

THE EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT AS THEME  
IN THE NOVELS OF ALBERTO MORAVIA

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

To abstract a thesis from the writings of a serious novelist is, in most instances, to do the writer an injustice. Such an effort is usually based on consideration of a single aspect or facet of his works, with many oversimplifications and overgeneralizations which either obscure or ignore the subtlety and complexity of the writer's achievement. Less liable to this critical infraction, however, are the novels of Alberto Moravia, the celebrated Italian novelist, essayist, and short story writer, who in recent years has gained an international reputation.

The outstanding feature of Moravia's novels is his preoccupation with a single theme; for Moravia is, by his own admission, a writer with a thesis. As he told an interviewer from The New Yorker,

I never trust a writer who can say too many things. By that I mean a writer who has too many tunes to play. One good tune is enough. Good writers are monotonous, like good composers. Their truth is self-repeating. They keep rewriting the same book. That is to say, they keep trying to perfect their expression of the problem they were born to understand.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"One Good Tune" (author not given), The New Yorker, XXXI (May 7, 1955), 39.

At this point one may ask what Moravia's "one good tune" is. Although Moravia considers himself a novelist with a monolithic approach, he is in no respect a propagandist or a writer of mechanically contrived stories aimed at propounding a philosophical viewpoint. Moravia has discussed his artistic intentions candidly. On the subject of his theme, he says

. . . a novel is not a philosophical treatise, and it is difficult to discuss a novel's "themes" outside the framework of their formal representation. All I can say is that the dominating theme of my work seems to be that of the relationship between man and reality.<sup>2</sup>

Alberto Moravia has two novellas, nine full-length novels, two plays, and over three hundred short stories to his credit, not to mention some journalistic writings and dozens of essays on a variety of subjects. His works have been translated into twenty languages, and in the United States alone, his total sales have surpassed those of any other Italian novelist.<sup>3</sup> All of his longer works have been translated into English, and four volumes of his stories, Bitter Honeymoon and Other Stories, The Wayward Wife and Other Stories, Roman Tales, and The Fetish and

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<sup>2</sup>Alberto Moravia, "About My Novels; a Fragment of Autobiography," Twentieth Century, CLXIV (December, 1958), 531.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Rolo, "Alberto Moravia," Atlantic, CXCIV (February, 1955), 69.

Other Stories, have also been published in English translations.

In Moravia's novels the existential predicament is paramount. While Moravia calls it "the relationship between man and reality," it could perhaps be more succinctly stated as Shakespeare has it in Hamlet's famous soliloquy--"To be, or not to be; that is the question." With Moravia also the question is "to be or not to be."

The very phrase "existential predicament" might elicit some question regarding its meaning. Predicament denotes a situation entailing uncertainty and bewilderment as experienced by the human being. The uncertainty arises from the unavoidable necessity of making decisions which will in some degree help the person come to grips with his situation; the bewilderment implies perplexity aroused by the awareness of multiple possibilities, not one of which has an absolute and universal value. There is no recourse to a priori standards: the person is alone and must rely on his own individual actions in confronting the existential predicament. "Existential" describes the actual, concrete, immediate, individual, particular, dynamic, and evolving character of human experience itself.

The phrase "existential predicament" is a summary of Moravia's preoccupation as a novelist. In his fiction

there is a constant, unrelenting obsession with the situation of a single, particular character confronting, through his own existence in a physical, historical setting, the forces or powers of negation which threaten him with the frightening personal awareness of the possibility, even inevitability, of his own dissolution into nothingness. "Nothingness" is the word used by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre to describe the condition. Albert Camus calls it "the absurd" and Paul Tillich, "the threat of non-being" or "eternal death." Such designations are symbolic abstractions used by philosophers; but in the novels of Moravia the concepts are more than the expression of obscure terms. His theme is grounded in a concrete fictional world and serves as the vital force in prompting the actions of his characters. His novels possibly offer a more lucid and comprehensible exposition of the existential predicament than would volumes of periphrastic philosophical verbiage.

Since it is through philosophy that these existential considerations have been most vigorously treated, however, it is desirable to take some note of what various philosophers have written about Existentialism. Defining Existentialism is no simple matter. In the first place, if one is to discuss Existentialism in a meaningful manner, he must include himself in his statements, for to

analyze this contemporary outlook on man's condition without acknowledging oneself as a part of that condition belies the statements themselves. If there is one point on which all thinkers who have been called Existentialists agree, it is the belief in the absolute contingency of the human condition. No one can be uncommitted. To speak with undue pedantry, dogmatism, complacency, or condescension about Existentialism is to lapse into a kind of clinical detachment, as in describing the symptoms of a physical disease. It must be recognized, therefore, that an outline of the salient features of what is called Existentialism is not Existentialism itself, but merely an arbitrarily systematized aid for the purpose of communicating the idea of Existentialism.

The only well-known philosopher to accept the label "Existentialist" is Jean-Paul Sartre. Martin Heidegger rejects the term, as did Albert Camus. A label implies a system, and most of the thinkers who are called Existentialists almost unanimously oppose having their philosophical observations molded into an abstract system of oracular belief divorced from the experiences of life. ✓

Existentialism is usually discussed as having two "schools"--Christian and atheistic. This is a rigid classification proposed by Sartre, and is too neat and unsatisfactory in the final analysis. The more precise



dichotomy, if there is to be one, should be drawn between the rational-humanistic Existentialism, best exemplified in the thought of Sartre, and the transcendental Existentialism of Martin Heidegger. The difference is in the ontological question. Sartre's somewhat overworked dictum "existence precedes essence" places the emphasis on man. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," writes Sartre.<sup>4</sup> As Sartre sees it, the predicament is in the anxiety produced by the awareness that through commitment and resolute action, man carries the burden of responsibility for all men. In Sartre's thought, then, man is condemned to freedom, if he is to be a man instead of an object. Sartre uses two terms to characterize the existential man: man in-itself (en-soi) and man for-itself (pour-soi). Man in-itself is man the physical object, the existent, and man for-itself is man the aware being of unfulfilled potential, the essence. Through his actions asserting his existence, man also creates his essence.

The German, Martin Heidegger, has proposed perhaps the most profound question in contemporary philosophy:

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<sup>4</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," translated by Philip Mairet, Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, edited by Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland, 1956), p. 291.

"Why is there any being at all and not rather nothing?"<sup>5</sup> Sartre with his existential ethics does not consider this question. Sartre's Existentialism is anthropocentric while Heidegger's is metaphysical. Heidegger sees as pervading all human existence an open field of being as being itself, which has no concrete external manifestation itself, yet which encompasses both existence and essence and transcends them. When this being as being is revealed to man, he is made aware of his finitude and the contingency of his condition, most awesomely revealed to him in the awareness of the immediate possibility of death as the agent of dissolution of the central self, as in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." The knowledge that man is subject to inexorable absorption into nothingness produces the anxiety which in turn promotes human action, the affirmation of self despite the threat of nothingness.

Albert Camus, though protesting that he was not an Existentialist, made some existential observations on the predicament of modern man. He is most famous for his concept of "the absurd" in human existence. The absurd man is the one who is conscious of his freedom from any gods, hope, or illusion of progress, and who is overshadowed by

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<sup>5</sup>Martin Heidegger, "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics," translated by Walter Kaufmann in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, edited by Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland, 1956), p. 220.

the supreme and inevitable negation of existence--death itself. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus proposes that man counter the predicament through conscious human action or rebellion, an attitude of lucidity in the face of the negation of death, and a passion for life itself. Camus writes, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."<sup>6</sup>

The last existential thinker bearing upon Moravia's thesis is the theologian Paul Tillich. His views on the existential predicament perhaps are not original, for there are echoes in his writings of the thoughts of many philosophers, including Sartre, Heidegger, and Camus. However, he is not fearful of systematic thought. He couches his Existentialism in religious terms and sees the great problem in existence as "the courage to be" in spite of "the threat of non-being"<sup>7</sup> and the impossibility of reaching final solutions of the existential predicament.

Although not a philosopher himself, Alberto Moravia is undoubtedly in this stream of contemporary European

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<sup>6</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1959), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven, 1952), p. 322.

Existentialist thought. In reference to his first novel, The Time of Indifference, he points out his affinity with the philosophical Existentialists:

In fact, ten years before Sartre's La Nausée and Camus's L'Étranger, Gli Indifferenti [The Time of Indifference], published in 1929, came to grips with those very problems which were later to be called "Existentialism." The difference between Sartre, Camus and myself is that when I wrote Gli Indifferenti, I was unaware that there was such a word as Existentialism. The problems that my characters sought to solve were, in final analysis, my own problems; and if they also happened to be the problems of the day, that is due to the faculty I had, at least at that time, of establishing a direct contact with reality independent of aesthetic or ideological principles.<sup>8</sup>

The statement brings up the important question of Moravia's intention as a writer. Philosophical novelists such as Sartre and Camus seem to imply that their work is based on a viewpoint of universal dimensions and that their judgments supply melioristic values having a universal significance. Moravia, by contrast, is concerned with the individual, the particular situation, and the immediate event as it reveals or creates the essence of the single human being. Moravia describes the existential predicament; he offers no proposals which might serve as rules of conduct or effect the progress of humanity. He is not a writer of allegories in the orthodox sense. Moravia is quoted as having said, "In the modern world,

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<sup>8</sup>Moravia, op. cit., p. 530.

everyone is trying to remake society. I have at heart, above all, the human person . . . with his name, occupation, age, face, body, arms, legs."<sup>9</sup> And in reiteration of his outlook on the writing of novels, Moravia has said, "The novel has no other goal than the description of a particular individual and the illustration of a particular conception of life."<sup>10</sup>

Though he avers that he is not so concerned with ideological principles as the philosophers, Moravia's novels present objective correlatives of the problems the philosophers see as comprising the existential predicament. Moravia illustrates the anxiety experienced by individual characters in a state of suspension over the abyss of nothingness. Their relationship with reality has been severed by their inability to overcome a spiritual paralysis which prevents them from living effectively in the external world. Floundering in a metaphysical void, Moravia's chief protagonists suffer a sense of uselessness and aimlessness, and in his novels the portrayal of the struggle to cope with this condition reveals Moravia's preoccupation with the existential predicament.

There are three main aspects of Moravia's treatment of the existential predicament. The first is the

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<sup>9</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

novelist's insistence upon the dualism of human existence--his probing of the conflict between instinct and intellect, intention and action, reality and illusion, and subjective and objective identity. The second aspect is his analysis of erotic love as the realm in which the existential situation is most clearly manifest, with emphasis on sex as the paradox of being and non-being coexistent. And finally, there is by implication in his novels a kind of existential morality, with the relationship of man to a true and authentic reality. All three aspects are related both to the novels and to the facts of Moravia's life.

## CHAPTER II

### ALBERTO PINCHERLE-MORAVIA

There are two reasons why Moravia's biography is relevant to an understanding of his novels. In the first place, even though his primary theme is consistent, there is a radical change in his narrative method after the first three novels, which were written while Moravia lived under oppressive Fascist restrictions. Also, certain incidents in his own life have appeared somewhat transmuted in his fiction. The first three novels in particular--The Time of Indifference, Wheel of Fortune, and The Fancy Dress Party--have more perceptible origins in Moravia's personal life.

