

What do you think is, in essence, the significance of America for a European writer?

In the first place, America makes you realize what it means to be a European. It manifests the fragility of its culture and makes you understand how impoverished is the life of people without a cultural consciousness. I ought to say also that there are millions of Americans who are really civilized Europeans, but they live on the frontiers of barbarism. To be civilized in America you need moral courage. And perhaps this is beginning to happen also in Europe. That moral courage is necessary because to be civilized means to be different, not to be part of the crowd. To be a reader, for example, means that you won't be able to talk about last night's TV program with the people around you. So perhaps some of the differences between Europe and America have to do with the fact that I grew up in a Europe without television, without mindless mass entertainment.

In each of your two novels one parent is missing. In IN PRAISE it is the father. In the MILLIONAIRE it is the mother.

Everything I've written involves a sense of loss.

This loss, in your books, helps your chief characters to be more free.

They succeed in becoming free. But the loss can be traumatic. My books deal with characters who transform a sense of loss into a potential for liberty: I don't want to praise loss as such.

YOUNG MEN, OLDER WOMEN

The first person narrator of IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN begins his memoirs with this sentence: "This book is addressed to young men and dedicated to older women, and the connection between the two is my proposition." Would you write the same today?

Yes. I think that the relations between young men and older women are a *sine qua non* of a civilized society. The contact between generations needs also the bond of passion. But in the book there is also the fact that the narrator, already a grown man and a university lecturer, is trying to pass his experiences on to his students. It is the idea of looking at the older generation not as an enemy but as an ally. To bring about a healthy civilization, each generation ought to have a very clear and settled idea, a very keen sense of the experiences of the previous one.

The sense of the transmission of knowledge.

Yes, continuity. For this reason I am very pleased that some brave secondary school teachers in America have put IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN on the reading lists for their courses.

When it first appeared it was taken as a provocation.

I never knew what it was to be hated until the publication of that book. There were real campaigns against me. On the publicity tour I had to be interviewed by the Baltimore Sun and when I arrived at the Sun with my publisher's representative the doorman kicked us out, saying that the publisher had decided that a person like me should not be allowed into the building. Insults of that sort were harder to take than the banning of my works in Hungary.

Why were your books banned in Hungary?

Because they all had that sense of loss that you referred to. And because they described tragic lives, therefore I was a bourgeois individualist who only talked about the negative and ignored how happy people were under socialism.

Your idea of the transmission of knowledge through sex seems very Mediterranean, very hedonist. Perhaps it was this that shocked people in the United States, a country which when all is said and done belongs to the Calvinist tradition.

I absolutely agree. The Calvinist tradition associates sex with evil, with guilt. And I tried to relate "the singing of all the senses" that sex can be. The phrase comes from AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE, but I believe it describes my first novel. At the time when IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN was being torn apart (or ignored, which was even more deadly) by the American critics, the were devoting themselves to praising the Marquis de Sade. What they could not tolerate in my novel was sex in the spirit of a fiesta. I didn't know what it meant to be a Catholic until I went to America. That is, I didn't know what it meant to be a European Catholic. There are millions of Catholics in the United States, but in reality they are Calvinists too.

And what does it mean to be a European Catholic in America?

Going to America made me understand how important it was to have grow up hearing the history of the martyrs, to the point that from a very early age you consider that to stand alone among pagans is a mark of honour. In America, on the other hand, the approval of public opinion constitutes the chief proof of virtue. Another thing I realized there was how important it had turned out to be that I was educated by the Benedictines, who taught me that being happy, having fun, was pleasing to God. Until I crossed the Atlantic, I thought that everybody shared this feeling. I have problems with Catholic theology but I believe that Catholic attitudes to life are very salutary. The Holy Family, the newborn child as saviour of the world... Love, indeed adoration of children is a very Catholic thing, and also a very good thing. And St Francis talking to the birds, making friends with the wolves: an authentic patron saint for the Greens.