Alberto Moravia
(1907-1990)

This month's essay is about one of the most important and certainly the most prolific, of modern Italian authors. As a novelist, playwright and journalist, his life and career spanned some of recent Italian history's most turbulent years and events. His work explored matters of modern social alienation, loveless sexuality and existentialism. His writing was marked by its factual, cold, precise style; it was rooted in the tradition of 19th-century narrative, underpinned by high social and cultural awareness that often depicted the malaise of the bourgeoisie and the iniquities of the modern bourgeois society.

Alberto Moravia, the pseudonym of Alberto Pincherle—the pen name “Moravia” was a surname linked to the family—was born in a house on Via Giovanni Sgambati in Rome to a wealthy middle-class family. His Jewish father, Carlo, was from Venice and was an architect and painter. His Catholic mother, Teresa Iginia de Marsanich, was from Ancona in the Marche region. Moravia did not finish conventional schooling because, at the age of nine, he contracted tuberculosis of the bone (a form of osteomyelitis), which confined him to bed for five years. He spent three of these years at home and two in a sanatorium near Cortina d’Ampezzo, in north-eastern Italy. (Moravia once remarked that the most important facts of his life had been his childhood illness and fascism, because they both caused him to suffer and do things he otherwise would not have done. “It is what we are forced to do that forms our character, not what we do of our own free will.”) While in his medical confinement, he studied French, German and English. He was a prolific reader during this time; his favorite authors were Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Boccaccio, Fyodor Dostoevsky, James Joyce, Ludovico Ariosto, Carlo Goldoni, William Shakespeare, Molière and Nikolai Gogol. He also wrote poems in French and Italian and began writing fiction at the age of eleven.

In 1925 at the age of 18, Moravia left the sanatorium and moved to Bressanone (German: Brixit) in the province of South Tyrol. During the next three years, partly in Bressanone and partly in Rome, he began to write his first novel, Gli Indifferenti (The Indifferent; English title: Time of Indifference). After working on the novel for several years, in 1929 he self-published it at a cost of 5000 Italian lira. The novel realistically and scathingly attacked the exaggerated “mother cult” that the fascists had been encouraging in Italy. It described the moral corruption of a grasping widow and her relationship with her daughter and son. It was immediately seen, if not
consciously intended by Moravia, as a realistic and scathing social polemic against a decadent Italian bourgeoisie that provided fascism with it most fertile soil. The novel’s attack on the bankrupt morality of the bourgeoisie, for whom sex and money had replaced any higher values, had inevitable political implications that went to the core of the fledgling fascist state. Literary critics praised the novel as a noteworthy example of contemporary Italian narrative fiction. However, it raised eyebrows and hackles among fascist censors and it left the young Moravia a marked man.

In 1927, Moravia started his career as a journalist with the magazine 900. The journal published some of his first short stories. In 1930, he started collaborating with the newspaper La Stampa (The Print) and in 1933, he co-founded the literary review magazines Caratteri (Characters) and Oggi (Today) and he also started writing for the newspaper Gazzetta del Popolo (People’s Gazette).

The years prior to World War II were difficult for Moravia as an author. In 1935, he published his second novel, Le Ambizioni Sbagliate (The Wrong Ambitions). The fascist government tried to prevent its publication and ultimately ordered newspapers and literary journals to not review it. To get away from the harassment of the fascists, he went abroad as a journalist for various newspapers, an activity which from then on always accompanied his creative writing. He lived mainly in Paris and London during the pre-war years and, in 1934-35, visited the United States for seven months (where he gave a series of lectures on Italian Literature at Columbia University), Mexico in 1935, China in 1937 and Greece in 1938. He published another novel in absentia in 1937, L’Imbroglio (The Scam), which fared the same fate as his second novel.

In 1941, Moravia married the novelist Elsa Morante, whom he had met in 1936, and they lived on Capri. However, during 1941, literary matters grew even worse for Moravia. He published La Mascherata (The Masquerade; English title: The Fancy Dress Party) which was an easily recognized critical satire of Italy’s dictatorship. The censors seized the novel and prevented its further publication. Another of his novels that was banned that year was Agostino (Augustine; English title: Two Adolescents), which was a masterly short novel vividly describing an adolescent’s emergence from innocence, the discovery of his mother’s femininity and his initiation into sexuality by a group of urchins he meets at the seaside resort where he is on vacation. Following the banning of these two novels, the censors ordered that Moravia write nothing more, not even newspaper articles. However, Moravia did continue to write novels, short stories and even movie scripts, eluding the authorities by writing under an assumed name.