Alberto Pincherle was born in Rome in 1907, the son of a well-to-do Venetian architect; his mother was a Jewess.<sup>1</sup> At the age of five, he was stricken with tuberculosis of the leg bone and spent five of his next eight years as a bedridden invalid. Pincherle did not completely overcome the disease until he was twenty-five, and his illness has reportedly left him with a slight

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<sup>1</sup>"Our Man in Rome" (no author given), The New Yorker, XL (April 4, 1964), 34.

limp.<sup>2</sup> As a child, he was taught by governesses from whom he learned several languages.

Moravia's novels are the major events in his early life. He evidently moved at his own pace, reading voraciously and writing feverishly, for his first work exhibits a maturity and intelligence nothing less than prodigious for a young man of seventeen. It was during this period of invalidism that the young Pincherle began his first novel in a sanatorium in the Alps.<sup>3</sup> The novel was rewritten several times before it was completed and given the title The Time of Indifference (Gli Indifferenti) in 1927, when the author was only nineteen. Publication did not take place until 1929, however, because Pincherle could not find a publisher. Finally he had to have the novel printed at his own expense.<sup>4</sup> The book was an immediate sensation. Pincherle, a mere twenty-two, found himself enjoying fame in literary circles and infamy in political quarters.<sup>5</sup> The novel, although not treating a political subject, pictures the decadence of a bourgeois Roman family in the early days of the Fascist regime. It covers a period of only two

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<sup>2</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>"Our Man in Rome," The New Yorker, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 70.



days in the lives of the characters and shows the inevitable degeneration of the family. With an acerbic irony, the young writer revealed what appeared to him to be the sin of the times (and perhaps of all times)--sloth, incapacity of will, faked emotions, vain and illusory desires--in short, the crime of indifference. Such a pessimistic view was contrary to the prevailing Fascist pseudo-optimism; and when the novelist's second book, translated both as Wheel of Fortune and as Mistaken Ambitions (Le Ambizioni Sbagliate) appeared in 1935, the censors forbade its being reviewed. The literal rendering of the Italian title, "mistaken ambitions," summarizes the theme. The story shows how mistaken ambitions can lead to self-delusion, chaos, and self-destruction. There are three main characters: a plain, parvenu matron whose ambition is to buy love with her money; a young journalist whose ambition is to be a paragon of virtue; and a beautiful young woman whose ambition is to secure wealth and social station by using her beauty.

The novel is interesting as a clinical treatment of human passions and foibles, but because of its rambling looseness, its contrived, melodramatic situations, and its characterizations bordering on caricature, it is not one of Moravia's most successful works.

At the time of the publication of Wheel of Fortune Alberto Pincherle assumed the pseudonym of Alberto Moravia. No one seems to know why he chose Moravia, but all of his subsequent writings have appeared under that name.

After writing this second novel, Moravia traveled outside his own country and wrote for the Italian newspapers as a foreign correspondent.<sup>6</sup> In 1935 he visited the United States and Mexico, and in 1941 he married Elsa Morante, who has since become well known as a writer herself.

In his next novel, The Fancy Dress Party (La Mascherata), published in 1941, Moravia describes "the fortunes of a certain country on the other side of the ocean," presumably Mexico. The plot deals with a dictator eagerly panting for an affair with a celebrated but heartless beauty and almost wrecking his government. Treated in a brutally farcical manner very much resembling opéra bouffe and unlike anything else attempted by Moravia, a parallel theme exhibits the atrocious extremes of the activities undertaken by secret police. The novel is a thinly-veiled parody of Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy; yet most critics rate it as a failure as satire, because Moravia's narrative perspective is diffused among

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

the various participants in the farce, and the reader is never allowed to arrive at a definite conclusion about the objects being satirized. Nevertheless, as a competent piece of writing from the standpoint of plot development and control, the novel is masterful. Eventually it reached the Minister of Popular Culture; he passed it along to Mussolini, who ordered it to be published, only to have it withdrawn a month later. Moravia was then forbidden to write for the press under his own name, and adopted the pseudonym of "Pseudo." Pseudo was silenced a year later by order of the government.<sup>7</sup>

Toward the end of Fascist rule in Italy, Moravia for a time wrote anti-Fascist propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Soon after the fall of the Fascist government in 1943, the Germans occupied Italy, and Moravia learned that the German Schutzstaffel had plans to arrest him. Although the Jews in Italy had not been subjected to the horrors perpetrated by the Germans in their concentration camps, the Italians of Jewish extraction went into hiding when the German armies entered their country. Moravia along with his wife fled Rome for the battle front in the Cassino area, hoping to fall into the hands of the Allies within a few weeks. He and his wife were not liberated until nine months later in May of 1944, when the United States Fifth Army captured

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

the village of Fondi, where the Pincherles were in hiding.<sup>9</sup> During this period, the couple lived like beasts in a stable.

These hardships were unquestionably bitter for the Pincherles, and the events described in one of Moravia's better novels, Two Women, grew out of this traumatic experience. In an introduction to the first English publication of Agostino, Moravia's next published work and probably his most famous single piece of writing, Ian Greenlees comments:

The liberation of Fondi meant for Moravia more than the termination of the immediate threat under which he had been living; it meant the liberation from the incubus which had hung over him for nearly twenty years, during which the Fascists had continuously tried to circumscribe his activities.<sup>10</sup>

In a diary he kept during the German occupation of Italy, Benedetto Croce has an entry recording a visit from Moravia after the novelist and his wife came out of hiding:

May 29, 1944--Moravia, the novelist, came to Sorrento. He had to stay with his wife for several months on top of a mountain near Rome, but has now been liberated by the Allied advance. He poured out all his despair, about the present and the future,

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<sup>9</sup>Ian Greenlees, "Introduction" to Agostino (London, 1947), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

nor was he able to produce anything more comforting than that.<sup>11</sup>

During his compulsory exile, Moravia wrote Agostino and much of his most famous novel, The Woman of Rome (La Romana), an achievement which testifies to his spirit and vitality.

Since 1944, Moravia has been amazingly productive. After the publication of Agostino came The Woman of Rome in 1947. Although Moravia had visited the United States earlier in his life and his first two novels had been translated into English and published in the United States, The Woman of Rome in its 1950 translation brought Moravia to the attention of most American readers. The reason for his sudden and increased popularity can be attributed to the undeniable fact that Moravia is perhaps the most skillful and graphic writer on the subject of sex. The Woman of Rome has as the protagonist a beautiful and sensual prostitute and is about whoring from the first page to the last. The chief interest for most readers may unfortunately lie in its unintended appeal to the prurient instincts.

The following year, 1948, Moravia published Disobedience (La Disubedienza). Agostino and Disobedience

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<sup>11</sup> Benedetto Croce, Croce, the King and the Allies; Extracts from a Diary July, 1943--June 1, 1944, translated by Sylvia Sprigge (New York, 1950), p. 134.

have come out under the title, Two Adolescents; the Stories of Agostino and Luca. Moravia's other novels, all translated into English, include Conjugal Love (Amore Coniugale), 1949; The Conformist (Il Conformista), 1950; A Ghost at Noon (Il Disprezzo), 1954; Two Women (La Ciociara), 1957; and The Empty Canvas (La Noia), 1961. Moravia is also an accomplished essayist, and a volume of his writings in this genre is to be published next year (1966) under the title Man as an End. A selection from the forthcoming book recently appeared in Saturday Review. Moravia is now divorced from his first wife, Elsa Morante, with whom he is still on amicable terms, and is married to another writer, Dacia Maraini, who is twenty-seven, thirty years younger than her talented husband. Moravia has no children.<sup>12</sup>

In August, 1952, Moravia expressed a desire to visit the United States again. His request for a visa to enter the country was denied under the terms of the McCarran Act of Internal Security.<sup>13</sup> The story regarding his exclusion makes an interesting chapter in the history of American literary politics. In 1944, an especially despondent year for Moravia, he published an essay, La Speranza, Ossia

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<sup>12</sup>"Our Man in Rome," The New Yorker, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup>"Injustice and Disservice" (author not given), Time, LX (August 11, 1952), 15.

Communismo o Cristianesimo, in which he expressed the opinion that Communism, divested of its negative qualities and coupled with Christian altruism, would be the hope for the economic and political ills of the world.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this statement by Moravia and the inauspicious timing of his request (the era of the McCarthy "witch hunts"), the State Department of the United States refused Moravia a visa. Dissenting writers in the United States filed a petition in protest. Among the signers were John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Alfred Kazin, Katherine Anne Porter, Allen Tate, Lionel Trilling, Robert Penn Warren, Thornton Wilder, and Edmund Wilson.<sup>15</sup> Moravia's request was later granted. The incident is especially ironic in that two years earlier the Soviet Union had also refused Moravia a visa.<sup>16</sup>

Moravia's works were placed on the Papal Index in May of the same year (1952) that the author was refused a visa by the United States government.<sup>17</sup> When he was informed of the action, Moravia facetiously retorted that at least

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<sup>14</sup>Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Moravia," Books Abroad, XXIV (Autumn, 1950), 361.

<sup>15</sup>"Injustice and Disservice," Time, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>"Visas and the Vatican" (author not given), Nation, CLXXV (September 6, 1952), 182.

he was in the good company of Boccaccio and Croce, also listed in the Index.

The levity of Moravia's reaction is not to be found in Moravia's novels. He is the most serious of writers; one of the most frequent criticisms leveled against his writing is his lack of humor. But Moravia, like Sartre, Camus, and to a lesser extent, Paul Tillich, has experienced the existential predicament in its most acute external form. He suffered a physical debility for twenty years of his youth, and arrived at maturity under a political system that was anathema to his principles. As William Barrett points out in his excellent book, Irrational Man, Existentialism is a distinctly European outlook on the human situation.<sup>18</sup> Although the United States was involved in World War II, the event was remote for Americans as individuals. For sensitive and brilliant Europeans like Moravia, however, the war and the circumstances precipitating it posed an immediate threat of physical annihilation, social and religious chaos, and a stricture of the spirit. Most Europeans found themselves in the existential predicament reduced to its fundamental terms of human survival. The only true question was to be or not to be in a situation where non-being seemed almost

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<sup>18</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, New York, 1962), pp. 10-11.



inevitable. To Americans, such a pessimistic view of the human condition is indicative of neurosis. But perhaps Americans have yet to experience the existential predicament in terms comprehensible to them. For Europeans it has been the problem for several decades, and Moravia's biography and novels exemplify his relationship with his historical setting.

### CHAPTER III

#### DUALITY: THE CEREBRAL AND THE PRIMAL

Alberto Moravia treats his theme, the relationship between man and reality, as a study in dualities, manifest most clearly in the struggle of the inner man in conflict both with himself and with the external world. Moravia sees two approaches to living--the cerebral, intellectual, analytical, rational; and the primal, instinctual, non-questioning, non-rational. In his novels Moravia describes the opposing inclinations in man at war with each other and probes the consciousness of his characters as they confront the existential predicament in its external forms. In Moravia's characters the struggles between the conflicting dualities of their respective temperaments result in a loss of clear perspective, in personal dishonesty, and in a confusion of values. Modern man, as Moravia sees him, is torn between intentions and results, between the objective and the subjective identities, between intellect and instinct, between reality and illusion.

