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Chapter 2

Repressed Memory and Traumatic History in Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome*

Charles L. Leavitt IV

Alberto Moravia traced the origin of *The Woman of Rome* (*La Romana*, 1948) to a memory. Although he started to write the novel in late 1946, that is to say, he located the project's true beginning a decade earlier, in 1936, in a fateful encounter on the streets of Rome. "I found myself in Largo Tritone with Leo Longanesi, after a typically boring evening in Rome, and all of a sudden I saw a woman who seemed to be a streetwalker," he recounted to his biographer, Alain Elkann.

> She didn't appear to be a day over twenty, and she was very beautiful. I said to Leo: 'I like that girl, I've got to go.' And I approached her: 'Where should we go?' 'To my house.' She brought me to a small and modest apartment in an alley behind the *Messaggero* building. As we entered I realized it was the house where she lived with her family. At a certain point she was nude, she had a splendid body, and she reminded me of a strange short story by Henry James, 'The Last of the Valerii,' in which a man falls in love with a statue. Then all of a sudden an old woman entered with a pitcher of warm water and a towel, and she said with pride: 'Tell me, have you ever seen a body like this, take a look, have you ever seen such a thing…' We made love in a sound and simple manner. Afterwards she said to me: 'The woman who came with the towel was my

> mother.' That's the story of my encounter with the woman who ten years later would inspire the protagonist of *The Woman of Rome*.[1]

In sharing this memory, it is clear, Moravia sought to draw his biographer's attention not only to the sensual details of his erotic encounter but also to the fecundity of his creative imagination. "At this point I'd like to offer a reflection on how inspiration can shine through," he thus told Elkann:

> As I said, my encounter with the girl lasted an hour, but the phrase 'that was my mother' lasted no more than a few seconds. It might be a Romantic touchstone, but so be it: that phrase had the flash and effect of a lightning-bolt in a thunderstorm: it revealed to me an entire human panorama that a sociologist would need a whole book of reflections adequately to explain and to illustrate. More simply, I would say that the phrase 'struck me,' that is it traumatized me. Then I must have undergone what psychologists call repression. That repression, as I've already said, lasted ten years before collapsing the morning of November 1st, 1946, as soon as I sat down at the typewriter with the idea of dashing off a short story about the relationship between a Roman mother and her daughter. Instead I went ahead for four months working away at the typewriter and on February 28, 1948 I had a novel of 550 pages to which I gave the title *The Woman of Rome*, suggested to me by Elsa [Morante].[2]

[1] Alberto Moravia and Alain Elkann, *Vita di Moravia* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007), 161. All translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Moravia and Elkann, *Vita di Moravia,* 161.

Moravia's idea for a short story, this explanation makes evident, was inflected with his memory of the prostitute's laconic reconciliation of the erotic and the domestic, which transformed his initial inspiration into something far more significant. Put simply, the act of writing had inspired his recovery of a repressed memory, and that recovery in turn had inspired his literary invention.

It is the link between Moravia's memory and his inspiration that I wish to explore in this essay. *The Woman of Rome*'s apparent debts to its author's dalliance in an apartment behind the *Messaggero* building are suggestive, and the narrative yields some unexpected insights when it is approached with that encounter in mind. Yet the novel cannot be said straightforwardly or faithfully to rehearse the story that Moravia recounted to Elkann, and the differences, too, are worth contemplating. Ultimately, I am convinced, what distinguishes Moravia's text from his memory is the author's experience of Italian history. The end of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, as well as the Second World War, stood between Moravia's rendezvous with the prostitute and his composition of *The Woman of Rome*. Returning to his traumatic memory, therefore, he was also necessarily recalling to mind the historical traumas of Fascism. In turn, I want to argue, in composing his novel he was attempting to redress the twinned traumas of history and memory. <break>

One month after he began work on *The Woman of Rome* Moravia reflected on a different—but I will argue related—memory: his "Ricordi di censura," which offered something more than the "Memories of Censorship" that the essay's title announced.[3] In point of fact, Moravia here shared his experience, and his pointed criticism, not only of the restrictions imposed by Mussolini's regime but also of the political predispositions and cultural prejudices that had led average Italians to support that regime in its totalitarian rule. Suspected for his

[3] Alberto Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," *La Rassegna d'Italia*, December 1946, 95-106.

