

# Alberto Moravia

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In one of his novels—*Il Conformista*, I think it was—Moravia makes the hero reflect that everything can be understood except existence. The observation is pointed enough to start one reflecting on this interesting and influential writer; it offers, I think, a clue, slight at first glance but likely to repay attention, to Moravia's mind and habits of thought and even, implicitly, to the way he poses and attempts to answer the fundamental moral question: what is the right discoverable term of human desires?

To say that everything except existence is intelligible sounds like a way of declaring oneself an intellectual, in the sense of one who has a large confidence in reason; but also, at bottom, an intellectual agnostic, for the fact of existence itself is declared unintelligible. But let us note, first, the rationalistic temper. Moravia is a man who tends to place knowledge above all other values. In a recent interview arranged by a popular weekly,<sup>1</sup> on being questioned about the erotic stress in his work, he came out with this: 'sex is above all a means to knowledge'; and it is obvious from Moravia's novels that the knowledge he speaks of here presupposes, besides immediate experience, a great deal of rational analysis. This is not to say that the many pages of explicitly reflective analysis that occur in his novels are always convincing, either in themselves or in their context: the prostitute Adriana's reflexions in *La romana* (*The Woman of Rome*) offer easy game to the critic in this latter respect; but simply that Moravia's is the sort of mind that does not rest until it has distinguished every experience into its components and so gained lucid rational control—or what he takes to be such—over each aspect and phase of life. At his best Moravia is certainly a formidable analyst of character, mood and situation. It is perhaps the one quality he has in common with the old master of modern Italian prose, Alessandro Manzoni.

But to return to the unintelligibility of existence. This statement is less metaphysical than it sounds; it is not, that is, a denial that one can form a concept of the act of being. Marcello, the hero of *Il Conformista* was a Fascist secret agent, not a philosopher: he did not, obviously,

<sup>1</sup>In *Tempo presente*, I, 1. Cf. G. Luti in *Il Ponte*, January 1961, pp. 81ss.

name existence with technical precision; and if, as seems likely, he is here voicing the mind of his maker, it is permissible to interpret the reflexion in the much vaguer and looser sense suggested by a phrase used later by Moravia writing *in propria persona*, as a critic. In some 'Notes on the Novel', printed in 1956, he outlined his aim of writing novels that would combine narrative with a clearly conceived and coherent 'ideology'. Such fiction, he said, would be 'allegory or metaphor'; and given the intellectual situation today, it would involve, on the one hand, an 'active devaluation of objective reality, considered as an irrational chaos, and on the other, the representation in images of something more contemporary and meaningful'. These are cloudy words for so usually lucid a writer, and touched perhaps with a slight pretentiousness; but it is clear at least that the description of reality as 'irrational chaos' both includes and goes beyond Marcello's discovery that existence was unintelligible. And it might seem to imply that for Moravia the natural universe, human nature included, not only has no discernible meaning but is in itself a mere confusion, a chaos in fact. But this would be to give the phrase a more precise sense than it was probably meant to convey. Moravia does not have to weigh his words as an *ex professo* philosopher would. He writes as an artist and a moralist. It is true that in Italy he has come to be regarded as something of a sage: his intelligence and curiosity, his blend of pessimism and compassion, his dry concentration on sex as a 'problem', and moreover the high importance he evidently attaches to his own work and calling; these are some of the reasons why his position in Italy has come to resemble a little that of J-P. Sartre in France. But with all his gifts Moravia is utterly incapable of writing a book like *L'être et le néant* (whether Sartre's metaphysic is acceptable is another question; I mention him only to suggest a parallel and a contrast); and, to return to that description of objective reality as an irrational chaos, I suspect that the phrase was rhetorical and that at bottom Moravia did not know exactly what he meant by it. An agnostic, perhaps an atheist, in face of the fact of existence, Moravia seems nevertheless to be always haunted by the possibility of discovering some meaningful and satisfying relationship between the human soul and the reality which it comes from and confronts. It is this that gives his work a certain fundamental seriousness—I would even say wistfulness, if this term did not suggest a tone and style very far removed from the hard, disillusioned, analytical Moravian manner.

