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Censoring/Censuring the Press under the Second Empire: The Goncourts as Journalists and *Charles Demailly*

PETER VANTINE

This article examines Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's critique of Napoleon III's strict control of the press, as expressed through the narrative discourse in *Charles Demailly* (1860–1868). The novel is informed by the brothers' brief career as journalists, which they abandoned after being censored. Their text suggests that political censorship under the Second Empire's authoritarian regime is responsible for contaminating literary criticism with covert political polemics and for turning the non-political *petits journaux* into trivial scandalmongers that debase the literary field and the public rather than building on the alleged intellectual and artistic gains of the 1830s. The narrator also blames the public for its complicity in the shameless but popular practices of such papers. Yet, through the authors' experiment with journalism as well as their critique of the press in the novel, we can discern an acknowledgement of their dependence on the public and a condescending but genuine desire to influence the public.

In the preface to the second part of *Illusions perdues* (1839), which depicts the world of Parisian journalism, Balzac declares: "Les mœurs du Journal constituent un de ces sujets immenses qui veulent plus d'un livre et plus d'une préface" (729). Indeed, a tremendous array of journalistic, literary, and historical texts spanning the nineteenth century attempted to portray, examine, define and question what contemporary scholars have identified as the birth of the "civilisation du journal," the "ère médiatique," and the "imaginaire médiatique."¹ Along with Balzac's novel and Maupassant's later *Bel-Ami* (1885), Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's novel *Charles Demailly* (1860–1868) is among the most complex and polemical fictional texts of the period on this contentious topic. It is a virulent critique of journalism in mid-nineteenth-century France, and especially of the *petite presse*. The Goncourt brothers' novel owes an obvious debt to Balzac's precedent,

but it is also informed and inspired by their own short-lived career as journalists, which was brought to an abrupt end by censors. Although recent scholarship on literature and the press in the nineteenth century has brought renewed attention to *Charles Demailly*, this essay will focus on the heretofore underexplored arguments that the novel's narrative discourse makes against the harsh controls to which the press was subjected under Napoleon III's regime as well as the further degradation of the press, which was perpetuated by its own practices. Just as Balzac's fictional portrayal of journalism is anchored in the political and literary context of the Restoration, in *Charles Demailly* the Goncourts assess the situation of the press in the historical and cultural context of the early Second Empire. Specifically, as I will demonstrate, the novel postulates a causal connection between censorship under the Second Empire's authoritarian regime and a regression in the nature of the *petite presse*, with repercussions for society as a whole and for the world of letters in particular. In describing the inextricable links between political authority, the press, public opinion and the world of letters within the novel, the Goncourts suggest that strict censorship under the Second Empire changed newspapers into petty rumor mills and shameless scandalmongers, infecting journalism—including literary criticism—with insidious triviality, thereby debasing literature and the public. The Goncourts are often disparaging toward the popular classes, the bourgeoisie, and the amorphous “public” more generally both in their novels and *Journal*. However, their foray into journalism and their subsequent critique of journalism in *Charles Demailly* reflect an acknowledgement of their dependence on the public, a desire to reach a broad public, and the belief that the public may be either corrupted through the texts they read by a vacuous yet vicious form of journalism, or improved through intellectually and aesthetically ambitious journalism and literature.

FROM JOURNALISTS AND CRITICS TO CRITICS OF JOURNALISM

Like most authors of the period, the Goncourt brothers were also journalists, though their career in the press was short lived. Their first novel, an eccentric *roman fantaisiste* entitled *En 18 . . .*, went virtually unnoticed by critics and the public alike upon its publication on 5 Dec. 1851. In addition to the book being overshadowed by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's coup d'état, the printer Gerdès burned all the posters that had been printed to publicize the novel, fearing that the enigmatic title might be interpreted as a reference to the “18 Brumaire.”² Thus, the Goncourts' literary début was marked by a form of censorship driven by the abrupt change in political regime. They subsequently abandoned any attempt to write a novel for nearly ten

years. For a period of fifteen months, from January 1852 to April 1853, the brothers collaborated on two literary newspapers founded by their wealthy cousin Charles de Villedeuil—a weekly, *L'Éclair*, and a daily, *Paris*.³ Many authors of the nineteenth century invested themselves to varying degrees in the journalistic enterprises with which they were associated, and Marie-Françoise Melmoux-Montaubin's evocation of a certain category of writer is an apt description of the Goncourts' intense but brief involvement with *L'Éclair* and *Paris*: “Plus que des écrivains journalistes à proprement parler, ce ne sont guère que des écrivains qui, au hasard des circonstances, ont été amenés à écrire dans le journal” (*L'Écrivain-journaliste* 10). Nevertheless, in this capacity Edmond and Jules wrote over a hundred articles, including numerous theater and book reviews, short stories as *fantaisies*, literary portraits, a few theatrical scenes, and several prose poems.