Jewish origins, his familial ties to the exiled political dissidents Carlo and Nello Rosselli, and his friendship with noted anti-Fascists in Italy, Moravia had found himself the frequent target of Fascist censors, who suppressed his 1935 novel *Wheel of Fortune* (*Le ambizioni sbagliate*), ousted him from his posts at several prominent cultural journals, and forced him to adopt a series of pseudonyms when he wrote for others.[4] He had ample reason, therefore, to decry the machinations of the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture. Yet he reserved his greatest condemnation for the attitudes of the Italian populace. "Blame for the situation cannot entirely be attributed either to Mussolini or to the Fascists," he maintained, "but rather to the ruling class or the bourgeoisie who conserved (when they conserved) the aesthetics, ideologies, and hierarchies of the previous century, insisting on imposing them with force."[5] Behind the institutions of Fascist censorship, in other words, Moravia identified the predilections of Italian high society. "The bourgeoisie in those years had suppressed any suspicion, any criticism, any skepticism about itself," he argued, "seeking only to enjoy a serene existence inspired by the most vulgar hedonism."[6] Discomfited by modernity—indeed, discomfited by reality itself—the bourgeoisie, Moravia believed, had sought to impose strict limits on Italian culture, denying the spread of information in an attempt to deny truths that it was unprepared to face. He therefore insisted that the censorship imposed by Fascism was intended to facilitate the flight from reality of a social class for whom "the truth, *tout court*, was unhealthy."[7]

[4] On Moravia and Fascist censorship, see esp. Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani editore, 1998), 34-38, 396-402; Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 156-158, 238-241.

[5] Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," 104.

[6] Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," 101.

[7] Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," 97.

Framing the argument in this way, Moravia was able persuasively to draw on his memories of Fascist censorship in order to further his ongoing investigation of the habits and quirks of the Italian ruling classes, which he had been conducting at least since his 1929 debut novel, *The Time of Indifference* (*Gli indifferenti*).[8] Building on that earlier work, the author began after the war effectively to redirect his investigation of bourgeois behavior, devoting his attention to what he now saw as the symptoms of that class's congenital Fascism. Moravia was far from the only critic to condemn Fascism as a bourgeois phenomenon; this was a cultural commonplace, in fact, as well as a central tenet of Marxist doctrine.[9] While drawing on this doctrine, Moravia shaped it to his own ends, conducting a cultural rather than a structural or economic critique of bourgeois society, emphasizing the inclinations towards authoritarianism inherent in bourgeois norms, and positing a causal relationship between the peccadilloes of the Italian ruling classes and the ascension of the Italian Fascist regime.[10] He was thus able largely to maintain the fastidious social investigations that he had begun before the war while claiming for them an increased political significance, since the defects in bourgeois behavior were now understood to have engendered the worst excesses of the totalitarian state.

In his most far-reaching treatment of the connections between (bourgeois) culture and (Fascist) politics, 1947's "La borghesia [The Bourgeoisie]," Moravia traced what he saw as the dire consequences of the reflexive traditionalism of the Italian ruling classes. As he put it,

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[8] On Moravia's critique of the bourgeoisie, see Pasquale Voza, *Moravia* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1997), 28; Roberto Tessari, *Alberto Moravia. Introduzione e guida allo studio dell'opera moraviana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1977), 36-37.

[9] La Rovere has attributed Italians' desire to blame Fascism on the bourgeoisie to the widespread desire to reject attributions of collective guilt and to impose more limited blame. See Luca La Rovere, "L''esame di coscienza' della nazione," *Mondo contemporaneo* 3 (2006): 23.

