

Edmond de Goncourt: La fille Elisa (1877, selon Oxf. Comp.)

Story:

Life-(and death)story of the daughter (illegitimate) of a Parisian midwife, early accustomed to lack of care and love, and to close-ups of fornications and parturitions. Unattached to her mother, she leaves, at the age of about 16, for Mulhouse with a friend of mother's, a visiting whore, who takes her back with her to the red-light district of Mulhouse, where she takes to whoring as to the manner born, enjoying the laziness that it finds scope for. Stays there two years. Wanders a bit, trolloping after a traveller for whom she works a while. To Paris and the soldiers' brothels beside the Ecole Militaire. Scene in the brothel, her colleagues. Her growing distaste with being fucked for a meagre living, vague yearning for lover. Has a lover a young peasant-conscript-virgin with holy leanings who tries to rape her one day in the old cemetery of Arteil. She knifes him almost in self-defence then 4 or 5 more stabs out of a sort of spite at her chaste yearnings' rout. Sentenced to death. Reprieved, hard labour for life. Sent to women's prison at Noirlieu. Work, silence, deprivation, isolation. Leads to intellectual degeneration, imbecillity and death.

Form:

Two parts, with a brief prologue. Prologue is set in courtroom at time of her sentencing. Part I begins at the beginning; part II at her reprieve and journey to Noirlieu. Documentary taste very apparent. Tale told almost throughout in the imperfect tense, few actual individual scenes described. Many pages could be taken from a handbook on the manners of whores, provincial and Parisian, in the second half of the 19th. Documentary flavour reinforced by: reproduction of a prisoner's letter-form, with en-tête and instructions, etc; intrusion of Goncourt himself in the last scene to visit a women's prison and madhouse and witness the last sigh of a demented decrepit Elisa; periodic references to la science médicale (p 56), une commission, p 79, un inspecteur de police, p 119, etc, as though to remind that this is not so much a novel as a case-history, as sociology, as authoritative observation of an actual historical situation, as though to reinforce the old omniscient-narrator convention with undeniable statistics. Obvious intention to demonstrate that this abject thing is a victim of social conditions, is a by-product of collective humanity's workings. Good scenes remain in my memory as the household of the brothel in Mulhouse; and the night-life in the Paris house. Style is something of a pain: constant prettifying and embellishment and violation of usage to no clear advantage, making one suspect that if the gilt was rubbed off the outlandish words, the meaning one would be left with would be pretty banal, pretty base metal, and making one wonder, because of this incongruity of style and content, why on earth should he want to embellish thus? Would not the drabness and futility and waste of the girl's life be better shown by simplicity and triteness of tone? It is as though, having exorcised the novel's old drug, the story, the fable, the sweet glamour of fiction, replacing it by cold hard facts and the pointlessness of prosaic, anticlimactic life, no more enviable than real life itself, no more purposeful, no more meaningful, it is as though he had merely replaced the old drug by another form of the same thing, by lending the strange glamour of his prose to the nasty facts of life, by pretending in fact that life is mysterious and capable of fulfilling the false promises of fiction, instead of letting his style be an expression of his pessimism. His mannerisms annoy me and remind me, in their contradiction of it, of Hemingway's injunction: Prose is architecture, not interior decoration."