At this stage in their career, the Goncourts sought to use the press to gain recognition. In a letter to their relative Léonidas Labille from 11 Jan. 1852, Jules insists that *L'Éclair* is a literary review that “n'est point faite dans nos idées ni dans notre style,” but that they nonetheless were contributing to it for one basic reason: “Pour être édité et lu. Pourvu qu'on étale, qu'importe l'étalage. Cette petite revue va être très répandue. [. . .] et le public, ce flâneur de public, nous fera plus de réputation avec ces articles de genre, qu'avec notre petit volume consciencieux et travaillé [*En 18 . . .*]” (*Correspondance* 1: 149). Unlike so many others, Edmond and Jules did not become journalists out of economic necessity. They had inherited sufficient means to live comfortably without additional revenue and had therefore decided early on to dedicate themselves to their artistic and literary endeavors. Yet like other writers of their time, they hoped to create a reputation for themselves through the exposure provided by the press, which had considerable influence over public opinion by the mid-nineteenth century. As *Charles Demailly* shows, the brothers were fully conscious that, as Adeline Wrona points out, “à l'heure de l'industrialisation de la culture, quand le journal devient peu à peu un medium [*sic*] de masse, quand le livre, avec les collections à bon marché, devient un bien de consommation courante, quand enfin la reconnaissance académique ne peut suffire à la consécration artistique, alors l'écrivain se voit livré inévitablement à son public” (xiii). In spite of their financial independence, the significant degree of artistic freedom it afforded them, and the aesthetic ideals they repeatedly proclaim throughout their *Journal*, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt were not focused solely on some hypothetical, ideal reader of the present or future (although over time they became increasingly preoccupied with their literary legacy). They were eager to attract the attention of their contemporaries, particularly as they

initially tried to establish themselves in the literary field, and the press was a potentially effective means of doing so—though it was not without risks.

Indeed, the Goncourts experienced one of the fundamental realities of journalism under the Second Empire when the censor deemed their article “Du n° 43 de la rue Saint-George au n° 1 de la rue Lafitte” (*Paris*, 15 Dec. 1852) to be too licentious due to five lines of erotic poetry quoted from Tahureau, which the brothers took from Saint-Beuve’s *Tableau de la Poésie au XVI^e siècle*. Like Flaubert and Baudelaire after them, though also like countless journalists throughout the period, the authors were tried before the correctional tribunal for “outrage à la morale publique.” Vincent Robert notes: “rares étaient, avant 1881, les hommes de presse qui n’avaient pas eu un jour ou l’autre des comptes à rendre devant un tribunal” (69). The Goncourts were acquitted with a reprimand (“acquittés, mais blâmés”) on 19 Feb. 1853, but they remained disgusted with the Second Empire’s authoritarian regime and fearful of the censor and the courts (*Journal* 1: 112). This episode largely put an end to their brief stint as journalists. Their fear of government censorship inspired by their trial would be lasting, such that even as late as 1877 Edmond self-censored his novel about a prostitute, *La Fille Élisa*, to avoid being dragged to court for it.⁴

In 1856–57, inspired in part by their anger at the mocking reception in the press of a novella, *Les Actrices*, and a collection of stories they had published, *Une voiture de masques*, the Goncourts first wrote a play entitled *Les Hommes de lettres* satirizing the world of the *petite presse* and attacking *la bohème*, which at that time referred to the bohemian class of writers who served as editors and authors at periodicals specializing in rumors and scandals, and who lived day to day off the pittance they earned for their articles exalting or lambasting the latest actress, painter, poet or novelist. After the play was refused by two theaters, the *Gymnase* and the *Vaudeville*, the brothers chose to transform it into a novel with the same title. The original title *Les Hommes de lettres* is ambiguous. By the 1850s, in contrast to the more highly valorized terms “écrivain” and “artiste,” the expression “homme de lettres” designated “un professionnel de l’écriture [. . .] les journalistes, publicistes et autres critiques qui gravitent autour de toutes les formes d’écriture salariée” (Wrona iii). This is the operative connotation in the protagonist’s improvised *saynète* “Catéchisme de l’homme de lettres” early in the novel.⁵ Yet elsewhere in the novel, as José-Luis Diaz has noted, the authors use the term in a positive sense to designate: “des gens sérieux, qui s’investissent à plein dans une œuvre, s’y absorbent, se sacrifient pour elle. Leurs hommes de lettres sont aux antipodes de la relativité bouffonne et opportuniste des acrobates de Petit Journal” (70). In contrast, the Goncourts’ use of the epithet *bohème* is pointedly pejorative throughout the novel. By the 1830s, the appellation “bohème” had come to

be applied above all to artists and connoted “un gracieux excentrique, vivant de peu, professant le détachement vis-à-vis de l’ordre bourgeois, auquel il préfère le culte de l’art et de la liberté,” but by mid-century the term and the images it evoked had become “à la fois un cliché et la désignation d’une réalité qui fait office de repoussoir” (Wrona iii–iv).⁶

