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The Limited World Of Alberto Moravia

SIDNEY ALEXANDER

5 NOVELS, by Alberto Moravia. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. \$6.50.

Compulsively going round and round, the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia has staked out several circles of the Inferno as his literary preserve. His favorite realms are those inhabited by speculators, deceivers, the carnally stung. This landscape he has already surveyed to the extent of fifteen volumes of novels, short stories, and critical essays, as well as a considerable bulk of journalism. Writing almost exclusively about unhappy, diseased, thwarted, or thoroughly unpleasant people, this author, translated into twenty languages, has achieved an international reputation: surely a curious commentary on the grayness of our time.

Moravia's clinical—some would say cynical—obsession with sex has been noted by many critics. However, in all fairness, his treatment should not be judged by the lurid covers on the American paperback editions of his work. Moravia is not by any means a member of that school of literature on all fours represented by certain realists on this side of the Atlantic. This intense Italian is never prurient, never cheap; if he is unblushingly frank it is in the Mediterranean tradition, not for the sake of creating a sensation. Indeed, he usually deals with the tides of desire like a man caught in a rapids, desperately trying to make for shore. As Charles Rolo points out in his chatty and appreciative introduction, "Just as Balzac's work derived substance from his preoccupation with 'the truth of money,' so Moravia's work gains force and individuality from his preoccupation with 'the truth of sex.'"

In the five novels of this collection, familiar obsessive themes occur: the adolescent boy's induction into the mysteries of the life force (*Agostino* and *Luca*), the marital

relationship as a struggle between inept male intelligence and irresistible female instinct (*Conjugal Love* and *A Ghost at Noon*), the use of erotic engineering as an intricate system of hoists, pulleys, and levers to lift oneself higher in the social scale (*Mistaken Ambitions*).

After reading through the representative pieces in this omnibus, one is forced to the conclusion that Moravia is honest, perspicacious, possessed of a sure classically hewn craft, but terribly limited in his vision. It is unfair to Moravia even to think of his compatriot Michelangelo in this connection. Yet Michelangelo was equally impatient of landscape and costume, and he too said everything he had to say by posing nudes against a void. But the Florentine Titan created a race of super-creatures beyond male and female, an aggrandizement not of muscles but of human dignity.

Moravia's creatures, despite the rigor with which they are observed, are a diminution of the full human scale. After all, the erotic relationship, pervasive though it be, is not humanity's sole concern. Not all of our actions, frustrations, ambitions, dreams, and achievements are referable to the libido. We also look at the stars and worry about wars.

The Light Is Neon

Nevertheless, within his limitations Moravia has shaped some of the most acutely disturbing writings of our time. Out of festering materials he creates a classic structure—eliminating all extraneous details, flooding it in the illumination of persistent analysis. But his light is neon, not sunshine. The result is usually cold, devoid of real feeling or of human sympathy. As in *Gide*, the tension is between precise form and moldering content, and the incongruity is as if, wandering through the colonnade of a Greek temple, one stumbled across carrion buzzing

with flies. *Spietato*—ruthless, merciless—is the word Italian critics like to apply to this writer.

The art of Moravia, then, is more akin to a case record than to the full-blooded embodiment that leaps from the pages of a truly great writer. In *A Ghost at Noon* the narrator states in the first paragraph: "This story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her and not to judge her, Emilia, on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me." In a lesser novelist, so bald a statement of intention, as in a Ph.D. dissertation, would prove disastrous. But Moravia skillfully compels our attention by the way he drives straight ahead to his goal with a wealth of situational invention and clinical analysis. For Moravia the story is almost always a mere body upon which the doctor performs his operation: The ups and downs of the plot—sometimes too pat, too contrived, as in the Ulysses parallelism of *A Ghost at Noon* or the complications of *Mistaken Ambitions*—are a fever chart hung at the foot of the bed. And we the readers, usually, feel less of a tragic catharsis than a post-operative throb.

Of course it is always unfair to abstract a thesis from a novel. Once when I asked a friend of mine what his novel was all "about," he replied, "It's about three hundred pages." The rebuke was justified. A work of art can't be paraphrased or abstracted. If it can be, the author is guilty of packaging his thesis too neatly. By the precision of his intelligence, however, Moravia tempts us frequently into committing just this kind of violation. There is too little living atmosphere in his work. The idea outlines are too sharp. Moravia usually excludes almost everything that might divert us from the beam of his story. Poetic divagation, humorous aside, language play for its own sake—all this is largely lacking. Here is an Italian with all his senses alive to one of the most beautiful countries in the world. But he rarely permits himself external description. Even in the few cases when he does—some lovely paragraphs on Capri in *A Ghost at Noon*, several evocative pages on the Tuscan countryside in *Conjugal Love*—

his mind, as if drawn by an elastic band, returns to the bleak inner landscape almost with relief.

Although fundamentally humorless, Moravia is capable at times of sardonic bite. This is well exemplified in "Epidemia" — Epidemic — a short story not included in this collection and to the best of my knowledge untranslated. This little political parable, published after the fall of Fascism, describes how certain individuals in an unspecified nation begin mysteriously to emanate a most fetid cloud from the tops of their heads. The sufferers gradually discover a semantic cure for their illness: At first the stink is a stink, then it really is only a bad odor, then a good odor, then a perfume, and eventually so delicious, so ineffable a perfume that its victims have only pity and contempt for the ever-diminishing number of those who persist in calling it a stink. Eventually a state of perfect calm reigns; without exception the citizens are completely lacking in olfactory nerves.

