

THE DECLINE OF THE DIARY

BY PAUL BOURGET

[This essay by the distinguished French novelist and academician was in part called forth by the controversy aroused in Paris over the refusal on the part of the members of the Académie Goncourt to print the unpublished portions of Edmond de Goncourt's diary. According to the terms of the Goncourt Foundation this should have been done in 1916. M. Bourget's essay has added point for English-speaking readers because of the interest aroused by Margot Asquith, an additional volume of which is to be issued presently.]

From *L'Illustration*, September 17
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OUGHT the unpublished pages of the *Journal des Goncourt* to be published or not? The reply to this question has set a good deal of ink to flowing.

I suppose that those who are faithful to the memories of the authors of *Madame Gervaisais*, among whom I am enrolled, do not concern themselves very vehemently either for or against it. They know in advance that the new volumes of the journal will add themselves to the rest, to be placed on the shelf in the library and not to be opened very often. It is the weak part of the work of the two brothers, — let us not separate them even in the survival of the elder, — this memorandum of impressions, which, we must often admit, are without significance, unverified bits of gossip, and sketches of literary figures, conscientious, but without any great resemblance. The Goncourts were original novelists, however they may have lacked one of the essential qualities of narrative — movement. The mosaics which they composed will remain a very interesting artistic effort, and their influence will have been powerful, if not always beneficial, upon the whole school of French story-tellers of the last fifty years.

As historians, they were no less original, and their success was even greater.

Their monographs on the eighteenth century are definitive. It is impossible not to like their style. One cannot deny them a certain nervous force, and especially one cannot deny a personality of remarkable vigor. It is a made style, — such an unusual thing! — as individual as the sound of a voice or a glance. It seems that the *journal intime* of these writers ought to have been their masterpiece, but it is exactly the opposite. I shall try to show why, by stating a problem in general terms, in order to show what an element of degeneration the present abuse of this *journal* seems to represent for literature.

On all sides we get announcements of these intimate diaries. Scarcely has there been talk of this one of the Goncourts, when we are advised of the existence of an enormous unpublished manuscript by Amiel. The literary summaries printed in the grand reviews are constantly revealing others. They are heaping up among the war-books that have appeared since the Armistice, and this frequency permits the conclusion that there is after all nothing here but a fashion. Yet is not a fashion itself a precious document for the understanding of a period, and is it not a highly significant trait of the psychology of our time which is thus revealing itself?

Go back one hundred and fifty years, into the age which was *par excellence* that of the literature of moral analysis. I mean our seventeenth century. Was there a single one of the great writers of that time who kept a *journal intime*? La Bruyère, it seems, and La Rochefoucauld were altogether marked out by the nature of their spirits for such a task. One wrote the *Caractères* and the other wrote the *Maximes*. It is not difficult to distinguish beneath their observation a high degree of emotional sensitiveness; but they have shown us nothing by impressions from which the personal touch has been abstracted. Perhaps, if one may say so, they show that same discipline of self-effacement which was equally Pascal's. 'The ego is hateful,' Pascal wrote; and Port-Royal offers this testimony with regard to him: 'M. Pascal carried this rule of not speaking of himself so far as to pretend that a good man ought to avoid naming himself and ought not even to make use of the words "I" and "me."' The same silence with regard to themselves appears in Racine, in Molière, in La Fontaine. Those of their contemporaries or their predecessors who broke silence at least kept no journals. They composed memoirs.

There is a great difference between these two kinds of writing. The writer of memoirs, like Montluc, Retz, and Gourville, — I take these names at random among fifty others, — is a kind of historian. He brings testimony with regard to events in which he has taken part, at an age when the hour of repose has struck for him. 'I shall begin by saying that I have entered my seventy-eighth year,' says Gourville; and Cardinal de Retz: 'Madame, whatever repugnance I may have in giving to you the history of my life, which has been disturbed by so many different adventures —'; and Montluc: 'Having retired to my home at the age of sixty-five, to find some repose after the many sor-

rows which I have suffered, I desire to spend the time that remains to me in describing the combats in which I have been involved during fifty-two years.'