Given the unflattering portrayal of the press in the Goncourts’ novel, it is not surprising that the wealthy banker Félix Solar, who directed the popular newspaper *La Presse* at the time, decided not to serialize it despite the previous announcement in March 1859 that the daily would publish it under the title *Charles Demailly* in the *feuilleton* section (Wagneur and Cestor 15). According to the Goncourts’ *Journal*, this reversal was due to pressure exerted by a journalist at *La Presse*, Adolphe Gaïffe (their former colleague at the newspaper *Paris*), after he realized that he had been satirized in their novel (13 Apr. 1859, 2: 220–21). The authors were ultimately forced to publish it at their own expense; and even then, editors Michel Lévy and Amyot did not dare publish a novel that denounced the press’s considerable influence over public opinion and exposed the commercial ties between newspapers and book publishers. In particular, they were afraid of crossing the powerful Hippolyte de Villemessant of *Le Figaro*, the model for the novel’s fictional journal editor. Edmond and Jules complain about the situation in their *Journal*, emphasizing “ce sentiment dont parle Balzac dans la préface des *Illusions perdues*: la presse, qui parle de tout et de tous, ne voulant point qu’on parle d’elle et se proclamant hors le roman, hors l’histoire, hors la loi de l’observation” (13 Apr. 1859, 2: 220–21). In other words, as with their first novel, the Goncourts’ literary work was again effectively subjected to a form of self-censorship from within the publishing community itself that also reflects the broader context of control and censorship during the Second Empire. Ultimately, a third editor, Dentu, agreed to publish the book in 1860. Predictably, several contemporary critics—the text’s primary targets—duly eviscerated the novel, while others reduced its impact by ignoring it. For the second edition in 1868, the Goncourts changed the novel’s title to *Charles Demailly*.⁷

The novel can be divided into four segments. The opening portion of the novel, which is the focus of the present study, depicts the world of the *petite presse* by focusing on a handful of journalists who, along with the protagonist Charles, work for a newspaper named *Le Scandale*. We follow this irreverent band of writers for a day from their office to a café, a bar, a bookstore, a bohemian soirée, a masked ball, and a restaurant. In the second section, the protagonist leaves the petty polemics and ephemeral articles of *Le Scandale* to write a novel entitled *La Bourgeoisie*. These chapters present the physical and mental aspects of the writing process for the “romancier

social” Charles, the concept and content of his novel, and then how his work is received by the public, by the press, and by a group of fellow artists (100). The third and longest segment of the novel concerns Charles’s suffering as a beleaguered husband after he marries an actress, Marthe, for whom he writes a theatrical *féerie* but who proves to be vain, cold-hearted, and vengeful. In the final chapters of the book, Charles is manipulated and humiliated by his wife and by jealous former colleagues from *Le Scandale*. He abandons his literary ambitions and descends into madness.

THE PRESS UNDER THE SECOND EMPIRE

Before I examine the Goncourts’ fictional portrayal of the press, it is necessary to first recall the situation of the press in the 1850s, given the importance of this historical and cultural context in *Charles Demailly*.⁸ The press passed from a brief period of great liberty at the start of the Second Republic to one of severe constraints several months later due to fears provoked by social unrest in June 1848 (Feyel 78). These constraints were then reaffirmed and multiplied with Napoleon III’s coup d’état in 1851 and the establishment of the Second Empire in 1852—strict surveillance of the press was likewise a feature of the First Empire under Napoleon I. One form of governmental control was financial; for instance, a *timbre fiscal* had to be purchased and placed on each printed copy of a newspaper. The *cautionnement*—initially instituted as part of the June 1819 “lois de Serre” (Feyel 78)—was a large sum of money that a newspaper director was required to deposit with the administration in order to found a journal that was allowed to discuss political issues. This sum served to pay any potential fines resulting from legal proceedings against the paper, and the sum had to remain complete if the paper wished to continue publication. Hence, the government could financially drain a newspaper and force it to disappear by dragging it from trial to trial. Moreover, even if a newspaper could ultimately be a very profitable enterprise, the substantial financial burden of the *cautionnement* ensured that relatively few people could afford to publish a newspaper in the first place. Similarly, in addition to being a source of revenue for the government, the *timbre fiscal* directly contributed to raising the cost of newspapers, thereby making them less readily accessible to those of limited means. Such financial measures were seen as necessary “garanties sociales” (Robert 81) that allowed governments “non seulement de contrôler et de censurer le contenu des journaux, mais aussi d’en limiter le nombre et la diffusion” (Lyon-Caen 31).

