philosophy and the descriptions of manners of a cast of innumerable minor figures the book develops a kind of shattered mosaic quality. But because the Journals are dated, and have recurring characters (such "minor figures" as Flaubert, Daudet, Gautier, Zola, Turgenev) depicted in various scenes throughout their lives and deaths, there is an underlying sense of narrative that The Book of Disquiet, by its very nature, cannot have. The Goncourts are genuinely hilarious and scathing, and are magnificent observers of life. I felt, coming to the end of the journals, almost a sense of loss that I would no longer be sharing in Edmond's private world. This is an inexhaustable resource for anyone interested in the literary life of Paris in the 19th century.

Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says

I went into this book thinking the Goncourt brothers' journal would give me interesting insights into many of the artists of the Belle Epoque in Paris. There were some interesting insights, but for the most part I just got annoyed by the egotism, privileged whining, and character assassination. The younger brother Jules composed the early part of the journal before his death at a relatively young age, whereupon his older brother Edmond continued the journal. I don't think the older brother was any less annoying, but his writing did take on a higher gravitas for a time as a result of his heartfelt reaction to his brother's death and the horrors of the

Siege.

I came out of this book thinking that I, as a man, owe an apology to women everywhere and everywhen for the insulting views of and comments about women spouted by these two self-absorbed males. Yes, it was a different time, but their views to me were so heinous as to lose the privilege(?) of hiding behind “the times.”

Finally, this kept popping into my head as I read:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”
-- Percy Bysshe Shelley

Jim says

This is a re-read for me -- and it came across just as well (and was just as surprising) as the first time I read it some fifteen years ago. I could only wish that the whole work were translated into English.

If you love French literature of the 19th century, this is an indispensable book to read and to keep handy. Fortunately, there is an excellent index in my edition (published by Oxford) which makes it all the more useful.

Reading the Goncourt Journal is like getting together for dinner with Flaubert, Dumas, Rodin, Daudet, Oscar Wilde, Maupassant and listening to what those bad boys had to say when they were at their ease. Edmond de Goncourt suffered grievously toward the end of his life by lawsuits and jibes in the press brought on by those who were slighted by some mention in the Journals. Be that as it may, it is worthwhile to see these giants of literature and art with their waistcoats unbuttoned, their sleeves rolled up, and their noses painted with the grape.

Eric says

Roger Williams, in *The Horror of Life*, a book I love to hate and am always so close to selling, argues that of the brothers Goncourt, Jules was more energized by neurosis and misanthropy. After reading this selection of

the Journal I'm inclined to agree. It seems that after Jules's slow death from syphilis in 1870, the book loses some of its bite. Initially I was a little bored with Edmond as the sole recorder, but he grew on me, and the entries of those twilight years are probably more memorable than what came before. I admire the wintry stoicism with which he persisted in his literary projects, despite the loss of his twin-minded collaborator and the continued condescension of much of the Parisian literati, professional ink-stained wretches who saw aristocratic writers as mere dilettantes (Byron and Pushkin also provoked reverse snobbery). Many of the incidents are touching, as when Edmond, in the last years of his life, is made an Officer of The Legion of Honor, and is feted at a huge banquet by old friends and reconciled enemies. And it is so funny when he demurs marrying a young woman because he doesn't want her to waste her best years caring for a dying old man, and because he wants to reserve his entire estate for the creation of the Académie Goncourt; when his lawyers initially nix this idea, he exclaims, "But I passed on marriage for this!" Edmond planned the academy as a stronghold of his taste, to rival and irritate the Académie française--not a completely dotty scheme it turned out, as the Prix Goncourt became France's most prestigious literary prize. The Académie Goncourt honored Proust (in 1913, for *Swann's Way*), which is more than the popinjays of the Nobel committee can claim.

<http://www.academie-goncourt.fr/>

Darran McLaughlin says

Absolutely fantastic. This book gives you a real insiders view of Belle Epoch Paris. The Goncourts encounter Flaubert, Zola, Baudelaire, Saint Beuve, Degas, Huysmans, Turgenev, Mallarme, Hugo, Dumas and Verlain and mix portray the slums, streets, Theatres, Palaces and brothels of late 19th Century Paris. Wonderfully vivid. A must read if you are interested in the history, culture and literature of this era.

Lynne King says

Having rated this book from when I read it years ago, I looked at the book again last night and have rated it upwards. It certainly deserves it.