First a man did something, then he told about it. It is the same way with reality. Life has placed in him some images which spring up again by the instinctive and spontaneous working of memory. He copies his images, and he thinks that he ought to excuse himself from arguing that his witnessing will permit him to understand better the events he regards as important.

While they were alive, these writers of memoirs did not watch themselves live. They did not sit by the window — as a philosopher says in defining the abuse of introspection — to watch themselves go by in the street. If they permitted themselves introspection, it was to devote themselves to prayer, which it would be interesting to define here, since it represents the salutary and normal exercise of the faculty of which the *journal intime* (understood in the modern fashion of the Goncourts and of Amiel) is the disease. Need we recall the well-known passage of M. Renan in his *Souvenirs de jeunesse* about the old priest of Saint-Sulpice, listening to the reading of a sitting of the Chamber of Deputies after 1830: — 'It is easy to see, my friend, that these chaps don't pray.' Renan continued: 'His sentence has lately come back to my mind in regard to certain discourses. How many things are explained by the fact that very probably M. Clemenceau does not pray.'

Prayer is the turning of the human being upon himself, with a will directed to improving his condition. The look into his own soul is nothing but a means; in the *journal intime* it is an end. All the difference in the world is there. For men of the seventeenth century, to study one's self was to repent. In the outline of a sermon, Bossuet says magnificently, 'All the wounds of the soul must be

healed by sorrow and, in consequence, all the wounds must be known.' The first book of the *Traité de l'Oraison*, by Nicole, has for its title, 'That Thoughts Alone are not Prayer.' In what light would men of this stamp have regarded one of their associates who came to tell them,—

Every evening I sit at my table to analyze systematically the very least sensation of the day. All the changes of my temper, I examine solicitously, my smallest crosses as well as my most insignificant joys. The more peculiar they are, the more I am pleased. All those whom I have encountered, relatives and friends, as well as outsiders, I mark down just as they have appeared to me. The words that they have uttered, when they were opening their hearts to me, I put down scrupulously. It is not public events that interest me; it is these trifling anecdotes, which I gather from the intimacy of one man or another. I never go out from my home except to gather up greater stories. I never come back except to heap up my treasury of little notes, and so, to pick apart my nerves, fibre by fibre, and to note it down, always to note it down.

This is a good place to recall Pascal and the conclusion of his terrible page on the hateful ego. 'I hate it because it is unjust, because it makes itself the centre of everything. I shall hate it forever.'

Let us admit that there is a little Jan- senism in this conclusion. The sweeping condemnation of nature, here as so often in the *Pensées*, pushes to extremes a reaction, wise enough in itself, against that disposition that the medical language of to-day calls by a term in which Pascal's very phrase reappears, though made a little more barbarous: *egotocentrism*.

But let us confine ourselves to the psychology of the writer of a *journal intime*, who is describing the material of his reflection. The ego described by him ceases to be detestable when these confessions, made with pen in hand, are

torn from a sorrow which in some ways comforts itself, from an anxiety which does not know how to deceive itself, and we have the *journal intime* of Benjamin Constant, *Mon coeur mis à nu* of Baudelaire, *Brulard* of Stendhal, and the *Memoranda* of Byron, preserved by Moore.

These are genuine pages of egotism, but they were not composed from this standpoint deliberately. We are not here confronted with the complaisance of a self-hypnotized vanity, in front of its own image, like Narcissus in the Greek myth. (What a symbol, and how just, of the destruction of the vain by their own vanity!) Constant is a victim of a torturing sentimental dualism. He diverts his suffering by crying out with his pain in his hands. Baudelaire agonizes in his misery over the destiny denied him. His journal, too, is only a cry. Beyle seeks to apply an anesthetic to the suffering which tormented all his life, by trying to understand himself better. 'I do not understand myself, and that is what tortures me in the night when I think of it.' As for Byron, *Astarte*, the lamentable document published by his grandson, Lord Lovelace, has told us too much about the inner drama which he hid beneath his daily confidences. He did not concern himself with a deliberate and systematic system of notation, like that of which the Goncourt brothers afford example, and the fundamental error of which we shall find in their case.