Moravia's first novel, The Time of Indifference, is an explicit development of dualism as an aspect of the existential predicament. Mariagrazia, well-to-do at one

time in her life, has become financially dependent on her lover, Leo. Mariagrazia does not really love Leo, but the notion of having a lover appeals to her vanity. And she needs money to support her children, Carla and Michele, both already grown. Leo, under the pretext of managing the family's finances over the years, has in truth been stealing money from their estate and has eventually got possession of everything they own. Mariagrazia, once a great beauty but now in her fifties, is above all concerned with keeping up appearances before her superficial friends, like Lisa, her rival and Leo's former mistress. Mariagrazia is also a social climber who desires wealth and high social station. She realizes these can never be hers, but the illusion is pleasing to her childish nature. Her security depends on her keeping Leo as her lover and hoping for a financially favorable marriage for Carla. She has fears of losing Leo to Lisa and berates him mercilessly, with infantile displays of artificial emotions, and later even confronts Lisa with her accusation. In actuality Lisa has no interest in Leo but lusts for Michele, the son.

The situation annoys Leo; he wishes to rid himself of the mother and begin an affair with Carla. Mariagrazia's perspective is so clouded with jealousy, vanity, and

delusions of grandeur that she cannot see that Leo is about to seduce her own daughter.

Carla, for her part, is almost completely passive. She dreams vaguely of "a new life," not because it might offer the novelty or stimulation which she feels her present life lacks, but simply because it is a comforting illusion. She feels no compunction about entering into an almost incestuous relationship with a lecherous, parasitic, aging businessman; she seems, rather, to comply with an instinct for self-debasement. As she waits in bed for Leo to complete his preparations before their first sexual act, Carla assesses her situation:

This is the end, she thought, vaguely and without conviction. From the desire for destruction that had led her as far as this bed there was now born in her a longing for the darkness in which she would cling to her lover. She imagined, not without a certain thrill--whether from an instinctive desire for enjoyment or because of her established plan of complete self-degradation, she did not know--that she would throw herself, in the blackness, in the promiscuity of night, into all those bestial profligacies whose existence she had long suspected without having any knowledge of them whatsoever.<sup>1</sup>

After the act, Leo immediately falls asleep and Carla is left with her thoughts:

She felt terribly lonely--yes, that was it--as she lay there on her back, in that bed, left to her solitary thoughts, to her fears, her weaknesses; the darkness of night filled her wide-open eyes, and her

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<sup>1</sup>Alberto Moravia, The Time of Indifference, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1953), p. 309.

lover did not caress her brow, or push back her untidy hair, or share her anguished wakefulness, or rally to her defense--it was as if he was not there at all.<sup>2</sup>

Carla realizes that her dream of "the new life" has no relationship with actual circumstances. As she prepares to leave Leo's apartment, doubts and uncertainty plague her: "She stooped and picked up her slip. Is it really possible, she thought, crushing the little garment nervously in her hand and staring straight in front of her, that this can be the new life?"<sup>3</sup>

Her doubts do not provide her with an impetus for action, and Carla, in her confusion, succumbs to her illusion of "the new life." Her indifference paralyzes her will and leaves her without any force of character. Having been used as an object of pleasure by the bestial Leo, she allows her passivity to pull her down even further into a mire of sloth and purposeless ease where she does not have to exert her will or make choices. In a sense, using Sartre's terms, Carla has allowed her en-soi to annihilate her pour-soi. Her subjectivity has been submerged, and she has lost her humanity. At the end of the novel in a conversation with her brother Michele, and in Leo's presence, Carla indicates her fallen state:

"A new life?" Disheartened, Carla crossed over to the window. The first drops of rain were

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 315.

streaking the dusty panes, and she looked at them for a moment, dreamily. A new life? So nothing was really changed? This dirty adventure of hers remained just a dirty adventure and nothing more? She felt stifled.

"No," she said in a clear voice, without turning. "I don't believe a new life is possible.

"I went with him"--and she pointed with a clumsy gesture to her lover, sitting motionless near her-- "I did this--d'you understand?--in order to find this new life. Now I realize that nothing is changed. It's better, then, not to make any more attempts, better to just stay as we are."<sup>4</sup>

Against the feeble objections of her brother, Carla agrees to marry Leo, whose reaction to her acceptance reveals his amorality and bestiality:

"I'm marrying a slut," he said to himself, then put out his hand to her.

"I swear to you," he said solemnly, "that I'll always be faithful to you."<sup>5</sup>

The emptiness of meaning and the scorn for integrity revealed in Leo's thoughts and actions are characteristic of the unscrupulous man throughout the story. Carla concludes in acquiescence: ". . . life was what it was and it was better to accept it than to judge it, let them only leave her in peace."<sup>6</sup> But for Carla there can be no peace--only indifference and a meaningless future as a nonentity.

Michele's indifference in coping with his inner conflicts is as pathetic as his sister's. Of all the

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 394-395.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 400.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 406.

characters in the novel, he is the most conscious of the problem which confronts all of them, yet his inability to muster enough concern and will to act for himself or for his mother and sister reveals him as the cowardly, simpering, effeminate person that he is. Michele hates Leo, but can do nothing about removing his family from the tyranny of the brutish man. He recognizes his mother's vanity and emotional theatrics, and sees her for the empty sham that she actually is. And most of all, he can see himself with more clarity and more honesty than the other characters can see themselves. He is subject to momentary impulses to act and almost, but never quite, asserts himself. At those times when he is about to fulfill his intention through action, his old indifference returns and his small spark of vitality fades into passivity and indifference.

His one potent action, a negative one at that, results in a fiasco. To prove to himself that he has some force as a man, Michele buys a gun in order to murder Leo and thereby free his family. He goes to Leo's house and discovers he has interrupted a tryst between his sister and the man. Michele's plan is purely analytical and has no basis in true emotional fervor; and even finding Carla with Leo fails to move him to a sincere moral commitment. Moravia shows him in anguished self-analysis:

Anger--rage--hatred, he thought feverishly. . . . I would give anything in the world for a little sincere hatred. But his spirit remained inert, leaden; there was no inkling of anger, or rage, or hatred. Carla in tears, naked, ruined, Leo with his ferocious appetites, the shame, the misery of it--nothing had the power to shake him.<sup>7</sup>

Michele works himself up to a kind of artificial anger as he makes his intentions known to Leo. The two men struggle, and Michele submits to Leo's superior strength. Leo wrests the revolver from Michele and is about to push him out of the house when Carla enters from the bedroom. Michele begins to feel himself becoming more mechanized and further removed from reality. Moravia comments at this point: "And he felt himself to be so very far from the truth and so deeply involved in the lies into which he was forced by the inertia of his own spirit that he was overwhelmed by black distress, by humiliation and misery."<sup>8</sup>

Having confessed her part in the affair, Carla reveals that her illusion of "the new life" has vanished. Michele, hoping to redeem himself in some way, proposes that they sell their villa, pay their debts, and give up their circle of bourgeois friends. But the villa is worth a considerable sum, and Leo proposes marriage to Carla in order to maintain his control over their money. She is not overly receptive to the plan, but her moral inertia

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 394.



again triumphs when Leo threatens to slander her if she refuses. Leo also promises Michele a job. The two, brother and sister, allow themselves to become objects in Leo's world of things. The effect of their compliance on their mother is of no consequence to them. Mariagrazia is under the impression that Carla will find a "good match" with lots of money, never suspecting that it is her own lover who will become her daughter's husband and that it is Michele Lisa is after. Again Michele is the lucid one. The novel concludes on a note of unrelieved despair:

He was oppressed by a feeling of dull disgust. His thoughts were arid, his mind a desert; there was no faith, no hope there, that he might rest and refresh himself in their shade. 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 the harder he tried to reduce, to simplify his problem, the more difficult and frightening it appeared to him . . . the forest of life, tangled and impenetrable, surrounded him on every side; no light shone in the distance.<sup>9</sup>

Earlier in the novel, Michele, in one of his frequent moments of intellectual lucidity, states the problem of the people of his world, and to a large extent that of the characters in all of Moravia's novels:

But he had seen, he had felt what would become of him if he failed to conquer his own indifference. Without faith, without love, alone, he must, for his salvation, either live through this unbearable

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

situation with sincerity and according to traditional standards, or he must get out of it for good. He must hate Leo, love Lisa, feel disgust and compassion for his mother, and affection for Carla--all of them sentiments of which he had no knowledge; or he must go away somewhere else and seek his own people, his own place, that paradise where everything--gestures, words, feelings--would have a direct connection with the reality in which they had originated [italics mine].<sup>10</sup>

In a sense, most of the people in Moravia's world are estranged from that paradise Michele speaks of: that place where intentions are fulfilled in actions; where intellect and instinct, the objective and subjective identities are in harmony; and where reality is not obscured by illusions.

Most of Moravia's protagonists recognize, like Michele, that as individuals they have been dehumanized and have lost their subjective identities through a lack of vigilance and will. Through Carla in The Time of Indifference, Moravia describes the situation with merciless detail. Carla and her family are at their evening meal. Mariagrazia asks the girl why she does not eat, and Carla answers that she does not know:

She was not hungry, among all the hungry things in her life. This room, in which she ought to have been feeding herself, had been feeding upon her; all the inanimate objects around her had, day by day, been sucking out her vitality with a tenacity far stronger than her own vain attempts to break away. The best of her blood was flowing now through the dark wood of

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 358.

the corpulent sideboards; the milk of her flesh had melted into the eternal whiteness of the air, and in the old mirror that hung opposite her place the image of her youth had been caught and imprisoned.<sup>11</sup>

The individual character's awareness of a loss of subjectivity in the objective world is an important aspect of Moravia's concept of the existential predicament.

Moravia sees nothingness or non-being as a definite threat to the identity of the person rather than as a clinical term for a merely temporary neurotic state. Carla's condition is paralleled in Moravia's other novels as well as in the actual world.

The Conformist treats most expressly Moravia's theme of submerged or lost identity resulting from the conflict between intellect and instinct. Set in Fascist Italy of the 1920's and 1930's, the novel has as protagonist Marcello Clerici. Marcello has grown up under the delusion that he is abnormal and guilty because he had destructive impulses as a child (a sadistic pleasure in killing animals) and was an unfortunate victim of a homosexual whom he believes he has killed. He tries to rid himself of his feelings of guilt and abnormality by pursuing extreme conformity. Marcello sets out deliberately to submerge his identity in the mass world of Italian Fascism by becoming "just like other people, just like

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 339.

everyone else."<sup>12</sup> He exercises his freedom to choose the kind of life that will be most meaningful to him, but Moravia makes it clear that the protagonist is acting out negative existential motives, those of fear and self-revulsion. A part of his plan to be "just like everyone else" is to mimic the prevailing social customs. He marries a simple-minded woman, who later bears him a child. Then he becomes an informer for the Fascist secret police, and finally participates in the assassination of his former teacher, whose sympathies do not lie with the Fascist regime.

Marcello's conscious objectification of self is transferred to his relationships with others, especially his wife Giulia. After an act of sexual intercourse, Marcello clinically observes his wife: "Marcello, remembering that he had possessed his wife a few minutes before, had the feeling that he was looking not at a real person but at a machine made of flesh, beautiful and lovable but brutal, made for love and for nothing else."<sup>13</sup>

A sub-theme of The Conformist concerns the enigma of guilt and innocence in human life. Marcello's actions in the novel stem from his obsession that he must mold his

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<sup>12</sup>Alberto Moravia, The Conformist, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1951), p. 62.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

life into a pattern of objective realities. His memorable childhood deeds, killing animals and firing a revolver at the homosexual chauffeur who tried to seduce him, cause him to feel that he must submerge himself in a reality larger than himself. And he chooses the Fascist State.