I was reminded of this book this morning when I saw that Warwick is currently reading it.

I'm looking rather sadly at what was my magnificent Folio Society edition until Jasper, a labrador who loved to chew books unfortunately, decided one day that this was his flavour of the month and ate part of the protective outer covering the Folio Society use. Luckily he didn't manage to destroy the book itself.

This is an excellent witty and social document about life in the late nineteenth century in Paris, beautifully portrayed by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. The illustrations are delightful depicting individuals such as Alexandre Dumas, father and also son, Alphonse Daudet, Ivan Turgenev, Victor Hugo, George Sands, Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, etc.

I was also fascinated to see that the brothers wrote this literary work between them as they were so different in their personalities "Edmond, born at Nancy in May 1822, was slow, serious, phlegmatic, very much the

responsible elder brother; while Jules, born in Paris in December 1830, was volatile, quick-witted, mischievous, very much the spoilt younger brother. Yet from the point of view of instinct, taste, and sensibility the two men were one."

A remarkable book and highly recommended.

David Hammerbeck says

An edited English-language compilation of selected entries from the Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, novelists, playwrights, critics and member of the French literary elite of the mid- to late-19th century. They counted among their friends and confidants Zola, Turgenev, Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, even Victor Hugo and very early on, Balzac. Their gossip and often sarcastic comments about other writers, their writing habits, and lifestyles are beyond fascinating - funny, scabrous, sentimental, occasionally racist or misogynist (the latter somewhat explainable by the fact that both men rarely had serious relationships with women, and picked up STDs from prostitutes, the younger brother dying from syphilis). But the insight into some of the great writers - Flaubert in particular - alone makes this work worth reading. And the insights and reflections upon art and politics of the time, and the theatre and theatrical world as well.

Warwick says

Hands-down the most entertaining book I've read all year. You need this in your life if you have any interest at all in French literature, the life of the mind, the creative process, or Gallic bitching on a monumental scale. Especially the last one.

Every page, and I mean *every* page, of this book contains one or more of the following:

1. A perfectly-polished aphorism;
2. An astonishing anecdote about a famous writer, or painter, or member of royalty;
3. A worm's-eye view of some major historical event;
4. A jaw-dropping insight into the ubiquity of nineteenth-century misogyny

...or all four. The nature of the Goncourts' social circle means that even the most Twitter-like entry of daily banality becomes interesting ('A ring at the door. It was Flaubert'), but more to the point there is so much here of the real life that never found its way into the fiction of the time. Reading this feels like finally finding out what all those characters in nineteenth-century novels, with their contrived misunderstandings and drawing-room spats, were *really* thinking about – the salacious concerns that lie behind all the printable novelistic metaphors. When the Goncourts and their famous friends get together for a chat, instead of just talking about who batted their eyelashes at whom last night, they are more likely to wax lyrical about

the strange and unique beauty of the face of any woman – even the commonest whore – who reaches her climax: the indefinable look which comes into her eyes, the delicate character which her features take on, the angelic, almost sacred expression which one sees on the faces of the dying and which suddenly appears on hers at the moment of the *little death*.

la singulière et originale beauté du visage de toute femme qui jouit—même chez la dernière gadoue—, de ce je ne sais quoi qui vient à ses yeux, de cet affiné que prennent les lignes de sa figure, de l'angélique qui y monte, du caractère presque sacré que revêt le visage des mourants qui s'y voit soudain sous l'apparence de la « petite mort ».

(An idea expressed in almost identical terms, incidentally, more than 150 years later in Nicholson Baker's *The Fermata*.) Or about their aversion to the 'oriental practice' of women shaving their pubic hair:

'It must look like a priest's chin,' said Saint-Victor.

It is all amazing stuff. The Goncourts are alert to the best gossip, the most entertaining and revealing anecdotes; their keen sense that they are underappreciated geniuses drives a lot of their observations of the people around them who are (as they see it) getting the success that they, the Goncourts, deserve. This is lucky for us, because it keeps them deeply interested in the artists around them to the very end.

The most prominent of these is Zola, who first pops up in the journals as an unknown fan. His prodigious work ethic and knack for publicity soon means that he is getting all the glory, and all the money, of being the leader of the new 'Naturalist' movement. The Goncourts reckon, not without some reason, that he lifted most of his best ideas from them, and they duly note down all the examples they can find. But they're impressed despite themselves at how good he is with the press; as Zola cheerfully confesses,

'I have a certain taste for charlatanism...I consider the word *Naturalism* as ridiculous as you do, but I shall go on repeating it over and over again, because you have to give new things new names for the public to think that they are new...'