Between August 1848 and July 1850, the government defined new press crimes and reestablished both the *timbre* and the *cautionnement*, which had been eliminated at the start of the Second Republic. Furthermore, with the

Tinguy-Laboulie law of 1850, the *Assemblée nationale* required every article to be signed by the journalist who penned it. This crucial change forced journalists out of the realm of anonymity, both exposing them to lawsuits from the authorities and giving them the possibility of gaining recognition from their readers. It was precisely such recognition that the Goncourts were seeking through the press, though they did not particularly attain it, becoming instead victims of the restrictive authority of the law.

After having orchestrated his coup d'état in December 1851 and transformed the Second Republic into the Second Empire, and himself from President to dictator in the guise of Emperor, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte swiftly suppressed all Republican papers and returned all trials against the press to the more severe *tribunal correctionnel*, judged solely by magistrates, as opposed to the more lenient *jury d'assises* put in place by the Second Republic. The strict controls of the Second Empire aggressively limited freedom of the press. In 1852, beyond the financial burdens already noted, a series of decrees reestablished various measures that included *l'autorisation préalable*, a requirement whereby official government authorization was a precondition for the founding of newspapers, which also were obliged to publish official communiqués for free in the first column of the front page. Conversely, they were forbidden from reporting on sessions of the legislature or on trials against the press, and it was understood that legislation concerning the press was not to be discussed within its pages. In other words, "l'ensemble du système de contrôle de l'information par le pouvoir devait rester dans l'ombre" (Robert 80). The government also put in place a system of warnings, or *avertissements*, and penalties whose highly arbitrary nature encouraged self-censorship (Feyel 79–80). The full list of such repressive regulations, fees, and modes of surveillance is quite extensive;⁹ a perfect illustration of official political censorship imposed by Napoleon III's government and of the corollary self-censorship it prompted can be found in issue 345 of *Paris* (4 Oct. 1853). At the top of the first column on the front page, before the lead article, there is a note from the *propriétaire gérant* E. Le Barbier:

Nous devons comparaître demain devant la 6^e chambre du tribunal correctionnel, pour répondre à l'accusation d'avoir traité de matière politique sans cautionnement, et d'avoir excité à la haine et au mépris du Gouvernement: ce double délit existerait dans un passage des *Guêpes* de M. Alphonse Karr.

Bien loin de rechercher le bénéfice douteux d'une opposition contre le Gouvernement, nous nous faisons un devoir de déclarer que nous mettons un soin constant et loyal à épurer notre feuille de toute allusion politique, et que s'il nous avait paru que le passage incriminé contint le

sentiment fâcheux que le parquet a cru y voir, nous l'eussions repoussé sans la moindre hésitation.

This second trial occurred eight months after the Goncourts had been reprimanded by the court and then left the paper, and Karr had in fact been a defendant in the first trial as well.¹⁰ The paper was ultimately suppressed as a result of the second trial.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant style of journalism was not based on reporting or on the gathering of news presented as objective. From the Restoration to the July Monarchy and the Second Republic, French journalism was militant. In terms of both quantity and importance, opinion and commentary far outweighed informational news about the current events that prompted such commentary. Subsequently, necessary self-censorship under the Second Empire prevented overt, pronounced political engagement, at least until 1868 when some measures of control were relaxed after nearly two decades of highly repressive measures (Feyel 108). Unable to express freely their political positions under Napoleon III, the dozen or so *grands journaux* were forced to adapt. Journalists deployed ingenuity and subtlety in working around government-imposed constraints by disguising their political views as aesthetic debates, often in the theater reviews that were regularly published in the *feuilleton* (or *rez-de-chaussée*) section. Moreover, there was a belief broadly shared in the nineteenth century that “le littéraire et le politique sont intimement liés, qu’ils représentent les deux dimensions complémentaires de l’action collective” (Vaillant, “La Presse littéraire” 319). Putting aside political and aesthetic convictions, on an economic level, “la taxation de la presse conduit les journaux à multiplier les polémiques pour s’attacher un abonné” (Lyon-Caen 38). Such polemical, politically-laden literary journalism was, however, significantly less remarkable for its actual contributions to an appreciation or understanding of the world of arts and letters by the broader public.

Nevertheless, because French literary publishing houses had been dramatically weakened by the upheaval of the Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and then severely repressed and regulated during the first Empire, they remained weak throughout the nineteenth century. Consequently, it was the press that served as “le principal vecteur de diffusion littéraire [qui . . .], à ce titre, a directement influé sur les évolutions esthétiques des écrivains” (Vaillant, “La Presse littéraire” 318). Specifically, literary and artistic criticism, as well as literary texts themselves, appeared in the *feuilletons* of dailies as well as in eclectic intellectual *revues*, in publications dedicated to aesthetic questions, and in less serious form within satirical periodicals.