That error is the diminution, the progressive paralysis, of emotion by this very notation. The two brothers said and believed that they had made their nervous system more delicately sensitive by this uninterrupted work of intimate analysis; but when one runs through their journal, one is astonished at the absence of emotion, at the insignificance — one must repeat the word — the insignificance of the impressions that

are registered. The cause lies in the lack of abandon to the hour or minute, in this continual recollection, which strangles all spontaneity and all self-forgetfulness. These so-called 'observers' were never alive, for the very simple reason that they never let themselves live. A profound and direct consequence of this emotional paralysis is the impossibility of representing the emotions of others. The old proverb, *Homo sum, et humani nihil a me alienum puto*, ought to be translated: 'It is through my own humanity that I understand the humanity of others.' Goethe said the same thing in different words: 'What you do not carry in yourself, you cannot receive.'

Nobody who associated with the Goncourts could have any doubt about their perfect intellectual honesty. For my part, I knew only the elder, Edmond. It was impossible to approach him without respect, and when we read in his journals such statements as this: 'At bottom there are only two things in us to envy, our love and our honor,' we, who were witnesses of his old age, agree with these two brothers in their youth, and say: 'That is true.' So it is certain that the notes in the *Journal* were taken with a deliberate and uncompromising conscience, and that in transcribing in the evening their daily meetings with Sainte-Beuve, Taine, or Renan, they told the truth as they saw it. Put these sketches together. A Sainte-Beuve, a Taine, and Renan stand out, but as such men that, if they had been as they are described in the *Journal*, neither the *Lundis* nor the *Origines* nor the *Souvenirs d'Enfance* would ever have been written. Now, these books actually were written. Well, then, there must have been in these personalities a force which the writers of the *Journal* were unable to see.

This is the test to which a careful critic ought to submit all the information about great men. This testimony may help us to understand why these

men were great. Were not these three writers, whose names I have just mentioned, the friends of the Goncourts? What about Flaubert — that associate whom they loved and admired, of whom they said — and on this point they only did him justice — that he was one of those rare artists devoted to 'pure literature and never wrote books except to satisfy himself'? Did they know him any better than the others? They complained about his 'aggressive and sanguine health!' They did not even know how to see the physical and moral distress of the poor giant, haunted without ceasing by the terror of his dreadful *comital* sickness. They found him 'hard on the nerves,' when it was he whose nerves were afflicted — and with what an affliction! Such blunders show how incapable these maniacs of the *journal intime* had become of looking about objectively. They saw other people only as parts themselves, of their own narrow egoism, and they failed to understand them.

Different as the Geneva professor was from the Goncourts by spirit, education, and career, there would be no great difficulty in showing the same harmful intoxication, in the case of Amiel. Only Amiel knew himself better.

He was not deceived as to his limitations. 'Other people seem like dreams to me,' he groaned.

I said earlier in this paper that the abuse of the *journal intime* represents a danger for literature. There is the danger, — in this incapacity to escape from self, which ends in the narrowing of the vision of society and in draining away of the imagination. When one regards closely the productions of the young writers of to-day, one is amazed at the great number of them and the narrow range of their subjects. They do not even seem to suspect that there is a great world to examine and depict. They are too often sensitive to an amazing degree in expression, and yet

at the same time characterized by an extraordinary poverty of observation. Am I mistaken in attributing this lessening of the sense for character, this absence of large contact with life, and of the passion for largeness among these young writers, to the *journal intime*?

In literature as in science, the first condition for thinking and making other people think is a varied and rich experience, and this experience must be taken humbly by a spirit that yields itself to facts, that does not impose a preconceived formula upon itself. The *journal intime*, in exaggerating consciousness of their own personality in those who keep it, ends by becoming the most effective agent of that mental stereotyping which consists in never seeing anything but your own ideas. It is the final and most morbid variety of individualism, that other malady which is so frequent in our time, and by which the Goncourt brothers, like Amiel, were profoundly contaminated.