By means of a contrivance that some critics regard as a recurrent flaw in Moravia's novels, Marcello's questioning about his lost innocence and the meaning of human existence is partially answered by the chance reappearance of the chauffeur, the man he believes he has murdered. The old homosexual tells Marcello, "All of us have been innocent. . . . Wasn't I innocent myself once? And we all lose our innocence, one way or another, it's the normal thing."<sup>14</sup> Frank Baldanza says of Moravia's view as it is given through Marcello that "normality can be defined as a futile longing for an innocence that one necessarily loses in the process of living."<sup>15</sup> Moravia seems to say then that to live is to be guilty. Any dream of returning to a state of innocence and perfection is illusory and false.

After the surprise meeting with the old chauffeur, Marcello takes his family on a trip into the country. As they are driving through the Italian countryside, he

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>15</sup>Frank Baldanza, "The Classicism of Alberto Moravia," Modern Fiction Studies, III (1957), 316.

continues his introspective self-laceration. He recognizes that

Living for human beings, did not mean abandoning oneself to the peaceful torpor provided by the indulgence of nature; it meant, rather, a state of continuous struggle and agitation, within the limits of larger problems that were contained, in turn, in the all-embracing problem of life itself.<sup>16</sup>

Marcello analyzes himself further as he contrasts his past deluded motives with the hope he has for his little girl's future:

In his daughter's life, he felt, all must be liveliness, caprice, grace, lightness, clarity, freshness, adventure. . . . There must be nothing in it of the savage pedantry which, until the day before, had shaped his own destiny. Yes, he said to himself, she must live in the fullest freedom.<sup>17</sup>

He sees with unaccustomed clarity and honesty that his quest for normality has been based on his own self-deluded refusal to face his own real self--his own, private, individual being. The novel concludes on a note of existential absurdity. Just as Marcello reaches a state of lucid self-recognition, he and his family are killed in their automobile by a strafing airplane. After a life of negation, he suffers the final negation of life--physical death itself. Such irony is typical of existential pessimism.

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<sup>16</sup>Moravia, The Conformist, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

The next two novels demonstrating Moravia's dualism deal with marriage. The relationship between man and woman affords Moravia a situation which best of all illustrates the conflict between the instinctual and intellectual approaches to living.

The first of the two books, and by critical consensus the better novel, is Conjugal Love. It might be more appropriately entitled "conjugal disunion," for that is precisely what the story is about. This novel, like all of Moravia's later fiction, is written in the first person in a terse, economical manner typical of Moravia's best work. The narrator is Silvio Baldeschi, a wealthy dilettante who revels in his marriage to his wife, Leda. The man and his wife are opposites: he is introspective, articulate, extremely rational; she is outgoing, instinctive, unquestioning. Silvio regards instinct as the vital power in life and art. Leda wishes for more of her husband's rationality. The two are staying in their villa in Tuscany during the early fall so that Silvio can go about writing the masterpiece that his literary ambitions lead him to believe he is capable of creating. Since his first efforts are frustrating, Silvio proposes to his wife that they abstain from sexual activity so that his full creative potency can be reserved for his art. Leda agrees, seemingly without reservations. Every day during their

stay in Tuscany, Silvio has a barber named Antonio come from the village to shave him. The aspiring writer is disturbed by some strange quality in Antonio, and in order to find out more about him, inquires in the village. Silvio then discovers that the calm, obsequious exterior of the barber masks a tireless libertine, who is the scandal of the countryside. Silvio, his curiosity satisfied, forgets about the barber. But one day his wife has Antonio dress her hair for her; and after he has left, she confronts her husband with the charge that the barber made obscene gestures to her. She requests that Silvio dismiss him. Silvio, in spite of or maybe because of his intellectuality, is obtuse; and not believing his wife's accusations, he persists in having Antonio come to shave him. By this time, Moravia has made it perfectly clear that Leda is both attracted to and repulsed by the ape-like barber. The outcome is predictable; she will eventually enter into a physical relationship with him. The irony of the situation is that Silvio--intelligent, artistic, rational--is unable to see that his vanity and selfishness have separated him from his wife. His wife, on the other hand, is doing what she must--that is, living by her natural inclinations, which though not always commendable are at least authentic and sincere.



The night that Silvio completes his masterpiece, he goes out into the air for a walk. On a haystack he sees his wife and the barber in the act of sexual intercourse. The sudden change from exaltation to recognition of his folly throws Silvio into a state of emotional shock. Dazed he returns to the villa, re-reads his story (called ironically enough Conjugal Love), and discovers for the first time that he has been truly deluding himself, that he has failed with his wife, and that as a writer he is mediocre. The story is not the masterpiece he has thought it would be. The shock of seeing his wife indulging her natural instincts brings with it a recognition, as in classical drama, that he has been blind to the true nature of his wife, their relationship, and his own reality. Even with his superior intelligence, he has lacked the clarity to see his wife as she really is--a simple, sensual animal who is also loyal, devoted, and affectionate. He has, by his vanity, tried to relegate her to the status of an object and consequently has almost destroyed his marriage. His clarity of perspective is restored.

At that moment I had an exact perception of the weakness of my own character, made up, as it was, of impotence and morbidity and selfishness; and I accepted it completely, all at once. I knew that, after that night, I should be a much more modest man, and that perhaps, if I so wished, I should be able,

if not exactly to change, at least to correct myself, since in that one single night I had learned more about myself than in all the other years of my life.<sup>18</sup>

Leda returns from her intrigue, disheveled and excited. Silvio, inwardly acknowledging that the failure has been his own, does not mention her affair with Antonio, although she senses that he has seen them in the act. At her insistence he reads his story to her. She recognizes that it is about their marriage and tells him that he has not shown her as she really is. Perhaps in time, she says, they will know each other better. The novel ends with Silvio aware that there is more than one approach to living, and that in their case, his wife's has been more authentic than his own.

As Silvio and Leda are walking the next morning, they come upon an old church which is adorned with many stone carvings. Silvio is fascinated by one which bears the image of a demon. Leda is reassuring him of his future success as a writer, and he records:

I said nothing; all I did was to stroke her hand. And, as I did this, I was looking over her shoulder at the capital with the demon's face on it and thinking that, in order to take up the story again, I should have not merely to know the devil as well as the unknown stonemason had known him, but also to

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<sup>18</sup>Alberto Moravia, Conjugal Love, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1951), p. 167.

know his opposite. "It'll take a long time," I said softly, finishing my thought aloud.<sup>19</sup>

The implication is that there is an enigmatic part of life which Silvio is only beginning to know--a secret, elemental, primordial demonism--which his wife Leda may represent.

The other novel on marriage, A Ghost at Noon, begins with almost the same situation as Conjugal Love, and the narrator is again the husband, a reasonably talented writer. Riccardo Molteni, the novelist, begins the narrative thus:

During the first two years of our married life my relations with my wife were, I can now assert, perfect. . . . This story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her and not to judge her, Emilia [his wife] on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me.<sup>20</sup>

Riccardo Molteni's flaw, like Silvio's, is self-delusion which leads to an incommunicability in the conjugal relationship. During the first two years of their marriage, the Moltenis have been living simply and rather poorly while Riccardo prosecutes his purpose to write serious drama. Then Riccardo decides that his wife needs more material comforts. He knows she has always longed for a comfortable house, so he purchases one for her that he

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>20</sup>Alberto Moravia, A Ghost at Noon, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1954), p. 382.

feels will be to her liking. To pay for the new house, the writer abandons his artistic ambitions and finds a job as a well-paid script writer for a movie producer called Battista. This man turns out to be the barber Antonio in a new guise. Almost immediately after moving into their new house, Riccardo finds that his simple, submissive, and affectionate wife has become distant, and is indifferent to his amorous advances. Riccardo is preoccupied with his new job and is unable to discover why Emilia has undergone such a reversal of character. After lengthy arguments and importunings with her, he finally wrests from her the admission that she has stopped loving him and in fact despises him. The remainder of the novel is devoted to the husband's attempt to analyze and discover the source of his wife's new attitude toward him. The Italian title (Il Disprezzo) sums up her attitude accurately: it means Contempt.

The producer Battista and a German director, Rheingold, are preparing a film treatment of The Odyssey. Battista, who is attracted to Emilia, invites all of them to his villa in Capri. Battista wants a spectacular, commercial film; and the German director, a dedicated Freudian, is intent on interpreting The Odyssey as an account of marital disunion between Ulysses and Penelope.

Molteni, artistically scrupulous, wishes to write the script as he believes Homer would have had it: "this bright and luminous world, enlivened by the winds, glowing with sunshine, populated by quick-witted, lively beings . . . that marvellous adventure, the discovery of the Mediterranean, in humanity's fantastic infancy. . . ."21

However, out of Rheingold's Freudian analysis of The Odyssey, Riccardo begins to make connections and to see reasons behind Emilia's contempt for him and her attraction to Battista, who had originally repulsed her with his crassness. The husband sees that his wife is an uncomplicated, instinctive creature, and that through her introduction to a world foreign to her nature, Battista's world of materialism and success, she has begun to look at her husband as a weakling who does not measure up to the standards of this new world. As Riccardo analyzes the situation, he concludes that his wife is a corrupted woman of primitive nature. She has experienced an inversion of values, identifying manliness and integrity with the coarse and tyrannical manner of Battista. Emilia's affair with Battista began because she felt that her husband wanted it to assure his own financial success. But she gradually becomes vitiated and begins to flaunt her

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

relationship with the producer. Riccardo decides that he must leave his work with Battista and return with Emilia to the primal simplicity of their first year of marriage. Emilia, for her part, has decided to return to Rome with Battista. On the way, she is killed in a strange accident; her neck is broken when Battista suddenly stops his speeding car. Battista escapes unharmed.

Moravia has been accused in this novel of oversimplifying for the sake of his thesis by making the connection between the discussion of The Odyssey and the marital conflict of the Moltenis too neat and contrived.<sup>22</sup> The novel, though it is open to this criticism, does show Moravia's dualism: his preoccupation with the disparity between intellect and instinct, reality and illusion, objective and subjective identity, and in essence, that between being and non-being. Moravia does not actually take sides; he merely describes the nature of these dualistic encounters as he sees the situation. Although there is no explicit declaration, the author seems to imply that it is the instinctive persons, usually the women in his novels, who have the greater mastery of life and who are better equipped to cope with the existential predicament. The men, usually introspective, brooding,

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<sup>22</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 74.

abstracting theories about reality from reality in order to submerge themselves in vain illusions, are the common failures.

Up to this point, it might seem that Alberto Moravia is the most pessimistic of novelists and that his view of life as shown in his writings includes nothing but failures. There is certainly not much joy in life for the people he creates, yet his novels are not without some hope.