These various forms of literary journals and reviews were but one part of the prolific non-political *petite presse*, which included over a hundred agricultural, scientific, religious, professional, financial, women's, children's, social, artistic, and other periodicals (Bellanger 2: 283–96). Many of these sometimes short-lived publications were sold at very low prices to increase readership. The most popular were those that provided news of contemporary Parisian life, under the headings “courrier,” or “causerie” or “chroniques,” and in articles bubbling with wit whose sole aim was to entertain readers. The purpose of these consciously frivolous and *mondains* newspapers, as the Goncourts note in their *Journal*, was to “raconter tous les jours Paris à Paris” (7 Dec. 1857, 1: 479). This particular form of journalism was highly successful during the Second Empire:

les interdits pesant sur la presse politique expliquent surtout l'essor sans précédent d'une presse littéraire virtuose, volontiers ironique, spécialiste de la fausse innocence et du double discours. Souvent éphémère et vendue au numéro, cette presse chroniqueuse, potinière, narcissique et blagueuse et incarnée par *Le Figaro* repris par [Hippolyte de] Villemessant en 1854, mais aussi par quantité de petites feuilles parisiennes ou provinciales qui servent très souvent de paravent au bouillonnement politique de l'opposition politique. (Lyon-Caen 44–45)

The master of the genre and powerful publisher Villemessant, along with his widely-read paper *Le Figaro*, are the principal inspirations for the fictional newspaper director Montbaillard in the Goncourts' novel and the aptly titled newspaper *Le Scandale*. In addition to its overtly satirical connotation, this fictional periodical title alludes to the subtitle of the original *Figaro* paper (1826–1833): “journal littéraire / théâtre, critique, sciences, arts, mœurs, nouvelles, *scandale*, économie domestique, biographie, bibliographie, modes, etc., etc.” (emphasis added). This facet of the journal is also explicitly advertised in the description provided by the paper's prospectus of a specific rubric: “Sous le titre de bigarrures, un feuilleton contiendra la chronique littéraire, les nouvelles des sciences, des arts, les anecdotes des salons, les causeries, les *médisances*” (“Bigarrures,” *Figaro*, prospectus, 1 Jan. 1826, emphasis added). Although Villemessant's revived *Figaro* did not feature a subtitle or include overt references to scandals and slander in its inaugural issue, a similar spirit informed his paper and contributed to its success. Given the popularity of these non-political (and therefore nominally “literary”) newspapers by the 1850s, the narrator in *Charles Demailly* observes that the *petit journal* was “tout ce qu'il voulut être, un succès, une mode, un gouvernement, une bonne affaire” (30).

Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous and contradictory literary portraits of the press, mostly set in the Parisian universe, can be found in prefaces and pamphlets, satires and plays, panoramic literature and novels.¹¹ During the first decade of Napoleon III's reign, in addition to the Goncourts' *Charles Demailly* (1860), literary texts that take on the subject of the press to differing degrees include Champfleury's *Les Aventures de Mlle Mariette* (1853), Charles Monselet's *Monsieur de Cupidon* (1858), Aurélien Scholl's *La Foire aux artistes* (1858), Émile Augier's *Les Effrontés* (1861), and Armand de Pontmartin's *Les Jeudis de Mme Charbonneau* (1862). One generally finds two extreme visions of the press: one is diabolical, the other idealistic (Vaillant, "La Presse au miroir" 13). *Charles Demailly* almost exclusively evokes the first vision of journalism as a milieu of corruption, deceit, intellectual emptiness, and moral prostitution.

The Goncourts' novel, however, goes beyond other fictional works about the press written during the Second Empire by proposing an analysis of the causality between censorship and a regression in the nature of the *petite presse* with broad social and aesthetic implications. In *Illusions perdues*, Balzac's narrator summarizes the history of the press from 1816 to 1827, evoking fiscal constraints imposed by the government, the role of *cabinets de lecture*, the invention of advertisements, and the corrupting alliance between newspapers and booksellers (395–97). In the several dense pages that comprise chapter three of *Charles Demailly*, the Goncourts use an historical narrative style reminiscent of Balzac to outline a brief history of the *petite presse*, albeit with a chronological scope that differs from its Balzacian precursor both by reaching back to the eighteenth century and by extending forward up to the novel's setting in the early Second Empire.¹² The narrator describes this evolution from the Revolution of 1789, when it was a risky and unprofitable organ of political opposition, through the Restoration and July Monarchy, when readership was still limited and a journalist's notoriety remained anonymous, up to the 1850s, by which time it had become a dominant force in society: "Il faisait des fortunes, des noms, des influences, des positions, du bruit, des hommes,—et presque des grands hommes" (27). To bolster the persuasiveness of their analysis, the authors include precise historical details such as the titles of earlier periodicals (*La Chronique scandaleuse* of 1789, the *Thé* and the *Journal des Dix-huit* of the Directory) and subscription estimates ("dans les mains les plus habiles, de 800 à 1 200 abonnements," during the Restoration and July Monarchy) (27–28). They likewise specifically identify the Tinguay law (described above) as creating a culture of the press in which

an individual journalist could gain renown for his or her “personnalité littéraire” (28).