Leda and Luca

In *Conjugal Love* a Boccaccian situation is presented with mocking precision: A dilettante author, Silvio Baldeschi, comes to the conclusion that he is blocked in writing what he hoped to be a masterpiece because too much of his vital energy is expended in loving his beautiful wife. He therefore proposes to his wife that while he is engaged on this work, they abstain from lovemaking. "But how do other writers manage?" asks the wife. (Her name, not surprisingly, is Leda.) "I don't know how they manage . . . but I imagine they lead chaste lives, at any rate while they're working."

"But D'Annunzio," she said. "I've heard . . ."

At this point Silvio decides that he has made a mistake. He hurriedly assures Leda that he is really not interested in becoming a writer; the only thing that matters to him is their love. But it's too late now; the wife insists on the bargain. Silvio falls into the trap he himself has dug. However, to his joy he discovers that his theory of the conservation of energy was correct: His book now begins to flow beautifully. He is blissfully immersed in his work when one day Leda complains about the

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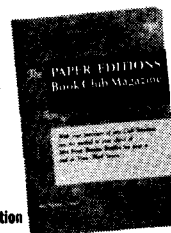


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attentions of a gross barber who comes to the villa every day to shave the author. Silvio, blind to what is really troubling Leda, refuses to take her complaint seriously. He pooh-poohs her charges and refuses to dismiss the barber. The inevitable happens. On the night Silvio completes his first draft, he takes an ecstatic walk alone in the moonlight. Passing the threshing floor he witnesses—in a scene of terrible power—his wife's infidelity with the barber. Leda's beautiful face has been transformed into a mask like a gargoyle on a Gothic cathedral.

And now the final irony. Rereading his completed novel, Silvio discovers that he has failed, that instead of a masterpiece he has created a mediocre work. The parallelism is complete: Artistic failure as well as conjugal failure results from an unwillingness or incapacity to yield oneself to primal forces.

A similar diptych is made up by the two *novelle* dealing with adolescence. Both are beautifully organized pieces of storytelling: terse yet rich, and poetically evocative of that disturbing passage between boyhood and manhood. *Luca*, indeed, is a small masterpiece, one of the rare instances when Italian sun breaks through the usual Moravian cloud-bank. In a series of willful No-sayings Luca rejects filial love, school ambitions, his games, his friends—heading like a sleepwalker toward the final rejection of life itself. The boy's spiritual malaise results in a serious illness. Luca wants to die; a middle-aged nurse helps to cure him. And as her last act of life affirmation, the nurse makes the ultimate gift to the fifteen-year-old boy. What in other contexts would be tawdry in this case is not.

Subsequently, reflecting like one of the author's maturer heroes on the engulfing beneficent vital power of his experience, Luca concludes: "Yes . . . that is what life should be: not sky and earth and sea, not human beings and their organizations . . ."

HOW STRANGE to hear that "should" from the thin lips of a descendant of Machiavelli! Moravia, of course, is not simply Luca grown up. But in a large sense he does deny nature and society, deriving his dis-

turbing power almost entirely from the ruthless focusing of his field of vision. His first novel, *Gli Indifferenti*, published in 1929 when the author was only twenty-two, created a sensation in the minds of those who interpreted its bitter aloes—a nonpolitical account of middle-class ennui, corruption, and emotional sclerosis—as an attack against Fascist morality. "He saw, always in

others, the same falseness, the same shabbiness that filled his own spirit, and it was impossible to rid his eyes of the film of discouragement and impurity that interposed itself between him and life." But now, a decade after the fall of Fascism, we see that Moravia's caustic view has nothing to do with politics: His people are still the indifferent ones, staring at the same brick wall.

Victorians Seen Without Mockery

THOMAS D. PARRISH

VICTORIAN PEOPLE, by Asa Briggs. *University of Chicago Press*. \$5.

Back in 1918 Lytton Strachey wrote *Eminent Victorians*, a long and brilliant sneer at the age of Disraeli and Gladstone. The laughter has died away. Sound scholarship, however, can still offer examples of a curious Victorian blend of comedy and tragedy (as in Cecil Woodham-Smith's account of the charge of the Light Brigade, *The Reason Why*, a chronicle of "the two greatest muffs of the nineteenth century"). Generally, however, the twentieth century has managed to make its predecessor look a great deal better than it did to Strachey, and we have somewhat more sympathy with an age whose defeated watchwords were progress, order, and security.

Victorian People is neither hostile nor nostalgic. It is a book in the splendid tradition of G. M. Young's *Victorian England* and the BBC symposium "Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians"—except that it covers only the years 1851 to 1867 (which suggests that Victorian scholarship is becoming more specialized). This was the high noon of Victoria's reign, introduced by the great Crystal Palace exposition and concluded by the passage of the second Reform Bill. The symbol of the period was the enormously popular Lord Palmerston; as Young wrote: "In the eyes of the world and his country Palmerston was England and England Palmerston."

Though the title might suggest otherwise, *Victorian People* is not a study of manners and mores. Its concern is chiefly political, and the important events of the period are presented in a series of enlarged portraits of the principal actors. The Crimean War, for example, is described in the portrait of John Arthur Roebuck, the Radical M.P. who forced an investigation of its sloppy conduct; this particular chapter, though, has to fight hard to avoid being dominated by Palmerston himself.

On the whole, the author's method works well. The chapter on the trade unions—its subject is Robert Applegarth, a truly remarkable labor pioneer—is excellent. And anyone who has read *Tom Brown at Rugby* or any of the Horatio Alger stories—somebody must have—will enjoy the portrait of Thomas Hughes.

In reading the straightforward discussion of the superbly named Samuel Smiles, the leading bootstrap thinker of the day, one can see countless openings for mockery of the Strachey type—openings that the author has refused to exploit. Nowhere, in fact, does Mr. Briggs indulge himself in style at the expense of substance. You won't find much humor here, but there is insight and a great deal of well-organized information. And, since it tells us about the world that gave birth to our own, the information is valuable.