In the four novels discussed, Moravia describes the death-in-life world of characters whose impotence, futility, and falseness cause a rupture with reality. In his most famous novel, The Woman of Rome, these defeated people are still present. But here Moravia brings to life a character of great vitality and honesty who, despite the misfortune of poverty, is in harmony with her world. Adriana is a beautiful, sensual, hopeful prostitute possessed by a succession of various lovers, not one of whom is capable of recognizing her worth as a person of basic sincerity. Adriana is a complete person. Her objective and subjective identities are united in the act of living itself. Moravia opens this novel having Adriana describe herself, revealing the openness and honesty that is characteristic of her throughout the novel:

At sixteen years of age, I was a real beauty. I had a perfectly oval face, narrow at the temples and widening a little below; my eyes were large, gentle and elongated; my nose formed one straight line with my forehead; my mouth was large, with beautiful full, red lips, and when I laughed, I showed very white, regular teeth. . . . Mother said that although my face was beautiful, my figure was a hundred times more so; she said that there was not a figure like mine in all Rome.<sup>23</sup>

This physical description is no mere device by Moravia to give Adriana dimension as a character. It shows, instead, a point that Moravia tries to make repeatedly--that the truly authentic experience is the one that originates in a feeling of being alive, of being conscious of the objective self as a vital, dynamic being existing in harmony with the subjective awareness of being alive. In an essay on Machiavelli Moravia attributes to the man the need "to feel himself alive."<sup>24</sup> This is essentially the need of all of Moravia's characters, but Adriana in The Woman of Rome is one of the few who actually feels herself alive. She is driven into prostitution by economic insecurity as well as by honest inclination. In spite of her degraded life with its numerous sordid affairs with worthless men, Adriana is sustained by her cheerful disposition, her natural, instinctive goodness, her unselfishness, and her

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<sup>23</sup> Alberto Moravia, The Woman of Rome, translated by Lydia Holland (New York, 1950), p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Alberto Moravia, "Portrait of Machiavelli," Partisan Review, XXII (Summer, 1955), 364.



longing for the security of the commonplace through marriage to an honest man. There are mainly four men who figure in Adriana's life--her first lover, Gino; Astarita, a wealthy government official; Sonzogno, a brutal criminal; and Giacomo, a neurotic, intellectual, anti-Fascist student. The last two figure most prominently. Sonzogno possesses her physically more completely than any other man, and it is by him that she becomes pregnant. Giacomo is the one she falls most deeply in love with, mostly because his comfortable family background appeals to her as an emblem of a good, secure life.

In a conversation with an American critic, Moravia declared that The Woman of Rome contains, by implication, the story of modern Italy. Drawing on his interview with the author, the critic says,

Adriana, in the early stages of the novel, represents the primitive Italy, uncontaminated by civilization, and Sonzogno and Mino [Giacomo] symbolize the factors that led Italy to disaster under Fascism--the appeal of force and the unfortunate role played by the intelligentsia.<sup>25</sup>

This symbolism possibly explains why The Woman of Rome is one of the two most hopeful novels he has written to date. It is significant that Adriana's is the only pregnancy recorded in Moravia's eleven novels. Here is one instance of life begetting life even under the most sordid

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<sup>25</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 71.

circumstances in an impoverished world of prevailing impotence and sterility. And Moravia recognizes and celebrates Adriana's vitality and perhaps suggests through her a hope for the future of Italy and of humanity.

The other novel by Moravia containing an element of optimism concerning the human condition is Two Women. The story is placed in war-time Italy (World War II). When the war comes to Rome, the widow Cesira and her daughter Rosetta leave Rome to seek refuge in nearby Fondi. The parallel here with incidents in Moravia's own life is definite. The action takes place almost entirely during the months of hiding in the hut, and concerns Cesira's friendship with Michele, an anti-Fascist intellectual who is also in exile. This novel is unique in Moravia's repertory for its sympathetic treatment of the man of intellectual temperament. Michele is not like Moravia's impotent intellectuals who are frozen by indifference and self-deception. His statements indicate an inner unity of instinct and intellect. Although there is a war surrounding him, Michele is not at war with himself as are Moravia's other intellectuals. Michele is captured and slaughtered by the Germans, and Rosetta is raped by Moroccan troops in an episode that shows both Moravia's naturalistic ability for recording a scene and his compassion for human suffering. Rosetta, after the incident,

accepts her loss of virginity, her loss of innocence with calm dignity. Cesira, in recalling the time that Michele read the Bible story of Lazarus to them, seems to see in Lazarus the symbolic hope for her daughter and herself:

. . . now I saw that Michele had been right, and that for some time now Rosetta and I had indeed been dead, dead to the pity that we owe to others and to ourselves. But sorrow had saved us at the last moment, and so in a way the passage about Lazarus held good for us too, since at last, thanks to sorrow, we had emerged from the war which had enclosed us in its tomb of indifference and wickedness, and had started to walk again along the path of our own life, which was, maybe a poor thing full of obscurities and errors, but nevertheless the only life that we ought to live, as no doubt Michele would have told us if he had been with us.<sup>26</sup>

In all these novels Moravia sees the cerebralized world of modern man as removed from the primal truth of elemental nature. Excessive rationalizing and pedantry have removed his people further from "that paradise" mentioned in The Time of Indifference, "where everything--gestures, words, feelings--would have direct connection with the reality in which they had originated."<sup>27</sup> But that paradise of truth and harmony with reality can be attained in some measure, Moravia suggests, by suffering the negations of life and still remaining clear about one's own position in the world. He does not imply,

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<sup>26</sup>Alberto Moravia, Two Women, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1958), p. 287.

<sup>27</sup>Moravia, The Time of Indifference, p. 358.

however, that passive acquiescence is the answer to the existential predicament. He seems to propose a kind of long-suffering endurance and serenity of spirit without any illusions of hope in prevailing against the human condition. As Cesira says, the individual must go forward in his own life, "a poor life full of obscurities and errors," but the only life a man has to live.

## CHAPTER IV

### EROS AND THE EXISTENTIAL PREDICAMENT

Alberto Moravia's theme, the relationship of man to reality, is most often exemplified in the relationship between men and women, and sex is the most important aspect of the relationship. Does the author's preoccupation with erotic love have a financial motive? The answer is no. Moravia's novels are sexually titillating; however, this appeal to the reader's prurience is only incidental. Moravia is more restrained in his treatment of sex than such writers as Henry Miller, Erskine Caldwell, and James Baldwin. Moravia is more concerned with the individual character's consciousness of his sexuality rather than with the act of sex itself. In his novels, sex is presented primarily in terms of an intellectual perception, but the physical aspect is at the same time made vivid by suggestion.

Moravia could be a successful pornographer if he should choose to become one. He seems to feel, however, that as an artist he has a more serious obligation than merely to provide escapist sexual fantasies for imperceptive readers. Sidney Alexander says of Moravia's

treatment of sex: "Moravia is not a pornographer. He is rather a moralist who writes non-morality plays to demonstrate a thesis."<sup>1</sup> The erotic element in human existence brings out the conflict between the cerebral and the primal in modern man's nature in such a way as to remind him of his animal origins.

Moravia's writing indicates an intellectual bias, but he is also a man of the Mediterranean to whom sex is a natural pastime and a pleasure to be enjoyed. Moravia does not yearn for any "good old days," but his fiction reveals his belief that modern man has suffered a separation from his instinctual nature. Moravia's analysis of this separation ignores conventional ethics and morality and concentrates upon the violation of the life principle itself. Charles Rolo offers the clearest statement on this subject: ". . . if sex figures so prominently in Moravia's work, it is, I think, because it represents to him the great line of communication between the cerebral modern and elemental nature."<sup>2</sup>

Moravia views sex as one area of life where the existential predicament is most emphatically encountered, the area in which man attempts to establish a true and

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<sup>1</sup>Sidney Alexander, "French Novel in Italian," Reporter, XXV (November 23, 1961), 56.

<sup>2</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 72.

meaningful relationship with experiential reality.

Moravia remarks in elaboration of this theme:

This [the relationship of man to reality] may seem to some people a philosophical problem and is indeed the outstanding problem of our time. It took an acute form during and immediately after the first world war because of the destruction by the war itself of the traditional scale of values, and because the relationship between man and reality, which up till then had been based on traditional ethics, was brusquely interrupted by the collapse of those very ethics. Man found himself suddenly incapable of establishing a relationship with his own world, for the world had become dark and unplumbable or--worse still--it had disappeared. Gli Indifferenti and my other novels have sought to express the urgency of these problems. It was this urgency that prompted a particular pre-occupation with the fact of sex, which is one of the most primitive and unchanging manifestations of the relationship with reality. . . .<sup>3</sup>

In Moravia's novels sex objectifies the existential condition of the tension between being and non-being. Again the novelist's ironic temperament becomes evident, for he views sex both as an inferno in which modern man can be consumed by physical passions and as an abyss into which civilized man can be plunged by consciousness of the inadequacy of sex alone, sex in and for itself. Anxiety and despair result from the awareness that the physical assertion of self through the sexual act is not totally satisfactory to a sensitive, creative, perceptive man.

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<sup>3</sup>Alberto Moravia, "About My Novels; a Fragment of Autobiography," Twentieth Century, CLXIV (December, 1958), 531-532.

Moravia has written three works which treat this area of the existential predicament--the two novellas, Agostino and Disobedience, and his latest novel, The Empty Canvas. Agostino and Disobedience describe two adolescent boys as they are brought to an awareness of the world of adult passions and complications. The Empty Canvas has as its theme the more metaphysical concern of eroticism as the manifestation of being itself and also as the negation of being itself.

Many critics consider Agostino to be Moravia's best writing.<sup>4</sup> In recent years novels on the subject of adolescence have become popular. Some of these novels, like Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, lapse into mawkish autobiographies, replete with self-pity and an obtrusive longing for the lost paradise of childhood where innocence and simplicity prevailed. Moravia, by contrast, manages to be compassionate and at the same time detached, so that he shows the suffering of his adolescent protagonists as they lose their innocence through living. Yet he avoids bogging down in sentimentality, both through his objectivity and a notably harsh, clear treatment of detail.

Agostino is the story of a young boy who comes to an awareness of his mother as a woman, a sexual being,

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<sup>4</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 71.



distinct from his childish illusion of her as a protective companion. Agostino and his beautiful mother are vacationing at the seaside during the summer just as the boy is reaching the age of puberty. Agostino feels an awe for his mother's beauty and in his childishness is convinced of a "deep sense of union with his mother."<sup>5</sup> The two swim daily to a raft out in the water, and here the mother is accustomed to removing the upper part of her bathing suit to sun her body. The son is enjoined not to turn around:

Agostino would go on rowing, proud of her injunction not to look, as if he were being allowed to take part in a ritual. And not only did he never dream of looking round, but he felt that her body, lying so close behind him, naked in the sun, was surrounded by a halo of mystery to which he owed the greatest reverence.<sup>6</sup>

The young boy takes pride in being seen with his mother and looks on their relationship with an intense filial devotion akin to jealousy.

But one day when a handsome young man appears, Agostino's mother is attracted to him and the two become regular companions. Agostino is puzzled and annoyed by this intruder. He and his mother meet the young man on the raft every day for swimming and sunning. Agostino's mother becomes coquettish and vain before the man; they

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<sup>5</sup>Alberto Moravia, Agostino, translated by Beryl de Zoete (New York, 1947), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

are beginning a sexual flirtation. Agostino is amazed by the change in his mother's behavior. Moravia subtly convinces the reader that Agostino's perceptions of the physical passion being experienced by his mother and her friend are those of an innocent boy coming to an awareness of something in life he has never known before.

Agostino is angered and hurt by his mother's neglect. He begins to feel that her affection for him has been perfunctory and contrived for appearance. As he becomes convinced of his own superfluity in the situation, his emotional reserves expand and he welcomes self-pity: "For it was with . . . a sense of discovery that he ran away to nurse his injury, which was something so novel as to seem to him almost incredible."<sup>7</sup>

For the first time in his life, Agostino becomes conscious of his mother as something other than a protective and gorgeous companion. The woman accidentally brushes her body against the young boy's cheek one day as she and the man are romping and playing in the raft while Agostino is rowing. Another day, Agostino's mother slaps the boy when he mockingly taunts her about her lover's absence. Agostino's awareness of his mother is beginning: the slap is an act of denial and represents the woman in

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

the role of the mother in control of her child; the brushing of her body against his cheek is symbolic of invitation and shows the woman in another light. Agostino is being awakened to the fact that his mother is a sexual creature and that he has not known her in all her human complexity.