The narrator goes on to argue that the start of the Second Empire marked a turning point of political, intellectual, and artistic decline for the *petite presse*: “Mais, en 1852, la pensée publique, sevrée soudainement de ses émotions journalières, privée de tant de spectacles et tant de champs de bataille où se battaient ses colères et ses enthousiasmes, condamnée à la paix du silence après le bruit de toutes les guerres de la pensée, de l'éloquence, des ambitions après le tapage des partis politiques, littéraires, artistiques, des assemblées et des cénacles, la pensée publique, sans travail, était en grève” (28). The authors use the date and a metaphorical description formulated in the passive voice to evoke the new legal restrictions that Napoleon III imposed on the press, rather than describing them more literally or explicitly naming the central political agent who effected the change—perhaps to avoid provoking the ire of the regime. Nevertheless, the conjunction *mais* conveys a clear contrast with the preceding historical context, while the adverb *soudainement* emphasizes the abrupt nature of the change. The sequence of past participles (*sevrée . . . privée . . . condamnée . . .*) creates a crescendo of censure that is reinforced by the expanding length of the phrases following each subsequent past participle and by the increasing gravity of the loss implied by each phrase. The narrative voice implicates Napoleon III's government somewhat more directly, though still in figurative terms, when it adds, “La victoire des hommes et des choses du nouveau pouvoir, défendant à l'opinion l'accès des hauteurs et la région des orages, toute l'opinion tourna en curiosité” (28-29). When serious debate and the exchange of ideas are stifled through censorship, explains the narrator, the preoccupations of the press become frivolous and acerbically personal: “L'attention, les oreilles, les âmes, l'abonné, la société, tombèrent aux cancanes, aux médisances, aux calomnies, à la curée des basses anecdotes, à la savate des personnalités, aux lessives de linge sale, à la guerre servile de l'envie, aux biographies déposées au bas de la gloire, à tout ce qui diminue, en un mot, l'honneur de chacun dans la conscience de tous” (28-29). The debasement is both individual and collective, and this litany of largely synonymous terms reflects the predictable, shallow and self-perpetuating style of journalism it is meant to describe.

A similar but more soberly-worded assessment appears in Eugène Hatin's monumental *Histoire politique et littéraire de la presse en France* (1859-1861): “La liberté politique [. . .] donne un but aux esprits, qu'elle relève à la hauteur des nobles spéculations. Quand elle disparaît, il se produit ce que nous voyons aujourd'hui: les esprits, ou du moins une multitude d'esprits, se laissent aller

à toute sorte de malsaines occupations” (8: 633). As Guillaume Pinson has noted, “Le second Empire s’est [. . .] imposé comme le premier grand moment de l’historiographie du journalisme” (113). Efforts to document and analyze the historical trajectory of the press were spurred in part by the regime’s authoritarian stance. The Goncourts may have referred to any number of histories of the press published around the time of their work on *Charles Demailly*, and their novel was a literary contribution to such debates.

Hatin offers a generally positive interpretation of the public’s relation to the press and insists that the risk of provoking public indifference is the greatest danger for the press when it abuses its role (8: 634). By contrast, the Goncourts’ narrator vehemently berates the public for its complicity in the degradation of the press. Particular blame is placed on the *petite bourgeoisie* for their eagerness to see the intellectual elite belittled, since they allegedly resent any form of inequality, including “l’aristocratie des lettres”—which the narrator describes as the only remaining aristocracy in a society supposedly free of social hierarchies (29). Thus changes in the press are linked to more profound transformations in the social structures and values of the country. The Goncourts’ disdain for the Revolution of 1789 in general, for its social and cultural consequences, and for any attempt to apply the notion of equality to intellectual and artistic capacities is a recurring sentiment in the *Journal*. It is not by chance, then, that the novel’s history of the *petit journal* begins with the Revolution, and this negative history of progressive decline underscores the willfully polemical tone of *Charles Demailly*. By contrast, the other aforementioned fictional works on the press from the Second Empire (by Champfleury, Monselet, Scholl, Augier, and Pontmartin) do not overtly criticize a specific segment of the public or post-revolutionary society as such. This relative silence can be explained no doubt in part by the fact that these other authors, with the exception of Armand de Pontmartin, did not share the aristocratic pretensions of the Goncourt brothers.