The attitude of all concerned towards women is shocking, especially in the early years (Edmond does mature quite a lot towards the end, benefitting from a close and gossipy friendship with Princess Mathilde Bonaparte that was clearly very important to him). The women that get discussed tend to be *gaupes* 'trollops', *gueuses* 'sluts' or *gadoues* 'whores'; sometimes translator Robert Baldick even renders *filles* 'girls' as 'tarts', which, given the tone, is not unreasonable. The brothers confess somewhere that neither of them has really been in love for more than a few days at a time, and their deepest emotion is always reserved for each other. Edmond's description of his brother's eventual death from syphilis is heart-breaking: 'This morning he was unable to remember a single title among the books he has written.'

And death does loom pretty large over parts of the journal, which covers such upheavals as the Franco-Prussian War, the Siege of Paris, and the suppression of the Commune – but the Goncourts' eye is always on individual responses, picturesque incident, personal idiosyncrasies.

Neither of them ever marries, although Edmond thinks about it a few times after his brother has gone. He tries to let down gently the few women that approach him. Eventually, in a passage that's somehow both creepy and moving, he confides that he's never really got over his first erotic experience as a young boy, when he was staying in his cousin's house:

One morning [...] I went into their bedroom without knocking. And I went in just as my cousin, her head thrown back, her knees up, her legs apart and her bottom raised on a pillow, was on the point of being impaled [*enfourchée*] by her husband. There was a swift movement of the two bodies, in which my cousin's pink bottom disappeared so quickly beneath the sheets that I might have thought it had been a hallucination.... But the vision remained with me. And until I met Mme Charles, that pink bottom on a pillow with a scalloped border was the sweet, exciting image that appeared to me every night, before I went to sleep, beneath my closed eyelids.

The Journal amounts to an argument that what matters in life is sex, death and literature – only the characters illustrating this are not fictional creations but rather Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Zola, Degas, Barbey d'Aureville, Huysmans, Dumas, Oscar Wilde, Swinburne, and Turgenev. It's not only glorious and life-affirming, it's also very moving because even while Edmond rages against how his literary works have been overlooked, the reader is increasingly aware that this journal is going to be everything that they hoped for their novels, and more.

A book is never a masterpiece: it becomes one. Genius is the talent of a dead man.

A talent they obviously had. I would rather read half a page of the Goncourts on Zola than a hundred pages of Zola himself. Indeed right now I feel I'd rather read half a page of the Goncourts on anything than almost anything else.

Bob says

Genuinely quite hilarious journal entries covering Parisian literary life for basically the last half of the 19th century, initially cowritten by the brothers Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, carried on by the latter after the death of Jules in 1870. Snobby but also gleefully and wittily intolerant of pretension and humbuggery, the brothers' world is that of Flaubert, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve and Théophile Gautier, who are not treated with excess reverence. This is giving me a lot more context for Zola's *Nana* which I may try to return to.

Jennyb says

What I knew about the frères Goncourt when I picked up this book is that a literary prize bears their name. Given their distinguished legacy, who could have ever imagined they'd be such a pair of catty gossiping bitches? They turn their condescending attentions on all the leading lights of their age -- Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, Hugo, and more -- and find none of them remotely as talented as themselves. Further disdain extends liberally to the bourgeoisie, those gauche usurpers encroaching on the time-honoured aristocratic privileges of the Goncourts, and how dare they? Another endearing quality is their inveterate misogyny,

which only heightens the irony that Goncourt the Younger dies from syphilis. The elder brother describes the decline, and possibly the only humanity in the book is his true agony at the loss of his beloved brother. Goncourt the Elder keeps up the journal for another 20 years, giving eyewitness descriptions of the overthrow of the emperor Napoleon (le 2eme), the Commune and various other historic, literary and artistic events. This is possibly the supreme chronicle of mid-19th century France; it's only too bad it's written by such arrogant, disagreeable observers. Finishing it nearly killed me, and I wish to god I hadn't persisted, because there's certainly no reward hiding at the end. Goncourt remains corrosive, gossipy and backstabbing through the very last words he pens, right up til his death.