Feeling rejected, Agostino takes up with a gang of young ruffians who are the children of local fishermen. With this gang the young boy is introduced to violence, hate, crime, and even homosexuality for the first time. It is from the crude members of the gang that he also finds out about the true nature of the relationship between his mother and the man, as the youths joke obscenely about the two. His initiation into the world of sex comes when the gang members, through crude gestures and foul language, tell him about that part of life. After the lecture and demonstration, Agostino's response is mostly puzzlement:

In reality he hadn't so much understood as absorbed the notion, rather as one absorbs a medicine or poison, the effect of which is not immediately felt but will be sure to manifest itself later on. The idea was not in his empty, bewildered and anguished mind, but in some other part of his being; in his embittered heart, or deep in his breast, which received it with amazement. It was like some bright, dazzling object, which one cannot look at for the radiance it emits, so that one can only guess its

real shape. He felt it was something he had always possessed but only now experienced in his blood.<sup>8</sup>

After his first meeting with the beach gang, Agostino begins to change his views about his mother and her lover. His jealousy is removed; instead, he gets a secret, almost perverse satisfaction out of his knowledge of what their relationship is based on. This is his first awareness of his own sexuality.

One afternoon Agostino and his mother are at their quarters, and the boy sneaks into his mother's room while she is undressing. The adolescent has never before committed such an impropriety. Moravia's description of his change of attitude reveals much of the theme of the story:

. . . that new thought, "It is a woman," rooted him to the spot, and forced his reluctant eyes to stare pitilessly at what yesterday he would not have dared to look upon. And during this conflict between repulsion and attraction, surprise and pleasure, all the details of the picture he was contemplating stood out more distinctly and forcibly: the movement of her legs, the indolent curve of her back, the profile of her arm-pits. And they seemed to correspond exactly to his new conception, which was awaiting these confirmations in order to take complete sway over his imagination. Precipitated in one moment from respect and reverence to their exact opposite, he would almost have liked to see the improprieties of her unconscious nudity develop before his eyes into conscious wantonness. The astonishment in his eyes changed to curiosity, the attention which riveted them and which he fancied to be scientific in reality owed its false objectivity to the cruelty of the sentiment controlling him. And while his blood surged up into his brain he kept saying to

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

himself: "She is a woman, nothing but a woman," and he somehow felt these words to be lashes of insult and contempt on her back and legs.<sup>9</sup>

Agostino's heart begins hardening. He seeks the company of the young gang of hoodlums because he receives a cruel pleasure in hearing their obscene remarks about his mother and about their own amorous adventures. He is conscious of his transformation:

He was conscious that his former disposition was changing into quite a different feeling, crueller and more objective, and he thought that their [the gang's] clumsy ironies, by the very fact that they hastened this change, ought to be sought out and cultivated. Why he so much wanted to stop loving his mother, why he even hated himself for loving her, he would have been unable to say. Perhaps because he felt he had been deceived and had thought her to be different from what she really was, or perhaps because, not being able to go on loving her simply and innocently as he had done before, he preferred to stop loving her altogether and to look on her just as an ordinary woman. He was instinctively trying to free himself once [and] for all from the encumbrance of his old, innocent love which he felt to have been shamefully betrayed; for now it seemed to him mere foolishness and ignorance.<sup>10</sup>

When Agostino goes for a boat ride with Saro, an older man who leads the gang, he suffers a frightening and humiliating experience as the man makes homosexual advances. When the two reach shore, the other boys taunt Agostino and accuse him of submitting to the homosexual. The young boy is hurt and embittered because Saro does not confirm his innocence in the affair. Agostino continues

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

to be attracted and yet repulsed by the cruelty and degeneracy of the gang. As he is riding in a boat with the hoodlums at the end of his second day with them, he realizes that he has entered upon a new age of difficulties and miseries from which there seems to be no escape. That day portends the beginning of a period of darkness and trouble for Agostino.

The greater part of the adolescent's conflict is the regaining of perspective after his jolting and apocalyptic experiences. He is torn between his filial love for his mother and his own budding sexuality which impels him to reduce her to an objective reality. As "only a woman" she cannot disturb his emotional stability.

He continues his association with the gang, though their attitude of contempt toward him does not change. In a childish and frantic effort to curry their favor, Agostino begins to dress like them and even adopts their depraved attitudes about life. He relishes his degradation, but is aware that he is not really a part of their class nor is he in his former station any longer. Agostino is in a state of suspension, morally, emotionally, and even socially.

In order to resolve his conflicts, Agostino decides to have sexual relations with one of the women in the local brothel. When he asks one of the members of the

gang about the procedure for entering a brothel, he is surprised to learn that he must have money. Agostino asks himself: "What was the relation between money, which is generally used for acquiring definite objects with recognizable qualities, and a woman's caresses, a woman's naked flesh?"<sup>11</sup> But before he embarks upon this momentous experiment, he begins to see his mother with more clarity. He is coming to know some of the mysterious forces at work in life. Agostino observes his mother as she prepares for a date with her lover:

He obscurely felt that she had never been so beautiful as on that evening. Her dress of glossy white silk showed off brilliantly her brown colouring and the rich rose of her complexion. By an unconscious reflowering of her former character she seemed to have recovered all the sweet, majestic serenity of bearing she used to have; but with an indefinable breath of happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Later, Agostino goes to the brothel with his companion from the gang. The other boy tells him about the adventure he is about to have. Agostino, the adolescent, when told that the prostitute will take the initiative, is pleased by the maternal aspect of the anticipated act. But as the episode turns out, Agostino's companion takes his money and Agostino is refused entry into the brothel because of his age. Agostino feels that "years and years of emptiness and frustration lay between him and that act

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

of liberation."<sup>13</sup> He returns to his room and goes to sleep. He is awakened by his mother in the middle of the night. She comes into his bedroom in her nightgown. The boy finally comes to an awareness that she is a reality which he must live with: ". . . not only did the image of that woman [one of the prostitutes in the brothel] not interpose itself as a screen between him and his mother, as he had hoped, but it actually seemed to confirm the latter's femininity."<sup>14</sup> Agostino scolds his mother for treating him like a child, and she assures him that from that moment she will treat him like a man. "'Like a man,' he couldn't help thinking, before he fell asleep. But he wasn't a man. What a long, unhappy time would have to pass before he could become one."<sup>15</sup>

In summation, Agostino tells the story of a young boy, thirteen, passing from a state of primitive subjective reality in which life is ordered, predictable, simple and direct, to another kind of subjective reality in which his old perceptions of life and illusions about the nature of things have ceased to exist. In order to relate himself to his mother's complexity and to restore order in his emotional life, he tries to harden himself to

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 128.



troublesome realities. This is Agostino's purpose in going to the brothel--to remove completely the old image of his mother as a protective, maternal being, and to transfer, through a sexual act, his old image of her into one that is less painful and more in keeping with his new knowledge. If he can look on his mother as "only a woman," merely an objective reality which can be labeled and kept at a distance, Agostino can avoid the necessity of relating his subjective identity with the unadulterated, painful reality and thereby lessen the anguish of his new life. The adolescent is trying to cope with his existential predicament, and sex is his means. Sex, that which has destroyed his old world, is to be used in uniting him to a more complex and unhappy existence.

Agostino is growing, but he has not yet learned of the dangers inherent in completely objectifying and oversimplifying life. He is not a man, and a long, unhappy time will truly have to pass before he can become one.

In Agostino sex is a consuming force which destroys the young boy's primitive consciousness; and sex is also a means for establishing a new, more complex consciousness. In Moravia's other novella, Disobedience (Luca), the same eroticism becomes a redemptive power capable of establishing an order and clarity in the confused world of a sensitive and somewhat morbid adolescent.

One might say that Luca, the protagonist of Disobedience, is Agostino several years later, at the age of sixteen. Luca is the sheltered and overindulged child of upper middle class parents. In contrast to Agostino, Luca is disgusted and repelled by his world of order and predictability. He is seized by an anger so intense that he is impelled by a rage against all living and has a death wish. He sets out to sever his relationship with his world by playing a game which he calls "disobedience." Luca's disobedience is a suicidal rebellion against life itself, and he goes to great lengths to alienate himself from the world he despises.

Luca's first actions are to objectify his parents and his acquaintances at school:

He saw them [his parents], in fact, with complete precision, in the pitiless light of reality, just as he saw the faces of his schoolfellows or his teachers. And because he saw them so well, it seemed to him that they had been degraded to a lower rank. And with this degradation to objects of insignificance there had disappeared from his life the warmth that gave it energy . . . he had an obscure intuition that his revolt against the world must have begun just at the time this warmth had diminished.<sup>16</sup>

Luca next gives up saying his prayers. He is accustomed to kneeling before a reproduction of Raphael's Madonna, and one evening he discovers his parents putting

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<sup>16</sup>Alberto Moravia, Disobedience, translated by Angus Davidson (London, 1950), p. 29.

away some bonds and cash in a safe hidden behind the picture. Luca, in silent revulsion, asks his parents: "And why did you for so many years make me say my prayers kneeling in front of your money?"<sup>17</sup> Like Agostino coming to the knowledge of the relationship between money and love, Luca cannot see the connection between an area of life that is supposed to be sacred--the symbolic significance of the Madonna--and one that is crass and mundane--material acquisition. Sensing that money binds him to the world he hates, Luca proposes to rid himself of all the money and material possessions he has. Before his present stage of growth, Luca greedily saved his allowance. But now he looks on his money and possessions with disgust:

Those objects and that money were not merely objects and money, but living, tenacious strands in the woof of which his existence was woven. But it was just because of this that he wished to break those threads; for they were also a sign of obedience to the destiny which had been imposed upon him without his being consulted, and to the world against which he had attempted so often, and always in vain, to rebel.<sup>18</sup>

He then gives away his stamp collection and sells all his books, sporting equipment, and other personal objects under the pretext of buying a record player.

Spitefully, the boy lies to his parents, telling them that he lost the money he received in the sale. Luca

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

decides to bury this money along with the sum he has saved from his allowance, and thus "in burying the money he would also in a certain way be burying himself--or at any rate that part of himself that was attached to the money."<sup>19</sup> There has been a recent murder in the town, and Luca chooses a spot where he identifies the money with the mutilated corpse of the murdered man--both horrors which must be hidden from the world. Luca's thoughts as he buries the money are especially revealing:

He discovered that he felt a profound hatred for the money, the sort of hatred one might feel for a tyrant against whom one has rebelled. The idea, too, that money was held in such esteem by his parents and that he himself without knowing it had for so many years said his prayers in front of a safe full of money contributed to his resentment. . . . Luca . . . wanted to destroy [the value of the money] not merely by his own desire to do so but in actual fact. Detested idol as he felt it to be, nothing less than this blasphemous tearing to pieces could serve utterly to desecrate it.<sup>20</sup>

Having suppressed his love for money and objects, Luca engages in another act of self-negation by effacing his pride in his achievements at school. The next stage of his disobedience is a desire for physical negation itself, "the desire to relinquish his existence."<sup>21</sup> In this neurotic state Luca stops eating and is subject to long periods of torpor.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

Luca's aunt becomes ill and her children are sent to Luca's house under the supervision of a governess. Luca is attracted to the older woman and against his will is drawn back into life from which he is desperately trying to withdraw. The woman engages in a flirtation with him, even going so far as to kiss and fondle him. Her advances repel and at the same time attract him, but since sexual attraction binds him to life, he tries to suppress his desire. Luca gradually gives in to a strange kind of anxiety:

It was the fantastic uneasiness of irresolution, which enormously exaggerates the alternatives of a dilemma but at the same time makes them appear indistinct and unattainable and which contents itself with merely formulating them, appearing to take satisfaction in an inertia which is not concerned with making a choice.<sup>22</sup>

Luca attempts to cope with his existential predicament in a negative way through deliberately seeking self-dissolution into nothingness. In his state of existential anxiety, life is bondage and death is freedom.