After the Armistice of September 8, 1943 between Italy and the Allies, which resulted in the fall of Mussolini, Nazi Germany sent troops to occupy Rome and keep Italy under its control. Moravia discovered that he was on a list of anti-fascist subversives who were to be arrested. He and Morante fled to the mountains in Fondi, southeast of Rome, an impoverished region the fascist government had arbitrarily given the name Ciociaria. Here, they endured nine months of hunger and cold.
This experience inspired another Moravia novel, *La Ciociara* (The Ciociara Woman), written over a decade later and published in 1957. The novel dealt powerfully with the impotence of the middle class and with the experience of war and the loss of innocence symbolized by a brutal rape. The point Moravia presented is that compassion and the wisdom of experience are the only way out of the moral quagmire of war and the selfishness and greed it generates.

**Return to Rome and National Popularity**

With the final liberation of Italy by the Allies, in May, 1944 Moravia and Morante returned to Rome for good. With the defeat of the fascists, Moravia began once again writing for important newspapers such as *Il Mondo* (The World) and *Il Corriere della Sera* (The Evening Courier), the latter paper publishing his reportage until his death.

After the war, his popularity steadily increased. From then on and for at least the next 16 years, Moravia novels and short stories poured forth in rapid succession. One of these was *La Romana* (The Woman of Rome, 1947) about the intersecting lives of three main characters, chief among them a prostitute, Adriana, (whose mother is also a prostitute) who tells her life story from her own perspective, which is that of a working-class girl drawn into prostitution. Her character and her morals stand in stark contrast to the moral impotence of her middle-class clients. Also, an idealistic intellectual who, after an interrogation by a fascist officer, during which he betrays his colleagues (for reasons he himself is not able to understand), becomes completely disillusioned about everything. Like many other Moravia novels, this novel explores the themes of existentialism, moral impotence and alienation. Even though it is about a prostitute, an intellectual who loses his commitment and his belief in everything and a fascist officer, it presents compelling insights about the individuals and their society and what links them together, as well as about their respective moral responsibilities.

In another novel, *Il Conformista* (The Conformist, 1951), Moravia addressed himself less to the drastic effects than to the psycho-sexual underpinning of allegiance to a specific ideology; namely, fascism. In so doing, he intimated a connection between sexual repression and fascism. Marcello, a government official and the protagonist, identifies himself with fascism and spends the entire novel in a search for what he perceives to be a normal life—normal activity, a normal appearance, normal emotions and so on. However, he confuses normality with conformity and in his quest to conform, subjugates his already-repressed emotions. When the natural course of his life presents him with ethical dilemmas such as the assignment to betray his friend Professor Quadri and his attraction to women other than his wife, he is ill-prepared to deal with them. He gradually comes to realize that this so-called normality consists precisely of perversion and aberration.

*L’Amore Conjugale* (Conjugal Love, 1951) and *Il Disprezzo* (The Contempt; English title: *A Ghost at Noon*, 1954) both portray a relationship between husband and wife that falters because
of the husband’s excessive concern with his profession. *L’Amore Conjugale* is the story of a man who tries to be a good husband and a good writer at the same time. He ends up failing both goals: erotic-sentimental failure on the one hand and literary failure on the other. The contrast between an affective life and a cultural life is faced in all its rawness, with Moravia’s ability to tell the story while bringing out a civil and moral discourse.

In *Il Disprezzo*, young Riccardo Molteni, who sees himself as an intellectual writer, does work he despises preparing scripts for distasteful film productions. All this to support his new wife, Emilia, the new flat he has taken, the new car he has bought, the maid who cooks and cleans for them and the secretary who comes in to type for him. He believes, even if his work is menial and his income shaky, that he is secure in his wife’s love. While he is well-educated, able to recite Dante at length, her impoverished family could not afford to educate her and she has to work as a typist.