But before taking our analysis further it may be of use to my readers

if I provide a few details about Moravia and his background. His real surname is Pincherle. He was born at Rome in 1907, and, to judge by his novels, probably reared in easy circumstances, in that well-off bourgeois world which he has always unsparingly criticized but with whose ways he has also shown himself intimately familiar. A Jew, it seems, by race, a Catholic by baptism, Moravia is in thought and practice an unbeliever. In boyhood he underwent a prolonged illness which kept him to his bed for years, and during this time he read widely in several literatures. Starting early as a writer, he published his first novel, *Gli Indifferenti*, at the age of twenty two; and it made a considerable impression. It is in effect a searing exposure of corruption in a bourgeois household, of snobbery, moral cowardice, greed and lust. It was a remarkably assured novel for so young a writer, and though Moravia has moved on a good deal since then, exploring new materials and ideas, he had already to a large extent found himself, his characteristic manner and point of view, in *Gli Indifferenti*: the analytical temper, the acerbity, the persistently dry lucid style, the spare compact construction of paragraphs, the calm and quite unhumorous indecency, the complete absence of 'charm', above all the detachment from inherited conventional values, especially those connected with family life—all this was already visible in that first novel. And two things about this gifted young writer soon became particularly clear: his overriding interest in sex and his moral earnestness. Neither of these characteristics, by the way, brought Moravia into any serious trouble with the Fascist authorities: Fascism could tolerate a lot of indecency and Moravia's seriousness did not extend, explicitly, into politics. Its chosen field was individual behaviour, its presuppositions rather Freudian than otherwise, but tending always to some sort of moral judgment. This interweaving of sexual psychology and moral concern found its finest expression in *Agostino* (1944); a masterly short study of a boy's loss of innocence, and perhaps the most moving of all Moravia's books. Morally less acceptable was his next important study of adolescence, the sombre and rather repulsive *La Disubbidienza* (1948). Another lonely boyhood forms the starting point of *Il Conformista* (1951), an exposure of moral chaos underlying the career of a successful Fascist official; an ambitious, rather clumsy novel, but full of thought and of the 'violenza moralistica' which Italian critics had become accustomed to find in Moravia. About this time Emilio Cecchi, the most distinguished of the older critics, expressed the wish that Moravia would allow more room for the 'contemplative seed' in him to develop, and perhaps the author too

found this desirable, for his next book was his first collection of *Roman Tales* dealing largely with the life of the poor and certainly showing some relaxation of that aggressive tension and intention which always appears in his studies of the rich or the middle class. Yet there was no fundamental change of direction. Already in *The Woman of Rome* (1947) he had made a woman of the people, the prostitute Adriana, his protagonist, and her story is only an expanded 'Roman tale'. And she is treated sympathetically, tenderly; indeed in this novel Moravia came as near as he has ever come to sentimentality. But neither here, nor in the *Tales*, nor anywhere else does he indulge in merely 'contemplative' observation or description, whether to a comic or a lyrical effect. He never seems able to relax his intellect enough for this—his implicit guiding of every situation along the lines of a foreseen psychological or moral enquiry. And after the *Tales* he returned with *Il Disprezzo* to a bourgeois setting and to concentration on a single theme, a husband's fidelity to a wife who has ceased to love him. A wider canvas, the Roman countryside during the war, is used in *La Ciociara* (1957), and a *popolana*, who has a good deal in common with Adriana, is once again the protagonist. Finally, in last year's *La Noia* Moravia brought out his so far barest and boniest work, a rigorously economical analysis of lust in action.<sup>2</sup> The hero is a rich bourgeois gone 'beat' for art's sake; the girl is lower middle class.

Through all these relatively slight variations of theme and setting Moravia has followed, persistently, his individual line. His scene is usually Rome, bourgeois or *popolana*, his theme is always sex, either marital or promiscuous. It was this sexual preoccupation (obsession, some would call it) that led to Moravia's works being placed on the Index in 1952.<sup>3</sup> The terms in which the Congregation of the Holy Office announced this condemnation made it clear that they thought that something had to be done to check the spate of pornography in post-war Europe, and that an effective means to this end would be to make an example of Moravia as an outstanding specialist in eroticism. Whether the ban has had the effect desired may be doubted; it does not seem to have reduced Moravia's sales, to judge by the prodigious success of *La Noia*; but of course there can be no doubt that his writings are obscene in some sense. And no doubt when the Holy Office branded them as obscene they had in mind not so much the physical realism of Moravia's descriptions as the general atmosphere, so to say, of carnality which his

<sup>2</sup>English transl., *The Empty Canvas*, 1961.