The governess leaves and gives her address to Luca, inviting him to visit her in her home. Luca is tempted, and finally succumbing to curiosity and desire, he goes to the woman's apartment. The governess, in her sexuality, represents to Luca a certain vital principle, an invitation to return to life. But when he reaches her

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

apartment, he discovers, ironically, that she is about to die from a mysterious disease. He leaves the house in frustration, lamenting the absurdity of his situation:

. . . this was what it meant to live, to go on living--doing, with passion and determination, absurd, senseless things for which it was impossible to find any justification and which continually placed the person who did them in a state of slavery, of remorse, of hypocrisy.<sup>23</sup>

Luca's neurosis eventually culminates in physical illness which lasts for three months. In a sense Luca has willed his illness and hopes that it will bring on the state of final non-being--death itself. "To die, it sometimes occurred to him, was perhaps the one true pleasure that life reserved for mankind."<sup>24</sup> Death becomes for Luca the ultimate reality which offers the most meaningful answer to the riddle of human existence, and he longs for the harmony with non-being which he feels death will bring.

But instead of dying, Luca becomes delirious with fever. A nurse is hired to care for him. Luca is so passive, debilitated, and lacking in will that the nurse is compelled to tend him as if he were an infant. After his long delirium, he regains consciousness and discovers that the concrete world surrounding him now has meaning and a reality with which he wishes to relate himself.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

Luca is returning to life. He is aware of a physical attraction to his nurse and of his hunger for the physical objects around him, both animate and inanimate.

The final experience which retrieves Luca from his moribund state is a sexual experience with the nurse. She comes to his room the last night of her stay with the family, and the boy is introduced to sexual love for the first time in his life:

. . . when she passed her hand unhurriedly over his body, seeking his sex, and, having found it, took hold of it by the root as though she wished to tear it away, implanting it then in her own body, he had the precise feeling that she was taking him by the hand and introducing him, a reverent novice, into a mysterious cave dedicated to a religious rite. This . . . was the life he had formerly invoked, and little did it matter if it presented itself to him in the garb of autumn.<sup>25</sup>

Luca's regeneration is completed. He has been awakened "into that more general love for all things,"<sup>26</sup> and he feels that he is now in harmony with reality. His relationship with life has been restored, first through his wish for death, and then through the sexual act as an act of living: "Content to have become a part of this order, he found a new strength in accepting its mysterious, external nature."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

Luca's parents send him to a sanitorium for convalescence. Yet the boy has already recovered from his true sickness, the inner one: ". . . he knew that, from now onward, not only the clatter of a train in a tunnel or the whiteness of snow on a mountain peak, but all things would have a meaning for him and would speak to him in their own mute language."<sup>28</sup>

Alberto Moravia's preoccupation with sex as revealed in these two novellas is not a licentious one. He avoids lascivious details aimed at an appeal to prurience. For him, sex as the subject of a novel has a much greater significance than the providing of superficial thrills. Sex is an act of living: in Agostino it is primarily a force of destruction, an intruding predator; in Disobedience, it becomes the force of life itself, a redeemer from the abyss of non-being. Any reader who accuses Moravia of using sex primarily for sensational effect is doing him an injustice.

Moravia's latest published novel, The Empty Canvas (1961), on the most obvious level of interpretation is a story of sexual obsession. Moravia said in an interview that the novel is his sexiest book--but that it is also

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 160.



his most chaste.<sup>29</sup> Some readers might find such a declaration nothing more than a teasing paradox. But Moravia's observation about his novel is correct.

The Italian title of the book is La Noia, which translated literally into English means "boredom." But boredom is not the precise meaning of the word denoting that facet of the existential predicament which is the theme of The Empty Canvas. The protagonist is Dino, an abstract painter, who could be seen as an older relative of Luca in Disobedience. At the age of thirty-five, Dino has been living alone for ten years, apparently satisfied with his solitary life as an artist. He is the only son of a wealthy businesswoman; in rebellion against the materialism of his mother's world he leaves her lavish villa to live alone and paint. Dino had begun painting during the war when the oppressive boredom of the Fascist way of life prompted him to take up art: "I hoped to be able to re-establish contact with reality, once and for all, by means of artistic expression."<sup>30</sup> Like most of Moravia's protagonists, Dino is capable of profound self-analysis. He sees the dominating force in his life as

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<sup>29</sup>Nicola Tucci, "The Proof of Life Is in the Loving," Saturday Review, XLIV (October 28, 1961), 18.

<sup>30</sup>Alberto Moravia, The Empty Canvas, translated by Angus Davidson (New York, 1961), p. 8.

boredom, a kind of tedium vitae which interposes itself between himself and external reality. He can find no sufficient or effective existence in external things, and his unrelatedness to these things causes his boredom:

. . . something with which I have no relationship, once it appears to me as an absurd object--then from that very absurdity springs boredom, which when all is said and done is simply a kind of incommunicability and the incapacity to disengage oneself from it.<sup>31</sup>

Like many of Moravia's other protagonists, Dino is bound by a purposeless inertia:

Worse than anything, I suffered from a kind of paralysis of all my faculties, which made me mute and apathetic and dull, so that I felt as if I were buried alive inside myself, in a hermetically sealed and stifling prison.<sup>32</sup>

Dino's predicament is an existential one. He feels himself to be fragmented, alienated from himself as well as from the external world, and suspended between forces of equal attraction--being and nothingness. The tension between the pull of being and nothingness results in his catatonia, paralyzing his conscious will and yet goading him to an awareness of his condition.

In this novel, as in the two novellas, and most of Moravia's other works, it is sex that becomes the tangible manifestation of this tension between being and nothingness. Dino's mother is a pathetic woman whose sole reason

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

for living is her money and possessions. She tries to lure her son back to her home, but he is repelled by her meaningless way of living and her view of life which reduces everything to an economic value. He refuses to return to the villa, even when she buys him an expensive roadster.

In the building where he has his studio, there is another painter, an older man named Balestrieri. Balestrieri is an erotomaniac whose only subject for painting is the female nude. Dino observes that the old artist is continually visited by a large number of women, all of whom he reputedly seduces. Dino is curious about his neighbor's activities and notices that all of the women who visit his studio are of the same type. One day a girl appears who seems to summarize all the women in the last ten-year period of the older artist's life. Dino sees the girl often as she goes to Balestrieri's studio, and he is aware of the suggestiveness of her actions toward him. Dino feels toward her a kind of nausea that is in keeping with his boredom:

It was, I reflected, the same feeling of nausea that probably everyone experiences when on the threshold of some unknown, vague reality: or perhaps, more simply, of reality unadulterated if one has become accustomed, over a long period, to not facing it.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

At the age of sixty-five, Balestrieri dies during the act of intercourse with his latest mistress, the young girl Dino has been observing. Cecilia is seventeen, a humorless version of the type found in Lolita, Candy, and the "Kitten" books. She is totally amoral and lacking in intellectual discernment; she lives purely by instinct.

Dino, compelled by what he calls a "secret, rigorous mechanism," is drawn to her. First, he engages in clinical discussions with her, attempting to find the meaning of her relationship with the deceased painter. Cecilia is uncommunicative, like Dino's perception of reality itself, and her monosyllabic, fragmentary answers to his questions elicit in him the profound desire to possess her physically in order to know her better.

Cecilia and Dino then begin their love affair. The physical relationship is extremely successful: Cecilia is an indefatigable nymphomaniac. Dino contrasts the limitations of her speech, thoughts, and mental processes with the eloquence of her physical capabilities during the act of sexual intercourse:

I came to the conclusion that she had only one means of expression, the sexual one, which however was obviously impossible to interpret even though original and powerful; and that with her mouth she said nothing, not even things concerned with sex, because her mouth was, so to speak, a false orifice, without depth or resonance, that did not communicate with anything inside her. . . . I could not help comparing

the horizontal cleft of her mouth with the vertical cleft of her sex and remarking, with surprise, how much more expressive the latter was than the former. . . .<sup>34</sup>

Dino discovers that he feels himself to be attracted to Cecilia in such a way that his former state of boredom is passing. In his fear he wishes to retain the unchallenging emptiness of boredom, which is less painful to him than personal entanglements with others. He tries to remove Cecilia from his subjective consciousness by treating her cruelly and questioning her mercilessly about her sexual activities with other men. But he is unable to daunt Cecilia, for in her mute way, she lets him know that he means nothing to her except during the sexual act, and then only as an object. Dino has never really loved the girl, but she disrupts his boredom, which he actually desires, and destroys his former equilibrium.

In the meantime, he has given up painting. He rips his last picture to shreds in a fit of dissatisfaction, and places an empty canvas on his easel to symbolize his starting anew. He vows not to paint again until he has overcome his boredom. His confrontation with an alien reality in Cecilia brings an end to his boredom but also forces him to commit himself to act on feelings which have been lying dormant for years. He is being subjected to

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

a force that compels him to assert his existence through involvement in life.

Cecilia is inscrutable and almost incomprehensible. Her part in the novel could be interpreted as the personification of the external reality which Dino has heretofore been separated from but which he must now meet in a meaningful and potent way.

Dino tries to reduce Cecilia's significance in his life. She is from an extremely poor family, yet money means nothing to her. When Dino tries to pay her for her services, hoping to reduce her to an objective level, she only turns the money over to her other lover, a young actor. This enrages Dino because his plan is thwarted; giving her money is to him an act of objectification, a denying of independent reality for the girl. He wishes to look on her as an object whose existence he can label and remove to a comfortable distance, much as Agostino tries to do with his mother. When Dino's sadism and money fail to reduce Cecilia to a confrontable level, he proposes marriage to her, hoping to impress her with his mother's wealth and thereby induce her to comply with his plan. By marrying the girl, Dino believes he can truly objectify her, deprive her of an independent reality, and thus return to his former static condition, a symbolic death or death-in-life. Dino, like Luca in Disobedience,

cannot tolerate the demands and anxiety of living. Cecilia refuses to marry Dino and goes away with her younger lover for a vacation paid for by Dino's money. The artist attempts suicide by driving his automobile into a tree.

Dino is not killed. As he is convalescing in the hospital after his collision, he comes to the realization, like Luca, that the external world has focused itself in his clouded perspective and that objects no longer bore him: they have an independent reality which he can acknowledge along with his own. As for Cecilia, Dino becomes aware that he no longer desires to objectify her through physical possession, but that she too has assumed an independent existence:

And finally I no longer desired to possess her, but to watch her live her life, just as she was, that is, to contemplate her in the same way that I contemplated the tree outside my window. This contemplation would never come to an end for the simple reason that I did not wish it to come to an end, that is, I did not wish the tree, or Cecilia, or any other object outside myself, to become boring to me and consequently to cease to exist. In reality, as I suddenly realized with a feeling almost of surprise, I had relinquished Cecilia once and for all; and, strange to relate, from the very moment of this relinquishment, Cecilia had begun to exist for me.<sup>35</sup>

Dino is thus reclaimed to life by his finding that, at least through contemplation and acknowledgment of external

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 305.

reality, he can issue from his "hermetically sealed" solipsistic condition of tedium vitae.

