

Vantine on les Goncourt, ed. Dufief (2004)

Goncourt, Edmond et Jules de. *Correspondance générale. Tome I (1843-1862)*. Édition établie, présentée et annotée par Pierre-Jean Dufief. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004. Pp. 707. ISBN 2-7453-0930

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“Qui révélera mieux que la lettre autographe la tête et le cœur de l’individu? ... Ce papier taché d’encre, c’est le greffe où est déposé l’âme humaine,” declare Edmond and Jules de Goncourt in the preface to their *Portraits intimes du XVIIIe siècle*. Pierre-Jean Dufief has begun the vast project of compiling the first edition of the Goncourt brothers’ own complete correspondence. Beyond the historical and literary value of the letters in this edition, it is a particularly appropriate addition to the existing publications by and about the Goncourts in light of their own passion for collecting and publishing letters, which they fetishized as uniquely expressive historical documents. Thus far only the first tome of the *Correspondance générale* has been published, covering a twenty-year span from 1843 to 1862. This volume begins to fill a considerable gap in Goncourt scholarship; previously, only a small portion of the brothers’ letters written to or received by over 1,400 correspondents has been published, as Dufief notes in his brief but useful introduction to the volume.

The period covered by this first tome includes 664 letters written or received by the Goncourts, of which several dozen pre-date the start of their literary career in December 1851 when — coinciding with Napoléon III’s coup d’état and the birth of the Second Empire — they published their first text (the enigmatic *fantaisiste* novel *En 18...*) and also began writing their *Journal*. Each year’s worth of letters is preceded by a short biographical chronology highlighting dates for that year that are of significance to the Goncourts’ personal life or work, or that are relevant to specific letters. Beginning with 1857, each grouping of a year’s letters is followed by a reproduction of the pages for that year from the Goncourts’ *Carnet d’achats*, which lists the name or description of each work of art they purchased, the name of the artist, and the price they paid. Dufief justifies the inclusion of these records by stating that an author’s complete correspondence is now conceived as a kind of “archive,” and indeed, since the *Carnet* is not otherwise available in published form, it is a valuable addition that has been coherently integrated into the chronological organization of the *Correspondance*. Likewise, the volume includes a wealth of paratextual tools that will allow scholars to use this edition of the Goncourts’ letters more fully and efficiently. There are copious, detailed annotations. There are also multiple indexes: an index of correspondents (with concise, informative biographical notices), of names cited in the correspondence, of newspapers and other periodicals cited, and of the Goncourts’ works cited. Finally, there is a chronological table of letters that gives the date as well as the name of the author and the recipient for each letter. This last feature makes it particularly easy to identify those correspondents with whom the Goncourts most actively exchanged letters during a given period, and it also clearly reveals the fact that Jules penned far more of the brothers’ letters until his death (though this fact in no way precludes the probable collaboration of the brothers on many letters, which—like their *Journal*—often evoke the plural “on” and “nous”). In the years covered by this first tome, their correspondents include art collectors and dealers; editors such as Dentu, Poulet-Malassis, and Levy; artists such as Gavarni and Nadar; and literary figures such as Janin, Banville, Sand, Hugo, Saint-Beuve and Flaubert.

Like the Goncourts’ infamous *Journal*, their rich and extensive correspondence sheds light on the fascinating dynamic between, on the one hand, the brothers’ tightly intertwined personal lives and their artistic collaboration, and, on the other hand, their distinct personalities. One early letter in particular (May 12, 1846) reveals Edmond’s paternalistic affection for an adolescent Jules, who was seven years his younger. The inseparable character of their fraternal relationship is often conveyed in their closing salutations addressed to close friends such as Flaubert: for example, “nous mettons nos quatre mains dans les deux vôtres” (September 24, 1861) or “Les deux frères vous serrent vos deux mains” (July 7, 1862). Multiple early letters show them searching for their vocation, with Edmond complaining of his work first as a law clerk (like Balzac before him) then as a civil servant at the Caisse Centrale du Trésor, and Jules, still a student, enthusiastically describing various literary projects and including long passages of dramatic verse in several letters. Jules’s verve and humor, which also mark the brothers’ earliest novels, are apparent in many letters to friends from 1848 onward. Later letters provide insight into the genesis, elaboration, and reception of their works of fiction, journalism, historiography, biography, and art criticism. Needless to say, their correspondence also documents (albeit from a highly subjective perspective) the historical and cultural context of the entire second half of the nineteenth century in France. Finally, the intertextual play between the Goncourts’ *Journal* and their letters is a subject worthy of a separate study. Although this edition does duplicate some previously published letters, its comprehensive nature and its array of meticulously prepared supporting material make it a highly valuable contribution to the field of nineteenth-century studies. Along with Honoré Champion’s ongoing publication of a new critical edition of the *Journal* under the direction of Jean-Louis Cabanès, Dufief’s edition of the *Correspondance générale* will become an indispensable resource for any scholar working on the diverse writings of the Goncourt brothers.

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