<sup>3</sup>*Acta Apost. Sedis* xlv, ser. 2 (1952) p. 432

characters breathe. In the Moravian world the sexual impulse is normally uncontrolled, apparently uncontrollable. It is a world without God. The Church seems only an ancient institution, more or less visible in the background, whose chief function is to buttress bourgeois respectability with the empty ceremonial of marriage according to the forms of religion. The few priests who appear—briefly—are all either stupid or knavish—except the handsome young Frenchman who heard the first of Adriana's two confessions in *The Woman of Rome*. And incidentally I suppose that Adriana the prostitute is the nearest to being a Christian of all Moravia's main characters. Sensual and superstitious, she retains enough faith to have recourse to Our Lady in her moments of deepest distress; even making, at the end, a vow of chastity—which however, the author hints, she is not likely to keep. Adriana is a victim of circumstances—of her poverty, of her selfish little mother, of her own weakness, of the men who use her—and the fact that she retains all through some flickering desire for goodness may be taken as evidence of Moravia's intention to present, in this Roman girl, the Italian working class as not wholly de-Christianized. But Adriana was not able to save him at the bar of the Holy Office; and really, taking the general drift of his work into consideration, one cannot be surprised. Moravia is not a Christian writer; and the fact that this is so very plain was perhaps (given his eroticism) the deciding factor in his condemnation by the Church.

Yet his own godless world leaves him unsatisfied. His mind rejects Christianity, but does not rule out all religion in advance. And his rejection of Christianity, though mental, is not based on *ad rem* reasons, as he had the honesty to admit in the interview from which I have already quoted. 'I cannot believe', he said, 'in what I have not verified by weighing the pros and cons; and this I have never bothered to do with Christianity'. And why? Because, 'it seems to me very difficult for an educated man nowadays to have a religious faith'. Difficult, but not, it seems, impossible if we ponder the rather revealing words with which he continued (revealing both in their naivety as a critique of Christianity and in what they show of what Paul Tillich would call Moravia's 'ultimate concern'): 'The problems which gave rise to Christianity are now all solved. Its disturbing revolutionary function has been worked out long ago. It's been a grand religion but it no longer meets human needs. The fact is that what Christianity demands from a man is a certain way of behaving towards his neighbour, whereas what Buddhism demands from him is a way of behaving towards himself and towards

reality. Therefore Buddhism is a more relevant religion today'. So Moravia in his middle fifties; and his words merit attention because they express an attitude that is fairly common, I think, among contemporary intellectuals on the Continent. Not that Buddhism, precisely, is so common; but a certain need for a right relation to, and insight into, one's deepest self and the reality which includes it—a need which can loosely be called religious—this certainly is widely felt. And I think that the journalist Moravia was speaking with put his finger on the point when he commented, 'for Moravia, Buddhism seems *more intelligent* than Christianity' (my italics). And this judgment is not hard to understand. Moravia, a lifelong stranger to Catholic thought and practice, sees Christianity principally under two aspects: (a) the moral example of Christ, (b) the institutional Church. Christ's example has, he thinks, by now been sufficiently learnt, at least as a *lesson* is learnt; while the aged institution of the Church he imagines to be receding more and more into the past, losing all vital contact with modern life. And it has to be realized that it is hard for an Italian of Moravia's kind to see the Church in any other way; or more precisely, it is only too easy for such Italians, given their powerful 'laicist' traditions and given the excessively *official* position of Roman Catholicism in Italian life, to see the Church in this particular way—as something more or less identified with a priestly caste, female devotions and obscure and complicated dogmas. If they are sincere, as Moravia gives some evidence of being, they want to be spiritually illuminated; but it is only too easy for them to assume that this want will not be met by the Church; they miss the Church's inner meaning: God made man to reveal God and man's way to God.

If man is *capax Dei*—a being constructed to receive God—then any serious writer's image of man may be expected sooner or later to hint at this interior capacity, if only by showing that creatures do not fill it. And a hint such as this Moravia seems to be offering in his last novel, though naturally without mentioning God: the nearest thing to a divine manifestation in *La Noia* is a cedar of Lebanon (the religious evocativeness of this image is presumably not accidental) which at the end the hero contemplates from his hospital window, and with 'inexhaustible satisfaction', as a thing that exists, beautifully, in its own right, outside himself. And then he contemplates in thought the girl whom he has pursued and possessed and pursued again through the preceding months, and he finds that he can see her in a similar way, and so begin to feel for her 'a new and different love', a disinterested

affection. With this illumination the story ends; it is the term to which it has all been moving; and though one may be left not wholly convinced by this *dénouement*, one must admit—questions of literary coherence apart—that with it Moravia is attempting a religious statement; or at the least that he is evoking a relation to reality that engages one at the properly and distinctively human level—and not on the level of animal concupiscence which has been that of his hero's existence hitherto. This said, I should add that *La Noia* is, in the ordinary unsubtle sense of the adjective, certainly an obscene book. The style indeed might be called chastely economical and clear; it shows Moravia at his maturest; but the representation of carnal desire and intercourse (working in a spiritual void) is utterly unreserved.