One critic calls Moravia "a French writer writing in Italian."<sup>36</sup> Certainly his preoccupation with boredom as the manifestation of nothingness places him with the Existentialists from France, but Moravia's vision is his own. Actually, Moravia had stated the theme of The Empty Canvas more than thirty years earlier in The Time of Indifference, but in this latest novel he gives his "one good tune" more explicit development.

Although sex plays such a prominent part in this book, Moravia's dealing with the subject in a naturalistic manner has a definite relation to his artistic purpose. Moravia himself has said of sex in literature that "if sex is not necessary, it is merely pornography."<sup>37</sup> In The Empty Canvas sex plays the symbolic role of intermediary between the participants in their state of spiritual dessication and the external reality to which they must return. J. N. Hartt expresses the matter this way: ". . . in The Empty Canvas the sexual performance is not by any means written off as mere copulation: it is expressed rather as the futile efforts of dead souls to

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<sup>36</sup> Sidney Alexander, "French Novel in Italian," Reporter, XXV (November 23, 1961), 55.

<sup>37</sup> Tucci, op. cit., p. 18.



reach some kind, any kind of external reality. . . ."38

In contrast to the view set forth by Moravia in Disobedience, eros is not a force redeeming Dino from the abyss of nothingness and bringing him back into life, but is, instead, a desperate means of self-transcendence which ultimately fails.

Moravia's view of eros as a part of human existence is not a simple one. He seems to look on sex in at least four ways: as a pleasure to be enjoyed by the senses (The Woman of Rome), as a disruptive force (Agostino), as a power of redemption (Disobedience), and as an unsatisfactory means of self-assertion (The Empty Canvas). And though it is the sexual element which reveals most clearly the nature of the existential predicament, Moravia does not propose sexual debauchery as a panacea for the problems of life nor does he invest sex with a religious significance. Ultimately, he seems to say that sex, though alluring and at the same time threatening, does not offer an escape from life, from individual moral responsibility of relating oneself meaningfully to others. On the contrary, Moravia, like the philosophical existentialists, appears to say that the particular person must, like his protagonists--Adriana, Cesira, Silvio, Agostino,

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<sup>38</sup>J. N. Hartt, "The Return of Moral Passion," Yale Review, LI (Winter, 1962), 302.

Luca, and Dino--return to himself for the answer to his own existence. And sex, an enduring and universal reality of life, might serve as a means to this self-attainment. But in Moravia's novels sex is not an end in itself.

## CHAPTER V

### AN EXISTENTIAL MORALITY

Although Moravia has been called a nihilist because of his rejection of traditional morality and religious beliefs, he may be more accurately described as an existential moralist with a humanistic outlook. He is, in fact, anti-nihilistic in his belief that the concrete, immediate world and the person's apprehension of it provide the bases of truth and reality. He often dwells on the sordid and unhappy in human existence, but one can detect in him a longing for an order of truth and simplicity in the civilized modern world, where confusion, uncertainty, disunion, hypocrisy, and moral inertia seem to predominate.

Moravia rejects the notion of Platonic essences and the eternality of Ideas. In his view, truth is to be found only in the world of human emotions, human involvements, inanimate objects, and historical occurrence. Reality to him means living completely aware of oneself: one's faults, one's virtues, and one's accommodations to the inevitable; reality also means living with a perceptive awareness of the external world, which includes

people as well as things. As he sees the existential predicament, it is the separation from reality thus conceived which brings about frustration and ineffectuality, and generates the anxiety so often observed in modern man. Moravia implies rather than states that there are moral values which will enable civilized man to regain contact with reality and thereby make his life more meaningful.

Moravia's antipathy to explicit moral commitments (especially traditional ethics) often makes him appear anti-moral rather than immoral or amoral. But his approach to moral questions is humanistic as opposed to transcendental or legalistic. All human action must be directed, either consciously or unconsciously, toward the attainment of meaning for living and toward the unity of the individual with the immediate present, no matter how oppressive this imminent reality may be. In his novels there are only two absolute values--acceptance of life and treatment of other people as ends in themselves rather than means (an echo of the Kantian Practical Imperative).

For Moravia the ideal attitude toward life is a calm, clear-eyed acceptance of all life and one's place in it as a contribution to the inescapable human condition:

What Moravia says with ever-increasing effectiveness is that until man assesses the circumambient world and his role in it, until he accepts responsibility for his execution of that role, he can know no peace,

and his lot can become no more enviable than a sorry acceptance of the makeshift present.<sup>1</sup>

Moravia is notably scornful of the sterile over-intellectualization he sees in the civilized western world. Adriana in The Woman of Rome observes:

I have often wondered why misery and anger dwell in the hearts of people who try to live according to certain precepts and to conform to certain ideals, and why those people who accept their destiny--which is mainly emptiness, darkness, and weakness--are so often gay and carefree.<sup>2</sup>

Moravia's emphasis on calmness in the face of misfortune and acceptance of one's lot in life may be subtly distinguished from compliant acquiescence to circumstances. Though he is impatient with moral ambition, he is equally hostile to smugness and complacency derived either from ideological prejudices or from moral indifference. He implicitly advocates the wisdom of "getting by" in a world of sensual immediacy, but he does not blatantly suggest that "where ignorance is bliss,/'Tis folly to be wise."<sup>3</sup> As has been pointed out, he pictures the depths of moral sloth and degradation to which modern man has sunk because of indifference such as that of Carla and Michele in The

<sup>1</sup>Frances Keene, "Moravia Moralist," Nation, CLXXVI (May 23, 1953), 439.

<sup>2</sup>Moravia, The Woman of Rome, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Gray, "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, edited by Cecil A. Moore (New York, 1935), p. 631.

Time of Indifference; because of surrender to destructive passion such as that of Dino in The Empty Canvas, or because of unthinking submission to brute force such as that of Adriana to Sonzogno, the criminal, in The Woman of Rome. For Moravia, the mere recognition of one's condition and the folly of one's manner of living is not necessarily ennobling or even comforting, as Camus suggests in The Myth of Sisyphus. Such recognition only makes it easier to live in the present as an operative member of the human species.

Thus, the final responsibility for the discovery of meaning in life rests on the individual. When all sanctities such as home, family, friends, philosophies, politics, and religion have been swept away, life itself becomes the only absolute value, and the individual alone must restore his relationship with a kind of psychologically stark existence that appears frightening and even incomprehensible. Moravia's existential morality is therefore relative: he proposes self-reliance and individual responsibility as a means to order in one's life and also as a reason for living. Ideologies, systems, and institutions are of little value when the real tests come--tests such as the two cataclysmic wars have provided in Europe during the last fifty years. When the person is faced bluntly with death and overwhelmed with chaos and

destruction, his moral codes, his religion, and his political loyalties somehow have no genuine significance. In Two Women Moroccan soldiers who have come to take part in the liberation of Italy rape Cesira and Rosetta in a cathedral (significantly a place of refuge and sanctuary) where they have gone to pray.

Moravia makes it clear that the impingement of the immediate world cannot be ultimately evaded. To hide behind illusions or to lapse into moral indifference is to give in to a kind of death-in-life condition where personal dishonesty prevails, and this personal dishonesty prevents his protagonists from attaining a just relationship with the immediate world. To give in to moral inertia, indifference, or boredom is, to Moravia, moral suicide, willing oneself to a state of nothingness. The only legitimate exit from this condition is in the human will to action. The most sympathetic and successful characters in Moravia's novels are Adriana in The Woman of Rome and Cesira in Two Women. Both exhibit a desire for life on the terms in which it presents itself to them, honestly accepting themselves and their shortcomings and their worlds of adversity. As Cesira says, comfort is in "the serenity of days lived at peace with oneself and with others."<sup>4</sup> After enduring many hardships--her home and

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<sup>4</sup>Moravia, Two Women, p. 287.

possessions lost, her daughter corrupted, she herself suffering personal degradation--Cesira begins to understand that she herself alone is personally responsible for finding reasons to go on living. Her realization seems to come through and take shape as she is observing a particularly beautiful view:

. . . the sparkling sea beyond the plain of Fondi, had seemed to me an enchanted spot in which a treasure might really have been buried, as in the stories I had been told as a child. The treasure beneath the ground did not exist; but I had found it, instead, inside myself, with as much surprise as if I had dug it up with my hands; and this treasure had been the profound calm, the complete lack of fear and anxiety, the confidence in myself and in outward things. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Her thoughts summarize the attitude toward life that Moravia seems to esteem as the most desirable.

As a moral force in human behavior, love occupies much of Moravia's attention. Sexual passion, as an aspect of love, though pleasurable in itself, is both destructive and creative, and impedes the attainment of a relationship with reality unless the feeling is based on honest consideration for the other person as an end rather than as a means to sexual gratification or some other egoistic motive. Among human activities, sex is perhaps the most moral, Moravia seems to say, in that it is the most basic experience of life. When sex is perverted and used as a

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 155-156.



force for reducing another person to the status of an object to be used for selfish pleasure, it is a violation of natural morality. The character in Moravia's novels who best exemplifies his attitude toward love as a means of countering the existential predicament is Adriana, the prostitute:

I understood that everything was love and everything depended on love. One had this love or one did not have it. And if you had it, you loved not only your own lover, but also every person and everything. And if you did not have it, you could not love anyone or anything.<sup>6</sup>

This is the kind of love Erich Fromm describes in The Art of Loving as "an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love."<sup>7</sup> This is the kind of love advocated by Moravia in his novels, and it provides his most positive answer to the uncertainty and illogic of human existence.

Moravia has said, "As with many neo-realistic writers, I have been criticized as being too much of a pessimist. True, for to be a man is automatically not to be happy. That is the human situation."<sup>8</sup> Thus Moravia

<sup>6</sup>Moravia, The Woman of Rome, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup>Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (New York, 1956), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup>Niccolo Tucci, "The Proof of Life Is in the Loving," Saturday Review, XLIV (October 28, 1961), 19.

does not suggest a complete cure for the unhappiness of the human being. He rejects all forms of moral cowardice, license, and anarchy but proposes no melioristic measures of conduct. He does say, however, that man must live his life with spiritual humility; he must retain the will to live; and he must endure without any hope of heroically prevailing, except in a small way, in the immediate present. He implies that classical equanimity and a subdued compassion for all life are the best approach to living. Charles Rolo cogently summarizes Moravia's moral outlook:

. . . he is a moralist whose theme is the danger of moral ambition. His fiction . . . tells us that we are never as bad as we think we are, and that we can never be as good as we think we can be. . . . Moravia does not intimate that clear-eyed self-acceptance will unlock the gateway to Paradise, but simply that it enables us to make the best of Purgatory.<sup>9</sup>

Man must serve in the Purgatory of the immediate world in spite of the threats of war, ultimate death, and the awareness that sacrosanct certainties no longer exist. To live a moral life is to reject passivity and indifference and meet openly the challenge of this the existential situation. And that challenge, instead of inevitable death, is the confrontation of life itself.

Many readers will find Moravia's view of life and man too cramped, too circumscribed, too uninspired and

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<sup>9</sup>Rolo, op. cit., p. 74.

uninspiring to be entertained seriously; others, particularly the Europeans who have been through hell several times in the past fifty years, may find it quite accurate and practical. And Moravia, let it be said, is speaking directly to his own people. His moral force consists precisely in his concern for them.

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