Although the Goncourts’ narrator blames the readers of the *petits journaux*, this narrative voice pities them and argues that the *petite presse* has contributed to wasting the intellectual gains of the 1830s and transforming the aesthetic victories of Romanticism into a weakening of the arts. The text expresses nostalgia for the literary battles and the public role of artists in 1830:

Le mouvement littéraire de 1830 avait fait de la France un grand public. Par lui la patrie de Boileau et Voltaire, la fille aînée du bon sens, agrandissant son goût et son génie, échappant aux idolâtries de son éducation, traduisant Shakespeare et retrouvant Pindare, avait appris à

vivre dans une Jérusalem céleste de poésie, de lyrisme, d'imagination. Elle était devenue le digne auditoire et la glorieuse complice des libres fantaisies et des révoltes magnifiques de l'idée. (31)

This elegiac evocation uses 1830 as a symbolic date meant to indicate the height of Romanticism and its heated artistic debates. We see here a defense of Romantic fantasy against Classical good sense, associated with the figures of Boileau and Voltaire. The Romanticism of 1830, argues the narrator, both broadened and intellectually elevated the French public. Subsequently, "Le petit journal abaissait ce niveau intellectuel. Il abaissait le public. Il abaissait le monde des lecteurs. Il abaissait les lettres elles-mêmes en faisant du sourire de M. Prudhomme l'applaudissement du goût de la France" (31). Thus, evoking Henry Monnier's caricatural bourgeois figure M. Prudhomme, the Goncourts contend that the *petite presse* had no loftier ambition than to amuse the bourgeoisie with trivialities rather than inciting it to think. Readers and *les belles lettres* alike suffered. This chapter of the novel clearly establishes the idea that the fate of literature in modern society is inextricably tied to the nature of its relationships to the popular press and the general public, two forces on which its reputation and role in the world depend.

Beyond the *cancans*, *médisances*, *calomnies*, and *basses anecdotes* that infected the style of journalism spawned by the Second Empire's restrictions on the press, official constraints obliged journalists to express their political passions indirectly: for instance, through literary criticism, whose aesthetic judgment was thereby compromised and whose potential to provide the public with a meaningful understanding or appreciation of new works was likewise diminished. The Goncourts denounce this kind of political prejudice in another chapter of *Charles Demailly* in which the narrator laments the infiltration of the political into the aesthetic, identified as a weakness of the literary criticism specific to France in the mid-nineteenth century:

Nous n'avons point en France les grandes revues critiques de l'Angleterre, ces organes considérés et influents, dégagés des passions politiques, et qui apportent dans le verdict littéraire l'impartialité absolue et le haut scepticisme d'une critique purement littéraire, d'un public et d'un jury de l'art dans l'idée. Notre critique est enrégimentée dans un journal, elle appartient plus ou moins à sa couleur, à ses tendances, et sinon à ses préjugés, au moins à ses principes. Aussi est-elle journellement exposée à faire passer l'esprit du livre avant la valeur du livre. Il ne lui est guère permis d'admirer dans un autre camp, ni de siffler dans le sien. (122)

The validity of this remark is confirmed by Melmoux-Montaubin's study of literary criticism in nineteenth-century French newspapers. She notes that because the literary section of a newspaper was less subject to censure, it therefore became a favored place where a paper's overall tone and ultimate success were often decided, and the tone set by a paper's literary section generally reflected its political sympathies ("Contes de lettres" 483).

The Goncourts' protagonist Charles experiences this phenomenon when he publishes his novel about the bourgeoisie: "Il avait eu beau ne vouloir et ne chercher que la vérité littéraire, son livre était un de ces livres qui allument les polémiques de partis, sans en contenter aucun. Donc le livre de Charles fut éreinté [. . .] Rouges, blancs, bleus, le lapidèrent à frais communs. [. . .] Il ne fut épargné que par deux critiques supérieurs" (123). Instead of condemning literary critics as a whole, the narrator maintains that many critics are, in fact, "supérieurs à l'œuvre qu'ils jugent," and that such high-quality literary criticism is "le genre littéraire qui compte peut-être en ce moment le plus de talents, attaché à un métier, presque toujours indigne d'eux, par le salaire fixe, la rémunération convenable" (122). The precariousness of an existence as *écrivains* means that even talented writers are forced to earn a living as *hommes de lettres*, some of whom are co-opted into the petty partisanship of the papers in which they write. By dismissing purely literary *revues* as nonexistent in France, the novel's narrator partially distorts the reality of the media landscape of the period. Yet the Goncourt brothers would have been justified in deeming *revues* to be substantially less influential than either the so-called "literary" *petite presse* or the literary articles in the political *grand journaux*. It was not until the 1860s and then more decisively in the 1880s that literary reviews succeeded in supplanting daily newspapers as an important publishing venue for authors by providing them with more creative autonomy than popular papers had done (Vaillant, "La Presse littéraire" 331).