I insert 'spiritual void' to indicate the state of mind of the hero (inappropriate word!) as he is introduced in a Prologue to the action, and which accompanies him throughout: *noia*, boredom. Dino is an amateur abstract painter, with a shabby studio in Rome where he lives, and a rich widowed mother, a drearily luxurious old lady, who inhabits a sumptuous villa on the Via Appia. He is thirty-five, self-divided from society, acutely intelligent in a godless way and subject to paralysing fits of boredom. The story opens with him in one of these fits and analysing it. Boredom consists, Dino finds, in feeling that things have no relation to himself; they go blank, uncommunicable, 'absurd'. When the mood is at its worst 'I seemed to have no relation even to myself'—surely a revealing addition; Moravia is much slower than a Christian writer would be to envisage the *self* as boring and absurd. But anyway, the underlying tension in Dino, a tension which at the end we are shown in process of being resolved (and here, it seems, is the 'moral' of *La Noia*) is a sense of frustration; for perhaps in 'some unknown paradise' things would *never* cease to be significant; and therefore, says Dino, 'my boredom involved, besides the inability to get out of myself, an idea that perhaps I could so "get out" with the help of some miracle or other'.

Such is the governing theme or idea of *La Noia*, stated explicitly in the Prologue; at the risk indeed of making the whole novel appear an *a priori* illustration or exemplification of an abstract theory. Even Moravia, who is so thoroughly an intellectual, and a Latin one at that, has never before laid his cards so openly on the reader's table; and it may be doubted whether *La Noia* ever quite recovers from being so explicitly set in the dialectic of a psychological theorem. If it does recover, if on the whole it succeeds as a novel, this is chiefly due to the

figure of the girl Cecilia. From the moment she comes on the scene the story comes alive, takes concrete shape and substance and moves towards its climax with the swift coherence—but not of course the reticence—of a Racinian tragedy. Reduced to its simplest elements the action springs from the interplay, the mutual stimulation and repulsion, of three factors: lust and boredom in Dino, lust alone in Cecilia. Dino's boredom is the occasion of his beginning to desire Cecilia, and her concupiscence, her total absence of scruples or second thoughts in the matter (qualities which, it must be admitted, Moravia shapes very skilfully indeed into a most convincing figure of youthfully candid and ingenuous depravity) means that his lust has free play. Then boredom, of course, returns, but instead of putting an end to the relationship its effect in fact is to stimulate, provoke and exasperate this; for Dino forms the crazy idea that he can best rid himself of Cecilia by continuing to pursue her until he shall have thoroughly possessed her, not her body only but also her feelings, her mind, everything; and so have reduced her to a mere 'thing' without relation to himself, an object of utter 'boredom' in short. In order to escape her, he pursues her. The motive of this strategy, so to call it, comes from his conscious mind, from his idea that the object of boredom is that which has ceased to count because it has become a mere 'thing' outside and unrelated to oneself and so 'absurd'. And he tries to make Cecilia absurd in this sense: he tries in a number of ways, and they themselves are all absurd inasmuch as they contradict two basic facts: (a) that he cannot do without her—his lust will not let him, his feelings giving the lie, all the time, to his secretly planning intellect; and (b) that in any case Cecilia will not play his game, she will not let herself be possessed in the way he plans. For if his lust is an obsessive concentration, hers is promiscuous. She likes and intends to belong to more than one man at a time; and naturally Dino finds this unbearable. So the pursuit goes on. It could only end, on these terms, either in a continual carnal union, which is impossible, or in his or her death. And in fact he attempts suicide, unsuccessfully; and so wakes up in hospital and to his contemplation of the cedar of Lebanon, all passion spent. But his state now is not one of mere release, for the time being, from obsession; it is an incipient illumination. And to see how this can be one has to recall that element in Dino's boredom which was touched on in the Prologue but has been submerged in the turbulent chapters that followed: the frustration arising from his feeling that somewhere beyond his reach, in 'some unknown paradise', there was to be found a right satisfying relationship with



reality; that things in themselves need not be insignificant and unlovable. And I suppose that the moral of the story is that lust does not lead to this relationship.

