

Les Enfants Terribles

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May 1-4, 2010

In spite of the title the book it is an English translation. It is a slight work, supposedly a modern classic in the eyes of the Penguins, the copy of which, slightly damaged by water, I find in my library. A slight volume, not only as to the physical size (the main motivation for me picking it up) but also as to its contents. Maybe a period-piece, somewhat reminiscent of Andre Gide, maybe because of the Parisian setting.

It is a book of slight imagination. When the mind moves in a vacuum, it has little to hold on to, and this airiness, is the main impression the book leaves in the mind. It is illustrated by the author. Terse line drawing, somewhat reminiscent of Picasso (which may not be a coincidence). What is it all about?

A brother and sister chained in an incestuous relationship, more suggested than delineated. It starts with a snowball war, and a hard snowball sending the brother back home. At home chaos reigns. The father, an alcoholic, has deserted the family, only to return and die. The mother prematurely aged at thirty five, soon to expire, her demise not making any noticeable impact on the pair of siblings. There is a Room where they both sleep and parade naked in front of each other. There are references to an ominous game. There is a friend of the brother attracted to the sister. He has a rich uncle of course, but no inconvenient parents. Then there is a young woman, a mannikin, drawn into the charmed circle. There is degeneracy, there is infatuation, even a marriage to a rich American Jew, who conveniently is killed (Isidora Duncan style) on his way to Nice. This is the only kind of humour, if that is the appropriate word, to be found in the book. Or at least the only time the reader is inspired to smile. As an effect (of the smile of the accident?) they are left with a big mansion in Paris. The brother is in love, or so he thinks, with the young woman, and she is pining for him too. By the machinations of the sister, that incipient flame is smothered, and desire channeled elsewhere. This provides the only semblance of drama. The end is melodramatic, involving two suicides (of the siblings, who else?). In the end, who cares?

In short, the book is like a tale told by children; and maybe that is the whole point of the exercise. It might have appeared clever at the time, but now, eighty years later, it is like a pun that has gone stale. Eminently disposable and forgettable. Still this slight, sketchy work, may make a movie of sorts. And in fact it was filmed twenty years later. As a movie it might have some qualities, conspicuously lacking as a work of literature. This only shows of course the film is a second rate art form.

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