It is proper, when one is talking about professional literary men, not to exaggerate the oddities of their intelligence, if they have them. Their work is related to great general causes, but it shows them only indirectly and through the medium of all kinds of private influences, of which we must take serious account. In the case of Amiel, for example, the contrast between the air of the city where he taught and that of the German universities where he passed the best years of his youth, explains why he underwent an intense feeling of solitude, and why he has taken to the written monologue. One might show in the same way what a trial their intellectual situation in the literary world of the Second Empire must have been for the Goncourts. Viewed in this light, their novel, *Charles Demailly*, is a revelation by the very *naïveté* and poverty of its perspectives.

It remains true, none the less, that this process of adaptation to their surroundings, which is the law of life, was rendered more difficult to all of them — the literary men of Paris and the professor at Geneva alike — by the daily introspection which their journals represent. Each became unsocial in the original sense of the word: a man who does not and who cannot become part of a society. 'Society: a permanent association of men living according to common laws,' says the dictionary. Not only written laws are concerned here, but also those of which the Goncourts recognized the imperative value when they talked of the 'honor.' And the newspapers have just told us that the unpublished parts of Amiel's *Journal* include the very strictest observations on his friends and likewise on himself. Is that true?

Undoubtedly, the unpublished part of the *Journal* of the Goncourts contains notes certainly cruel for the living or for the dead, whose close relatives are still alive. The difficulties that have been made over their publication prove it. I am convinced — in view of the lack of critical acumen so constant in the two brothers, and especially in Edmond, the elder — that these notes will not disturb those whom they concern; that the tittle-tattle in their third volume will not hurt our admirable Sainte-Beuve. What good will these notes do us? Perhaps gossip like that about the Magny dinner in confidential intimacy — and to repeat such things is to betray confidence; or else stories of uncontrolled spitefulness — and to collect them in order to perpetuate them is a process which is rather disconcerting, coming from literary gentlemen such as the Goncourts.

The explanation of this anomaly is that they thought that they ought to write thus, — strange as this word may appear, — because of a duty. Toward

whom? Toward their *Journal* and to serve the truth — this very truth which the hypnotism of that *Journal* constantly kept them from telling. It is a curious piece of irony, and it contains a great lesson. Fortunately for the memory of the Goncourt brothers,

they wrote other books which this mania for note-taking has not been able to spoil. But it has lessened their value. One can only say how great a pity it is, when one thinks of the good faith, the fervor, and the gift for expression of these two brothers.

DEFENDING THE PHILIPPINES

BY VICE-ADMIRAL MARK KERR, C.B., M.V.O.

[The writer of this article besides being a vice-admiral of the British navy, held the rank of major-general in the Royal Air forces during the war. For this reason he may fairly be regarded as a non-partisan in any discussion concerning the relative importance of air-ships and battle-fleets in future wars.]

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SINCE last February, when I pointed out the apparent impossibility of battle-fleets being able to operate against an enemy when far from their own home bases, I have had the advantage of a long conversation with that far-seeing great sailor, Admiral Sims, of the United States Navy, and I was glad to find that we agreed on that subject, and on the future methods of naval warfare.

The report that has just been issued by the Joint Commission of Navy and Army officers on the recent bombing of warships by the U.S. Air Service has only emphasized the experience gained in the late war, namely, that it is extremely difficult to hit a moving ship with a bomb dropped from a considerable height in the air. I was in a monitor in the Gulf of Trieste when she was bombed for thirty-five minutes by a continual stream of Karpa flying-boats, each carrying three bombs, and flying at a height of only 900 feet. They

registered only one hit, although the monitor was steaming at the slow speed of six knots an hour. The real danger to the battleship from the air comes from the 21-inch Whitehead torpedo which is dropped into the water and makes its run in the same way as if it were fired from a submarine or destroyer. Smoke-bombs will generally be used in the future before such an attack, to make a screen behind which the torpedo-carrying plane can remain concealed until the moment has arrived for discharging its missile.

In view of the coming Conference in Washington, it is interesting to pursue this subject further and to examine the best mode of defense for the islands of the Pacific and Australia against enemy attack; so let us take a concrete case and examine the problem of the defense of the Philippine Islands, the American colony in the Western Pacific. This group of islands, which is 800 sea miles