And so too we return to that remark of Marcello in *Il Conformista*, about the unintelligibility of existence, from which our enquiry began; and we can begin to entertain the possibility that *La Noia* represents the last stage so far in an argument that Moravia has been carrying on with himself throughout his career as an artist and an observer of life. And because the argument is so radical, and has been pursued with a certain thoroughness, we find ourselves obliged, I think, to allow that Moravia is a man deserving of more intellectual and moral respect than one usually pays to popular novelists. He begins to look like something more, far more, than a successful pornographer. Nine years ago Maria Sticco, one of the few Catholic critics who have paid serious attention to Moravia, distinguished sharply between his style, which she admired, and his ideas, which she found totally unacceptable: 'while Moravia's view of life is decadent', she wrote, 'he has a classical conception of art; and the contrast between his style and his ideas is such as to suggest that the latter are second-hand whereas the former is a genuine expression of his temperament'.<sup>4</sup> Behind the robust forthright style and the evident delight in the utmost possible lucidity the critic detected, in other words, a shifting uncertainty of thought, a rather hollow eclecticism. The judgment is valuable, but it leaves, I think, something still to be said in Moravia's favour; and this essay has been some attempt to say it. Moravia's view of life is excessively carnal, and to this extent is unhealthy and decadent. Again, there is truth in Maria Sticco's further criticism of a certain inconsistency in Moravia's bias towards 'happy endings'; she would prefer him to be a pessimist all through rather than slip into the facile 'cordiality' of *The Woman of Rome* or the 'sensual complacency' of *Amore coniugale* (or, I would add, of *La Disubbidienza*). And I agree that the solutions that Moravia finds for his protagonists' problems can give an impression of confusion and weakness, moral as well as artistic; only I would exempt *La Noia* from this charge. I do not think that this novel's relatively happy ending exhibits moral or intellectual weakness. I think that here, if nowhere else, Moravia has succeeded in clearly presenting, through the 'metaphor' of an appropriate dramatic action, a really profound apprehension of the human condition, of his own condition. He has reflected honestly enough to bring the ground of his mind into view; and it is well worth attention.

<sup>4</sup>*Il romanzo italiano contemporaneo*. 'Vita e Pensiero,' 1953, pp. 79-87.

What may be expected now of Moravia? What direction is his mind likely to take? My own impression, for what it is worth, is that that passing remark on Buddhism, quoted above, may be a pointer: it seems likely that Moravia is now moving towards a 'mystical' view of reality—which, however, need not in the least imply religion in the sense of a conscious submission to God. To become religious in *this* way Moravia must first, I believe, overcome a deep-rooted prejudice against assent to a personal God, the prejudice that affects most intellectuals today, more or less, and which Teilhard de Chardin called 'l'illusion spatiale' and defined as 'l'idée que le Tout, même ramené à la forme de l'Esprit, ne saurait être qu'impersonnel'. But if this 'idea' is really only a 'spatial illusion', then at bottom it is a product of imagination and not of intelligence; and since Moravia is nothing if not intelligent, we may hope that sooner or later he will see through it.

## Ecumenical Survey

### NEW DELHI — FAITH AND ORDER — BIBLIOGRAPHY

We must wait till the summer for the full Report of the New Delhi assembly of the World Council of Churches, held from November 18th to December 5th, 1961, and consequently for a complete assessment of its accomplishment. Meanwhile however we have two excellent paper-backs (S.C.M. Press) to go on with; *New Delhi Speaks*—the official Message of the assembly, and *Despatch from New Delhi*, a vivid and sympathetic eyewitness description and comment on the day-to-day events of its sessions by the Revd Kenneth Slack, general secretary of the British Council of Churches.

The most notable event of New Delhi was the accession to membership of the Russian Orthodox Church, together with three Eastern European Orthodox Churches, the Bulgarian, the Rumanian and the Polish. There was of course opposition to the acceptance of the Russians, arising from the obvious fear that they would use the Council as a platform for political manoeuvre. But the Russian leader, the youthful Archbishop Nikodim, made a great impression as a Christian leader, and in the end there were only three adverse votes and four recorded abstentions, with 142 churches voting in favour. Dr Oliver Tompkins, Bishop of Bristol, who had been present at New Delhi, and who is of course