

C O N T E M P T

Alberto Moravia



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CONTEMPT

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A RUTHLESS PSYCHOLOGY informs the writing of Moravia's middle period. Coming back to him after a decade and more, I am struck above all by the fierce dispatch of his storytelling, and then by its cruel determinism, a quality that generates so powerful a sense of pathos that it prompts sympathy with even the most unsympathetic of protagonists. Only a page or two into anything Moravia wrote, I find myself thinking: this is an aggressive, even dangerous author—one who is not afraid of taking risks with my sentiments.

Though very different in their range and scope, Moravia's novels have certain key elements in common. There is the hyper-conscious protagonist whose lucid reflections revolve remorselessly around feelings and events that will remain forever obscure. There is a profound melancholy that will never quite be placed but is such as to make every event, every memory, pregnant with possibly unwelcome explanation. A heavy cloud of menace looms over the most trivial of encounters: what appalling truths are perhaps about to be revealed,

what terrible mistakes will be made? However domestic and apparently innocuous the scene, no sooner has Moravia's cool rational voice begun to describe it than we are filled with an irrational apprehension.

Yet in sharp contrast to these gloomy and disturbing emotions, Moravia's narratives also possess an exhilarating spirit of comedy and even farce. In their rapid, often grotesque concatenation of events, his stories cannot fail to entertain, indeed are often most amusing when most they disconcert. And if they push credibility to the limit, and sometimes beyond, this doesn't mean they preclude a sense of recognition on the part of the reader. It is time to say a word or two about the fictional mode Moravia works in. Is it, or is it not, realism?

Beginning his writing career in the late 1920s, thoroughly conversant with French, English, and German, Moravia was certainly aware of modernism and its many experiments. Yet he made use of none of them. His icily analytic, ever-precise prose never thaws sufficiently to allow for the poetic representation of consciousness we find in Joyce or Woolf, let alone the kind of impassioned participation that characterized Lawrence's work, though his subject matter of isolation and alienation has much in common with that of his English counterparts. Nor, despite living through the 1980s, would Moravia ever stray into the area of magical realism. All the same we cannot quite think of his writing as strictly realist either, or at least not in the way that the writings of Graham Greene or Anthony Powell, or indeed those of Italian contemporaries like Cassola and Pavese, are realist. In their different ways, despite opening in a determinedly realist fashion, each of his novels gradually generates an aura of the surreal, in turns farcical and nightmarish. How so?

A melancholy, alienated, disturbingly lucid individual seeks to identify the source of his unhappiness, perhaps in some primary experience from infancy, perhaps in his relationship

with mother or wife; a Freudian anxiety fuels his reflections. Such is Moravia's modern man. He reaches certain conclusions, decides on a certain course of action. Then an accelerating series of events, in the course of which both the characters around him and the protagonist himself are seen to act in the most unpredictable, though somehow inevitable and predetermined, of ways, makes a mockery of all his reflection, all his yearning for comprehension and control. Sex and sensuality are all important here: just married to one woman, a man is declaring his passion for another; or a devoted wife is suddenly, inexplicably cold, or is making lesbian advances toward another woman. The libido, at once our most vital and our most biologically determined quality, capriciously tosses out surprise after surprise, confirming the hero's confusion and ridiculing the rational, would-be dispassionate voice in which the story's extraordinary events are being recorded. It is here, in the collision of reason with bewilderment, of lucidity with enigma, that Moravia demands and gets recognition from his readers. The real as we experience it, he insists, does have this surreal, oneiric, often farcical quality. Given his talent for combining melodrama with high seriousness, it is hardly surprising that so much of his work has been filmed.

In an interview late in his life, Moravia spoke of *Contempt* as "one of my best novels, because at once profoundly felt and completely invented." The story of a tortuous and distressing marital crisis, the autobiographical "feeling" behind the book no doubt came out of Moravia's difficult relationship with his wife Elsa Morante, herself a brilliant writer, but as passionate and volatile as Moravia was determinedly cool and analytical. In the same interview, Moravia confessed: "There were days when I wanted to kill her. Not to split up, which would have been the reasonable solution, but to kill her, because our relationship was so intimate and so complex and in the end so vital that murder seemed easier than separation." The genius

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of *Contempt* was the creation of a plot that would allow us to explore such a complexity in all its contradictions and conundrums—its intense and bewildering emotions—without ever feeling that we have properly understood it, just as the protagonist will never even begin to understand his wife.

It would be foolish, in conclusion, to pretend that Moravia was anything but the most profound of pessimists. Love, in his novels, is almost always something suffered rather than enjoyed. Whether at its most promiscuous, passionate, or conjugal it rarely relieves a gnawing sense of alienation, so that his characters frequently find themselves staring at each other in varying states of wonder and perplexity. Yet his work is enlightening. In his combination of obsessive reflection and dreamlike unfolding of plot, he creates a convincing and entirely personal vision of the world which compels us to turn the pages to the end, leaving us afterwards with a mental construct at once so consistent and so elusive that the reader will be brooding over it and reconsidering it for weeks—in my case years—to come. I ask no more of a book.

—TIM PARKS