But the spark has gone out of their marriage and two small incidents trigger its dissolution. First, Emilia catches Riccardo kissing his secretary, a lapse he shrugs off to her as meaningless. Then, a brash movie producer, Battista, asks the two of them to his house in Rome. As he has a two-seater car, he takes Emilia, leaving Riccardo to follow by taxi. The taxi breaks down, leaving Emilia alone with Battista. She interprets this as Riccardo rejecting her, offering her to Battista in order to further his career, so she tells him that she now despises him and will sleep alone.

The two are invited to Battista’s villa on Capri, where Riccardo will work on the script for a production of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. There he sees Battista rip Emilia’s dress and kiss her body, while in *The Odyssey* he sees disturbing parallels to his own unhappy life. In a mood close to suicide, he has a vision by the sea of the loving Emilia he first knew who has come back to be reconciled. Regaining his equilibrium, he returns to the villa to discover that she has been killed in an accident in Battista’s car.

Once again, Moravia explores the relationships between love, sex, work values and the boredom that is associated with modern bourgeois living and having “things” that are valued as important, but are really not.

While writing these novels, Moravia also wrote a large number of short stories, the *Racconti Romani* (Roman Tales) that are considered by many critics to be his best work; they were first published in 1954. The stories have been compared to the work of the Milanese Belli with their sense of historical and psychological authenticity and their mixture of standard language and dialect. In these stories, Moravia is not writing to demonstrate a thesis or a philosophical point, as he increasingly appeared to do in his later work; the stories retain both a freshness and spontaneity in their evocation of a lower middle-class Rome in the postwar years. Three later volumes of short stories, *Il Paradiso* (Paradise and Other Stories, 1970), *Un’altra Vita* (Another Life; English title: Lady Godiva and Other Stories, 1973) and *Boh!* (I Don’t Know; English title: The Voice of the Sea and Other Stories, 1976), were all collected from stories Moravia published
in the *Il Corriere della Sera* in the 1950s and 1960s. These stories are all linked by their use of a first-person female narrator. Moravia declared that if his dramatic characters are women, it is because women live most dramatically the tensions and contradictions of the modern world. Many of these short stories portray family life and marriage, which is seen as collective violence by society on the woman or as a systematic means of exploitation. The role of mother is seen to be inconsistent with an autonomous female identity and the other side of bourgeois marriage is prostitution. These works of Moravia show women as constantly denied subjectivity and autonomy by the world of men and work. In search of their identity, the women lose that identity.

In 1960, Moravia published one of his most famous novels, *La Noia* (Boredom or The Empty Canvas), which is the story of the troubled sexual relationship between a young, rich painter striving to find sense in his life and an easy-going girl in Rome. The novel is presented as a monologue of the protagonist who tells and explains his story. There is a clear reprise of the themes of Moravia’s first novel, *Gli Indifferenti* (The Indifferent, 1929), namely the collapse of the hypocritical bourgeois world and the obsessive search for sex and money. The themes, however, are updated and investigated through the lenses of Marxism and existentialism, especially Sartre’s existential philosophy. Central to the novel is the problem of the relationship with reality through the typically bourgeois category of possession. The novel was popular and critically well-received, winning the 1961 Viareggio Prize for Literature.

*L’Attenzione* (Attention, 1965) is perhaps Moravia’s most differentiated and intricately constructed novel. Besides being concerned with the problem of the “authenticity” of man’s being and his actions, the central theme of the novel is the constant discovery, page after page, of the inauthenticity of reality. The protagonist is Francesco Merighi, who strongly feels the falsity of human relationships that are based on economic profit and not on ideal values.

It is a novel about the inability to write a novel, which, in the end, is nevertheless written in the form of a diary. The argument at the center of the story is a possible incestuous relationship between a stepdaughter and her stepfather, who experiences this temptation firsthand by analyzing it in a lucid and conscious way. So, at the base of the novel there is the diary and when Merighi is about to read it again, he realizes that the reality he had wanted to reproduce did not correspond to the reality he had live.

**Final Years**

In 1967 Moravia visited China, Japan and Korea. In 1972 he went to Africa, which inspired his work *A Quale Tribù Appartieni?* (Which Tribe Do You Belong To?), published in the same year. In 1982 he returned to Japan and included this time a visit to Hiroshima. This visit inspired a series of articles for *L’Espresso* magazine about the atomic bomb. He used the same theme in his novel *L’Uomo Che Guarda* (The Man Who Looks, 1985) and the essay *L’Inverno Nucleare* (The
Nuclear Winter, 1986), which included interviews with some contemporary principal scientists and politicians.

