GONCOURT, Edmond & Jules de : Germinie Lacerteux (1864) Paris, Flammarion-Fasquelle, 1921

Story:
Germinie is the maid of a ci-devant daughter of the Varandeuil family. Both these ladies have had a hard life, Mlle de V through being dispossessed by the Revolution, through the hardships of the revolutionary period and the harshness of her father who kept her as an unpaid servant, forbidding her to marry. Germinie is a provincial prole born late to a brutal and shiftless father and to a worn-out mother who soon died. Germinie passes from relative to relative, reaching Paris at 14, couverte de poux. She gets raped by an old man where she works. Disgrace, fausse couche. She enters chez Mlle de Varandeuil as bonne, where she will stay for the rest of her days. She leads a double life, as they say: for her employer she is sugar-and-spice, hard-working, faithful to a fault almost, thrifty, clean, kind. For the proles of the district, she is as randy as a billy-goat, she has a lover, Jupillon, for whom she would go through hell and high-water, and does: buys him out of the draft, becomes his mistress, his skivvy, his slave, gets in the family way, has a daughter, sweet interlude with baby in the country, baby dies, Germinie develops morbid sexiness, debauches herself to Jupillon who couldn't care less, who stands her up for other tastier girls, but she goes on ministering to him and being swindled by him and his mother, a crémière, she setting him up in business as a glover (she borrows, begs and even steals from Mlle de Varandeuil to get so much money). She is abandoned by Jupillon, becomes obsessed by little girls in the street who could have been her little girl, takes up with another wastrel, a house-painter by the name of Gautruche, for whom she does, to whom she abases herself and becomes his doormat. Breaks off with him when he suggests they get hitched, because she can't face the prospect of not being Mlle de Varandeuil's any more. Swings back to Jupillon, looking like a vieille pocharde now from all the absinthe and alcool she has become addicted to, and waits for him one night in November in the rain which leads to pneumonia and to peritonitis and to death at Lariboisière. After her death, Mlle de V finds out the truth about the double-life as the debts come home to roost and she hears all about Jupillon, the absinthe, the pregnancies, the thefts. Mlle de V has a reaction of revulsion against the memory of her, but goes to the cimetière Montmartre to kneel in forgiveness in the snow by the fosse commune, but there is no cross or anything to tell her where Germinie is buried.

Subject:
Less easy to put down on paper. One could say that it is the study of a "case", a case of morbid temperament being conditioned by history and society into disintegration. This reading is supported by the hints of physiological jargon and viewpoint that crop up, eg the beginning of chapter XXXII, p154:

> C'est un effet ordinaire des désordres nerveux de l'organisme de dérégler les joies et les peines humaines, de leur ôter la proportion et l'équilibre, et de les pousser à l'extrémité de leur excès etc

Many others, suggesting like this one the style of the medical manual, the omniscience of the expert in physiology, the constant implication that character and behaviour are no longer to be seen and explained as traditional psychological novelists view them but as aspects of genetic organic make-up. This reading is also supported by the feeling that this is not so much an individual case we are reading about, but a representative of a common human type, possibly the hysteric. Thus the greater part of the novel is told in the imperfect tense, as though to underline the representativeness of this sort of behaviour, the conditioned inability to deviate from habitual modes of behaviour. Few scenes are seen from the point of view of the single preterite. Even scenes where one would expect the past definite, since they presumably happen only once and are not repeated, are also couched in the blurred outline of the imperfect tense, eg in chap XLVIII, page 201:

> Une demi-heure après, les deux femmes partaient, remontaient le long du mur de l'octroi et trouvaient, au boulevard de la Chopinette, le reste de la société attablé à l'extérieur d'un café. Après une tournée de cassis on montait dans deux grands fiacres et l'on roulait. Arrivé à Vincennes, devant le fort, on descendait et toute la troupe se mettait à marcher en bande le long du talus du fossé

This stylistic mannerism, like others of the brothers', seems to become just a sort of tic when they use it for no apparent reason, when they make it serve no clear purpose.

