

Genova on Reverzy and Bourguinat, eds. (2016)

Reverzy, Eléonore, and Nicolas Bourguinat, editors. *Les Goncourt historiens*. PU Strasbourg, 2016, pp. 282, ISBN 978-2-86820-978-8

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In this collection generated by a 2015 conference, “Comment les Goncourt écrivent-ils l’histoire?,” scholars rethink the brothers’ complexity in the nineteenth-century development of modern historical analysis. The Goncourts pined for the 1700s, criticizing their era in their correspondence, essays, journal, and novels. Indeed, Reverzy quotes in her preface the Goncourtian maxim: “L’histoire est un roman qui a été; le roman est l’histoire, qui aurait pu être” (5). Because of their haughty stance, they can still offend, yet this compilation invites a reconsideration of these admittedly eccentric writers.

The collection presents four parts; in the first, “Une petite histoire?,” Pierre-Jean Dufief examines how the authors breathed new life into the past. There is an “écriture de la collection, de l’accumulation et de l’ajout” (26), as Dufief underscores their archival methodology. Érika Wicky explores the Goncourts’ depiction of eighteenth-century women, highlighting a new attitude: to understand the French eighteenth century, the Goncourts emphasize what they perceived as an intimate, feminine history, purportedly accessing “le parfum d’une époque” (46). José-Luis Diaz addresses “l’histoire au jour le jour” (47), emphasizing the *Journal* for its presentation of experimental literary history, unlike that of their contemporaries, such as C.-A. Sainte-Beuve or Hippolyte Taine. Michael Rosenfeld also investigates the *Journal*, analyzing a unique “personage-type” (63): the *pédéraste*. Comparing manuscript versions, he uncovers Edmond’s censorship, as the text stereotypes homosexuals as perverse, alongside criminals and prostitutes.

The second section, “Matériaux et méthodes d’une histoire renouvelée,” opens with Nicolas Bourguinat’s study of eighteenth-century women, referencing Goncourtian texts featuring female characters. While certain aristocratic women had been presented by historians as a “galerie de portraits” (90), the Goncourts include women of all classes, and Bourguinat accentuates how the Goncourts communicate a rich history, replete with details of ordinary life. Marine Le Bail surveys the Goncourts as *bibliophiles*, scrutinizing their extensive eighteenth-century collection of documents. Described as “dix-huitémolâtres farouches” (101), their appreciation is striking, as they heighten the validity of the “document,” especially with works from the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, and from the Revolution. Guy Ducrey reviews the history of theater, positing Edmond as a figure *en abyme* who emphasizes “ce qui excède, au théâtre, le seul texte” (114), i.e., the presence of gestures offering an appreciation of the movements of the body and the impact of the voice on the evolution of aesthetic history. Émilie Sermadiras considers the Goncourts and anti-clerical historical analysis. The representation of devotion among their female protagonists is surprisingly equivocal in the texts. Originally inspired by Jules Michelet and the “neurosis” of female religious fervor, the writers offer a “religieux, historico-pamphlétaire et médical” (126) explanation of their characters’ behavior.

Part three, “Les Goncourts historiens des lettres et des beaux-arts,” presents Peter Vantine’s analysis of the sarcastic Goncourtian view about the suspicious notion of “democracy,” especially evident in their earliest works on eighteenth-century art. For them, the “Révolution se révèle l’ennemi absolu du savoir et de l’art” (144), as they bemoan the increasing commercialization of aesthetics. Sirin Dadas assesses *Manette Solomon*, a significant “pendant romanesque à leur critique d’art” (155), embodying a deformation of the actual contemporary artistic scene by presenting a convoluted view of the Ingres/Delacroix debate and substituting the real-life scandal of Gustave Courbet’s Realism with a distorted vision of Orientalism. Christine Peltre asserts that the Goncourts’ interest in *Japonisme* overshadows their complicated relationship with Orientalism. Her metaphor of the kaleidoscope is evocative, as an icon “adapté à la traduction des scènes prises sur le vif dans la multiplicité simultanée d’impressions” (174), obviously attractive to these practitioners of *écriture artiste*. Sébastien Roldan presents a dense philosophical investigation of time and space, formulated in response to ideas introduced by Jean-Pierre Richard and Jacques Dubois. Roldan holds that these critics’ views on the *immédiat* and the *ébauche* need development, with the Goncourts’ work conceived as a “travail d’atomisation et même d’abolition de la durée” (184). The Goncourts’ own subjectivity complicates the question, which Roldan examines by way of three novels: *Une voiture de masques*, *Les Hommes de lettres*, and *Sœur Philomène*.

Finally, in “Histoire morale, histoire sociale,” Federica D’Ascenzo analyzes the Goncourts’ anti-liberal view of history. Against utilitarian progress, the writers critique the bourgeoisie; they consider universal suffrage as illegitimate. D’Ascenzo writes, “la monnaie induit désormais le mode d’organisation des interactions sociales” (207), and the constant references in their novels to the *pièce de cent sous* stresses this nineteenth-century obsession with monetary power. Véronique Cnockaert

explores, in *Renée Mauperin*, one family's connections to such core themes as name, land, and war. Aiming to "rendre à l'histoire sa réelle épaisseur" (220), the Goncourts fill their novel with quotidian details, expressing inherited genealogical influences and the effects of bloody land wars on the identity of the individual, who may or may not receive the linguistic *particule* that determines their fate. Sophie Lucet studies historical drama through *La Patrie en danger*, which, refused by the *Comédie Française* in 1868, was staged in 1889 at the *Théâtre Libre*, and embodies "une histoire de l'histoire au théâtre" (235). The ingenuity of the Goncourts is evident in their interest in adapting documentation onto the stage; the work presents a kind of Naturalist *épopée nationale*. Sophie Pelletier's contextualization of *Chérie* as a literary testament places the novel within familial and national histories. Pelletier shows how the toys, and the hallway in which the protagonist plays, teem with history, suggesting that "ces divers objets, véritables artefacts historiques, inscrivent le devenir de l'enfant dans une ligne de temps fracture et sans issue" (245), uniting national and personal history in referencing the ambivalent notion of *filiation*. Philippe Geinoz explores America's role, through the cultural phenomenon of the circus, in *Les Frères Zemgano* and *Chérie*, in which the clown and the acrobat evoke both laughter and silence. The rising interest in capitalism is underscored through the expression from François-René de Chateaubriand, repeated by the Goncourts, who describe American culture as produced by "Barbares de la civilisation" (262).

Reverzy argues in her postface that these writers should be repositioned as innovative historical thinkers, torn between the "histoire résurrectionniste de Michelet et l'histoire positiviste" (278); as archivists of often under-appreciated documents, their works give voice to those whose words faded away.

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