

Stephen Vizinczey, one of the great writers of our time in the English language, has been one of the most unexpected revelations of the Spanish publishing scene of recent years. His novel IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN (the contents of which do justice to the title in the most precise manner), published in the US in 1965 with a considerable scandal, was introduced here in an honest way as one of the "bestsellers" of the previous period.

And since at this late date it is not possible to resort to the explanation of prurience, Vizinczey's success in Spain has to be attributed to factors such as the universality of the theme, the elegance of the prose or the human quality which breathes from his pages and which beyond any mode or tendency must prevail as the chief attraction of this author's work. A human quality which, it must be said, he maintained for his part as an unforgettable constant through the various meetings in Sitges, where this interview was done.

Vizinczey, born in Hungary in 1933, exiled to Canada after taking part in the uprising of 1956, a resident of London since the late 1960s, is a slow and conscientious writer who, apart from two collections of essays - THE RULES OF CHAOS, TRUTH & LIES IN LITERATURE - has published only one other novel, AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE, which has just been translated into Spanish. If the subject of IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN, described with irony and tenderness, was a sentimental education, AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE is about the search for a treasure, about the legal entanglements which ensue, about love - naturally - and many other things besides.

AN INNOCENT MILLIONAIRE coincides with another recent novel, Tom Wolfe's BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES, in presenting the legal system as a "destiny" in the classic mode, as a fatality.

BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES belongs to the American tradition of defending the criminal. Its theme is how difficult it is to be a criminal and how hard the judicial system is for the guilty party. What I'm interested in is the opposite - how hard the system is for the innocent. So your observation is truer of Wolfe's novel than of mine. My theme is a young man's discovery of what is most important to him in life, and the judicial process is only one stage on this voyage of discovery. Of course it is true that while Mark is trapped in the lawsuit, it seems to him that the Law is his destiny. But the world is always bigger than we think, and our destiny is woven by many hands. In the case of my hero, his fate is decisively influenced by a man whom he never meets, whom he has heard of but rarely thinks about: I'm referring to Kevin Hardwick, the chemical magnate who doesn't love his wife but is morbidly jealous of her. So the lawyers aren't even the principal villains of the book.

In your first novel, IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN, the central character is a seducer. In the second, he is a monogamous person. Why this change?

One of the reasons is because I think I've exhausted the character - in the first novel I said what I wanted to say about promiscuous characters. About the MILLIONAIRE, though, I would like to add that there are good lawyers but there is nothing to be said in favour of the chemical industry. The law is something necessary, we couldn't live without laws. But the world got along very well for many centuries without the chemical industry.

Do you consider yourself a conservative?

It depends on the subject. I don't believe that the views of any political party help you to understand the world. I consider myself an explorer, one of Columbus's party. In many aspects I'm a revolutionary. I also believe in constitutional monarchy, for practical reasons: it differentiates the person who symbolizes the country from the one who holds power, while in the US one person plays both roles. I believe it is better for the symbol of the nation not to exercise power. Much of what is wrong with American politics derives from this confusion of roles.

What do you think of the success of IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN in Spain?

Before anything else, I think it has a great deal to do with the translation by Ana Mariá de la Puente. She translated the two novels brilliantly and I am very grateful to her. If it had not been for her, the books would probably have disappeared without trace and we would not be having this conversation.

How do you look upon that first novel now? With nostalgia, as a present thing or as part of the past? What emotions does it produce in you?

Well, I believe it is also part of the future. I tried to write a novel that would be sufficiently true to life to be valid a hundred years later. At the moment it has survived its first twenty-five years, and it is better understood now than when it first appeared, so I hope that it will continue to work. Although I am perhaps over-optimistic as a result of the novel's reception in Spain: I feel as though it has finally come home. At any rate, I've been writing since the age of eight and publishing since the age of twelve, but I consider that my life as a writer began in my thirties, with this book.

Could it be said that IN PRAISE is a European book and the MILLIONAIRE is an American book?

The theme is America, but America seen through European eyes.