This suggestion of representativeness is further strengthened by a comparative device which they are fond of, and which their admirer Zola was to inherit eg p 267...le

> le portier qui revenait du cimetière avec une redingote noire et la mine de componction d'un retour d'enterrement

(this example is a strikingly silly use of the technique, as it is tautological and vacant of meaning; but at least it does illustrate what I mean: instead of trying to describe how this individual portier looked when he came back from Germinie's funeral, they say that when he came back from her funeral he looked like someone coming back from a funeral!) cf p 259 une honte de servante: not an individualized shame, but the sort you would expect from a servant, ie it does not attempt to make the reader see, observe, how a single personality would express this, but falls back on a stereotyped preconception of how one would expect a woman of her category to react. This impression is contributed to also by statements like this:

> elle avait aussi ce fond de lectures brouillées qu'ont les femmes de sa classe quand elles lisent p 212

or

> Médéric Gautruche était l'ouvrier noceur, gouapeur, rigoleur, l'ouvrier faisant de sa vie un lundi ettc p 208

ie they have chosen not to describe, preteritely, an individual worker-cum-wastrel but draw on the preconception already existing among their readers, of their own class, about a category of workers whose behaviour is classifiable into generalizations of this sort. Zola would inherit this too, Maheud is patently this sort of construction, a stock cultural stereotype who is NOT observed, pace their stress on observation of the real thing.

The novel starts out, after the first chapter, almost Balzacian. The background to the life of Mlle de Varandeuil is sketched in with skill & conviction, and moves along at a fair pace; it is highly readable, this account of the formation of a young girl by history and milieu. There is a very obvious parallel here being drawn between Germinie & her mistress, for we have just had the ist person account of Germinie's life, told in vulgar French by a femme du peuple. This must be one of the first irruptions of popular speech-forms into the novel before l'Assommoir. It may not be authentic demotic, but certainly achieves an impression of it. The whole atmosphere of Germinie's life of proletarian distractions is forcefully conveyed, too: the scenes in hospital, the walk to the barrière with Jupillon, the working-class dance-hall, the outing to Vincennes when she meets Gautruche, the glimpses inside tenements. To a bourgeois of 1864, this must have seemed like life in the raw. Certainly, it is Zolaish avant la lettre, it is recognisably the world of Gervaise Lantier.

The écriture artiste is not as apparent in this one as in La fille Elisa, especially in positioning of adjectives and in use of adjectives as nouns. However, there are signs of it, and especially of the syntaxe nominale: a great many nouns (often of colour or impressionism) in -ment, at times 3 of them in one line: p53 avec le chatouillement & le soulagement d'un pansement dans toute les parties tendres. This type of statment is, in fact, so ubiquitous that one only has the embarrassment of choice (as transmongrelizers say): p 60: le ressaut des hanches & le rebondissement des rondeurs ballonant la robe; similar is, on p 60: Et mollement, dans une paresse de grâce, elle...etc; the static and concrete verb mettre is often used with this noun-construction, adding to the impression of rigidity and fixity that the -ment words suggest: p 60: l'ombre et la lumière, se heurtant et se brisant à son visage plein de creux et de saillies, y mettaient ce rayonnement de volupté jeté par un peintre d'amour etc. Other examples of the -ment device: p57 et comme l'affadissement d'une odeur d'encens éteint; p 55 elle passait entre les rangs des chaises, sur les dalles, avec le glissement d'une chatte qui se coule sur un tapis (= pp 54-55 actually). p 128 Ce ne fut plus qu'un tressaillement de loin en loin, dans ce corps accablé, bientot apaisé par la lassitude, par un brisement général. p 128: A la suite de cette crise Germinie tomba dans un abrutissement de douleur. p 116: abîmée dans ce doux affaissement qui suit les épouvantables déchirements de l'enfantement, tout heureuse et tout etonnée de vivre encore, nageant dans le soulagement et etc. Many others, of course.

cf. pp 219, 220 196.