Although my focus here has been on the Goncourts' critique of censorship under the Second Empire and their representation of its detrimental impact on the *petite presse*, the public, and the literary field, it is important to note that the authors also use *Charles Demailly* to extensively portray and analyze a crucial counterpoint to these negative political and cultural developments. Despite being successful as a journalist, Charles voluntarily leaves *Le Scandale* to dedicate himself to creating a more lasting and significant "œuvre" (112): more specifically, to writing a "roman social" that combines "de l'observation et de l'analyse" (122). He strives to "s'élever à la synthèse sociale [. . .] et intéresser l'attention du public, non par la tragédie des événements, le choc des faits, la terreur et l'émotion matérielles de l'intrigue, mais par le développement et le drame psychologique des émotions et des

catastrophes morales” (102). Thus, Charles—who is in many respects a figure of the authors themselves, especially in this section of the novel—believes it is possible to challenge the public with an ambitious and complex literary work. Despite the mentally and physically exhausting effort required, the novelist revels in his literary labor (96–99). Moreover, Charles successfully completes and publishes his novel: “Mon livre marche [. . .] Mon éditeur ne me cache pas qu’il est content. [. . .] On me vend et on me lit” (151). His work is appreciated and discussed by a cénacle of intellectuals and artists with whom he becomes friends, though it is briefly mocked and then dismissed by the bohemian journalists who were his former colleagues and who are jealous of his talent and success.¹³ Despite the fact that Charles has freed himself from the professional demands of the press to instead pursue his literary work, the press ultimately drags him down (with help from his manipulative wife) through the machinations of his jealous former colleagues Nachette and Couturat (Birch). They use *Le Scandale* as an “arme” and come to symbolize the unscrupulous and destructive character of the *petits journaux* under the Second Empire (109).

In *Charles Demailly*, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt present their perspective on the manner in which both journalism and literature were assailed by political, social and economic forces in the 1850s. These overlapping spheres had fallen victim to the authoritarian regime of the Second Empire and its severe constraints on freedom of expression, which pushed political passions to invade the aesthetic domain and literary criticism. After the intellectual and artistic victories of Romanticism, the Goncourt brothers believed that literature was suffering from a double degradation: the desacralization of the writer, or the fall of “l’aristocratie des lettres,” and the corruption of the public who now takes pleasure in the spectacle of the artist’s humiliation. Through their novel, the Goncourts attempt to reignite the artistic passion and aesthetic debate that they nostalgically associate with the 1830s by challenging fellow authors and the reading public to acknowledge and resist what they perceive as the tyranny of the *petits journaux*. Their attitude toward the public is reproachful and unmistakably condescending, yet unlike the government or the newspapers that they blame for debasing the reading public, the Goncourts see themselves as attempting to elevate their readers by raising their critical consciousness about the increasingly powerful and ubiquitous press, about the factors such as censorship that shape it, and about the resulting consequences for French society and culture.

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NOTES

1. See Kalifa et al., Thérenty and Vaillant, and Pinson.
2. See Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal* (in the Cabanès edition), Dec. 1851, 1: 51–52. All quotations from the Goncourts' *Journal* come from this edition except where otherwise noted.
3. *L'Éclair* began 12 Jan. 1852 and lasted until 10 Dec. 1853; *Paris* ran from 20 Oct. 1852 until 7 Dec. 1853. The Goncourts published regularly in both periodicals, until 18 Dec. 1852 in *L'Éclair* and until 27 Apr. 1853 in *Paris*. See *Journal*, "Répertoire," 1: 562, 655.
4. See *Journal* (Ricatte), 30 Dec. 1876, 2: 722.
5. *Charles Demailly* 63–65. All quotations from the novel come from this edition.
6. The issue of *Cahiers Edmond et Jules de Goncourt*, entitled *Les Goncourt et la bohème* (see Diaz) features multiple articles on the authors' experience with, attitude toward, and representation of *la bohème*, including several articles about *Charles Demailly* [*Les Hommes de lettres*].
7. Wagneur and Cestor provide a useful dossier of material related to the novel's reception (583–682). They also propose several possible interpretations of the Goncourts' choice to adopt *Charles Demailly* as the definitive title (15).
8. A letter that Charles receives and another that he sends are both dated "185 . . ." in the novel (92, 182). Wagneur and Cestor situate the novel's action more precisely as unfolding between 1857 and 1859 (13).
9. Robert provides a detailed presentation of censorship of the press throughout the nineteenth century (61–95).
10. There is a similar but much shorter—less detailed and less apologetic—announcement in conjunction with the first trial (*Paris* 115, 12 Feb. 1853).
11. A series of articles that explore this vast topic can be found in Thérenty and Vaillant, *Presse et Plumes*.
12. See Noiray for an extended comparative analysis of *Illusions perdues* and *Charles Demailly*.
13. Elsewhere, I examine at length *Charles Demailly* as a meta-novel that invites the reader to reflect critically on the art of the novel and that presents Charles as a figure of the artist. See Vantine 158–259.

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