Moravia published another short story collection, *La Cosa e Altri Racconti* (The Thing and Other Stories, 1983), twenty erotic stories peopled with a gallery of eccentric individuals. Throughout the stories run the recurring Moravia themes of violence, sexual yearnings, frustration, boredom and the bourgeoisie. The collection was dedicated to Carmen Llera, Moravia’s new companion (who was 45 years his junior), whom he married in 1986, after Morante’s death in November 1985. (Moravia and Morante had separated in 1962, but they were never divorced. Soon after the separation, he went to live with the young writer, Dacia Maraini. Llera followed Maraini in Moravia’s love life).

In 1984, Moravia was elected to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France as a member of the Italian delegation. His political party affiliation was the Italian Independent Left. His experiences at Strasbourg, which ended in 1988, are recounted in his *Il Diario Europeo* (The European Diary, 1984-90). He always insisted that politics held no fascination for him and in his memoir he dismisses the entire profession as “very boring.”

In 1985 he won the title of European Personality. Moravia was a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature, having been nominated 13 times between 1949 and 1965.

His final work, *La Villa del Venerdì e Altri Racconti* (The Villa on Friday and Other Stories) is a book of short stories published January 1, 1990, roughly nine months before his death.

Several films were based on Moravia’s novels and short stories. Three of the most important are: Vittorio De Sica’s adaptation of *La Ciociara* (Film’s English Title: Two Women, 1960), produced by Carlo Ponti and starring Sophia Loren, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Eleonora Brown and Raf Vallone; Damiano Damiani’s adaptation of *La Noia* (Film’s English title: The Empty Canvas, 1963) starring Bette Davis, Horst Buchholz and Catherine Spaak; and Jean-Luc Godard’s adaptation of *Il Disprezzo* (Film’s English title: Contempt, 1963), produced by Carlo Ponti, Georges de Beauregard and Joseph E. Levine and starring Brigitte Bardot, Michel Piccoli, Jack Palance, Giorgia Moll and Fritz Lang.

On September 26, 1990, Alberto (Pincherle) Moravia was found dead in the bathroom of his Lungotevere apartment in Rome, having died of either a stroke or a heart attack at the age of 82. His body was taken to a room on the Capitoline Hill, Rome’s civic heart, and was put on public view. A nonreligious memorial service was held on September 28 in the hill’s elegant main square, which was designed by Michelangelo in the 16th century. He is buried in Rome’s Cimitero Comunale Monumentale Campo Verano (Municipal Monumental Cemetery Campo Verano). The Italian publishing company, Bompiani, published his autobiography, *Vita di Moravia* (Life of Moravia) posthumously a week after his death.
Conclusion and Assessment

Alberto Moravia was one of the most important and certainly the most prolific, of modern Italian writers. He was Italy’s most widely read author in the 20th century; his works were translated into some 30 languages and sold in the millions around the world. His achievement was to probe and reveal the relationship between the economic, the erotic and the political. While his narratives owed much intellectually to Freud and Marx, it was the dramatic events of twentieth-century Italy and his response to the spiritual and material conflicts of the modern world that formed the heart of his work.

His keen moralistic approach focused primarily on the iniquities of bourgeois society. His works could be considered variations on one theme, the caustic portrayal of the disintegration of middle-class mores as revealed through the prism of sex. Moral aridity, the hypocrisy of contemporary life and the inability of people to find happiness in traditional ways, such as through sexual promiscuity or through love in marriage, were all important subjects in his works.

At the root of the modern malaise of alienation, he saw a complete lack of rapport with reality. Of the two possible approaches to objectify this crisis of rapport, critical realism and experimentalism, as he called them, he opted for the former and, as he described it, its “objective and in a sense scientific representation of the phenomena of the crisis in all its psychological and social aspects.”

Critics often praised him, especially in his earlier works, for his stark unadorned writing style (characterized by elementary, common words used in an elaborate syntax), his narrative skills, his psychological penetration and his ability to create authentic characters that used realistic dialogue. He utilized all of these in his explorations of disillusion, alienation and—most conspicuously—sexual experience.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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