Another noticeable ingredient of the noun-style is the tendency of many of their sentences towards the form of the list, the enumeration, the string of substantives, in which they seem out to exhaust all the synonyms, all the alternative ways of saying if not the same thing exactly then nearly the same thing. Now and then, rarely though

there is an effective use of the resource, eg p 218: Elle marchait ainsi souvent des heures (...) Elle suivait les maisons rouges des marchands de vin, les tonnelles nues, les treillages de guingettes étayés des arbres morts qu'ont les fosses aux ours, les masures basses et plates trouées au hasard de fenêtres sans persienne, les fabriques de casquettes où l'on vend des chemises, les hôtels sinistres où l'on loge à la nuit. Elle passait devant des boutiques fermées, scellées, noires de faillites, devant des pans de mur maudits, devant des allees noires barrées de fer, devant des fenêtres murées, devant des entrées qui semblaient mener à des logements de meurtre dont on fait passer le plan, en cour d'assises, à messieurs les jurés and so on. Here, the enumeration is used to good effect to reinforce the suggestion of monotony and boredom and soul-destroyingness of Germinie's walks while she waits for her Gautruche. (In passing, notice also the point of view from which the story is often presented: Germinie's experience is not presented from her own point of view but from that of a witness, a middle-class visitor for whom the Goncourts write this sort of guide-book from their expert knowledge of the lower orders; from that of someone who could become one of messieurs les jurés; the comparison of the last clause is eloquent of the point of view: not a comparison taken from the range of experience of the consciousness which is eyeing this scene, but of that which is reading this landscape of which Germinie is, not the subject, but an object. This heightens also the scientific, or sociological, feeling: she is a specimen, and is presented as such ie in a way that makes her impossible to sympathise with, to identify with; she is observed from the outside by the bourgeois writer for the instruction and entertainment of the bourgeois reader.) At other places, and this is more frequent, they use the list where I can't help feeling a single chosen detail would be more effective: p 103: Le bal pour lui n'était plus seulement le bal, c'était un théâtre, un public, une popularité, des applaudissements, le murmure flatteur de son nom dans des groupes, l'ovation d'une gloire de cancan dans le feu des quinquets (so you said! gives a laughable impression if read slowly, with pauses between each statement). On p 98 another quite effective example: De temps en temps la danse, dans son branle et son tournoiement, montrait un bas sale, le type juif d'une vendeuse d'éponges de la rue, des doigts rouges au bout de mitaines noires, une figure bise à moustache, une sous-jupe tachée de la crotte de l'avant-veille, une crinoline d'occasion forcée et toute bossue, de l'indienne de village à fleurs, un morceau de défroque de femme entretenue. Here the effect is one of the flicker and constant change of impressions in the shifting light and whirl of the dance-floor, well rendered by the list of nouns. Same goes for p 87, the description of the evening proles outside the fortifications, the jumble of impressions well suggested by the enumeration; same on p 85 to describe the things they see as they make their way through the outskirts towards the fortifs.

By the way, one strikingly stupid sentence: p 258

Sur le siège, le dos du cocher était étonné d'entendre pleurer si fort

As for psychology, they resemble Balzac and Zola. Balzac, by the way they give the game away from early on about Germinie's devouring passion, the episodes following being merely illustrations of what we already have been told. eg p 75

Germinie était passionnément jalouse. La jalousie était le fond de sa nature; c'était la lie et l'amertume de ses tendresses

quite reminiscent not only of Balzac's giveaway technique but even of his words about say Bette: see livre de poche ed p 39: la jalousie formait la base de ce caractère plein d'excentiricités. There then follows much about Germine's possessiveness and her envious nature; let pass what is meaningless about an expression like the fond de sa nature that this statement asks you to believe possible. But then it becomes Zolaish: for she begins to demonstrate things that are not that coherent or plausible and which are in no way connected to her jealousy, eg her degeneration which comes about possibly through her attachment to one or two men, but this demonstrates her strength of love, her constancy, the circumstances in which she finds herself, and has nothing to do with the famous fond de sa nature. The p 75 statement about her fond de sa nature and the pages which follow and support that statement, lead one to think that this is study of overriding jealousy that one is reading. But it is nothing of the kind. The outcome of Germinie's secret degradation, the roots of it have nothing as far as I can see to do with this supposed presiding passion. There is in her character a very similar implausibility to that which Zola twists into that of Gervaise; and which is equally unconvincing as a demonstration of what he purports to be demonstrating.

cf. Taine on Balzac's style de comédie [illegible]

One last point: the final couple of pages 278-280,of invocation of Paris before Mademoiselle makes her visit to the fosse commune. How yucky it is! All those exclamation-marks! All that soap-opera for bourgeois readers! Gone,gone and never called me mother sort-of-thing! Authorial interventions of the crudest sort. A faire vomir Gustave. Yet,in the letters he compliments them,and on this very section,he reads it at one sitting between 10.30 pm and 4 in the morning! And what bourgeois lies in these pages too: seven years before the Semaine sanglante and they can pretend to believe this:

> O Paris! tu es le coeur du monde,tu es la grande ville humaine,la grande ville charitable et fraternelle! Tu as des douceurs d'esprit, de vieilles miséricordes de moeurs,des spectacles qui font l'aumône! Le pauvre est ton citoyen comme le riche. Tes églises parlent de Jésus-Christ; tes lois parlent d'égalité;tes journaux parlent de progrès; tous tes gouvernements parlent du peuple; et voilà où tu jettes ceux qui se tuent à créer ton luxe,ceux qui périssent du mal de tes industries

and so on. No doubt there is somewhere in this a sincere well-meant attempt to draw attention to injustice,poverty,exploitation,cruelty and inhumanity,as well as to the hollow bourgeois propaganda of the Second Empire slogans about fraternity and equality and greatness. But it is all too much like middle-class breast-beating, it is as hollow and pissy and ineffectual as what it pretends to condemn. It could, the novel that is,have shown all this. It is because their novel has failed to give the reader, graphic and unforgettable,the feeling that all this is true that they have to tack it on in this diluted rhetoric. At least Zola would realize that in order for the thing to succeed,you had to show the brutal conditions under which the proles lived. You had to present them from their own point of view and make the reader feel the forces of capitalist society something like the way that the worker feels them.

There is a Postface by Gustave Geffroy

p 286: ...en février 1865,dans le Salut public de Lyon,une page d'admiration vaillante fut consacrée au livre par un jeune homme de lettres,qui était Emile Zola, âgé de 24 ans...

287:...le chef-d'oeuvre du roman réaliste contemporain tomba dans le silence...

290: Edmond de Goncourt,toutefois,devant les proclamations de Zola,avait hautement raison de penser et de dire que l'auteur des Rougon-Macquart avait trouvé,pour une partie nettement visible,son inspiration et sa voie dans leur oeuvre,et particulièrement dans cette Germinie Lacerteux,qui fut,à n'en pas douter,génératrice de l'Assommoir par sa description des milieux populaires,des bals publics,des comptoirs de zinc,des trottoirs du boulevard extérieur,par les contacts évidents qu'il y a entre Germinie et Gervaise,entre Jupillon et Lantier...

294-5: (extracts from article,in 1876,by Céard under name of Denoisel): Chez les Goncourt,les personnages "n'agissent pas,ils subissent. Loin d'être un moment/295 les maîtres d'une société,ou même de la tenir en échec,ils en sont les victimes...Ce sont des cas pathologiques..."

298:...on trouve dans le tome II (1862-1865) de la première série du Journal des Goncourt,mémoires de la vie littéraire,la genèse complète du roman,sous forme de notes journalières prises sur la maladie et la mort de Rose,la vieille servante des deux frères pendant 25 ans...

303: Le 12 octobre 1864,c'est à l'éditeur Charpentier qu'ils vont lire quelques chapitres de leur livre,et lorsque celui-ci demande que,pour le publier,ils ne couvrent pas Germinie,arrivant à Paris,de poux,mais de vermine,ils s'écrient:"Au diable ce public,auquel il faut cacher le vrai et le cru de tout! Quelle petite maîtresse est-il donc,et quel droit a-t-il à ce que le 304roman lui mente toujours... lui voile éternellement tout le laid de la vie?"

304:...leur exclamation du 12 octobre ne les empêche pas de retirer,comme trop vrai,de leur manuscrit,un chapitre sur les couches de Germinie à la Bourbe...

304: Le 24 octobre 1864 (...) ils marquent la liaison désormais indestructible du roman à l'histoire:"Le roman depuis Balzac n'a plus rien de commun avec ce que nos pères entendaient par roman. Le roman actuel se fait avec des documents racontés,ou relevés d'après nature,comme l'histoire se fait avec des docuements écrits. Les historiens

sont des raconteurs du passé, les romanciers des raconteurs du présent."
309: Avec leur Germinie Lacerteux, les Goncourt n'ont pas publié seulement un chef-d'oeuvre du roman réaliste, un livre type, égal à la Madame Bovary de Flaubert... (SIC!)