[10] For the author's acknowledgment of the validity of the Marxist indictment of bourgeois Fascism, see Alberto Moravia, "Situazione della psicoanalisi. Opinioni di due narratori," *La Fiera letteraria* 1:16 (July 25 1946), 3. On Moravia's own post-war Marxism, see Alberto Sebastiani, "Moravia, il comunismo e l'anticomunismo nel dopoguerra," *Poetiche* 1-2 (2008): 272.

"Fascism is above all that spirit of small-minded conservatism, ungenerous and opposed to every ideal through which we made known the first cause of all the deficiencies of our bourgeoisie."[11] The attitudes of the ruling classes, Moravia thus forcefully asserted, not only stultified Italian culture but also quickened Mussolini's rise to power. This was an argument Moravia developed with particular acuity in analyzing what he termed "L'impermeabilità degli italiani [The Impermeability of the Italians]": the refusal of the Italian people, and in particular the Italian ruling classes, to countenance even the most salutary social change.[12] Instead of acknowledging that modernity entailed a natural and necessary evolution of the social order, he argued, they sought to shut out reality, deliberately retarding the development of Italian culture by upholding obsolete values and venerating—indeed rigidly enforcing—retrograde tastes, in order to preclude all but the most minimal of transformations. Fascism was the ineluctable result of this reactionary intransigence, since the bourgeoisie was prepared to implement censorship, even dictatorship, to shield its beliefs, customs, and traditions from a confrontation with contemporary reality. It was on these grounds that Moravia asserted a resolutely political imperative to what otherwise might have appeared merely a critical appraisal of bourgeois mores.

There is evidence to suggest that this imperative, in turn, provoked his recovery of the repressed memory that would inspire *The Woman of Rome*. The encounter with a Roman prostitute, that is to say, seems to have been recalled to mind, and more to the point imbued with additional political connotations, in light of Moravia's subsequent analysis of the bourgeoisie's responsibility for Fascism. Signs of the passage from critical reflection to political insight to creative expression can be traced with particular clarity through Moravia's 1947 essay

[11] Alberto Moravia, "La borghesia," in *Dopo il diluvio. Sommario dell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. Dino Terra (Milan: Garzanti, 1947), 213-214.

[12] Alberto Moravia, "Impermeabilità degli italiani," *Mercurio* 2:15 (November 1945), 23-26.

"Dopoguerra bigotto [Post-war Sanctimony]," which explores the persistent censoriousness of Italian society even after the fall of Fascism, and which does so by means of a particularly telling reference. "The Italian bourgeoisie is the most ignorant and inconsequential bourgeoisie in the world," Moravia insisted in that essay.

> They do not read but want books to be confiscated; they do not go to church except on Sundays to make a show of their clothing and their worldliness, but they shout that Christian morality is in danger; they are entirely resistant to cultural influences, but they claim to believe that Sartre's books corrupt the soul. How many souls, then, are lost every day in countless brothels? Without doubt those brothels, disgusting and barbaric places, have infinitely more regular clients than Sartre has readers. All this uproar regarding two- or three-thousand copies sold and profound silence regarding the twenty- or thirty-thousand visits to the brothels.[13]

Prostitution thus came to exemplify for Moravia the fundamental hypocrisy of the Italian ruling classes, who wanted to banish sex from the culture, forbidding its artistic representation and its mention in polite society, while turning a blind eye to the country's rampant prostitution, which would remain legal until the passage of the Merlin Law in 1958. Moravia's remembered encounter with the prostitute, and in particular his emphasis on the unapologetic candor of the girl's mother in contrast to his own demureness, should be read against his resonant critique of bourgeois hypocrisy.

It should likewise be read against another contemporary invocation of prostitution, this time from his 1946 essay "L'Uomo come fine [Man as an End]," Moravia's jeremiad against the

[13] Alberto Moravia, "Dopoguerra bigotto," *La Fiera letteraria* 2:20 (May 1947): 1.

instrumentalization of human life inherent in modern society. "The world has been broken to pieces, and the brothel-keeper who sells the prostitutes' bodies for profit is every bit as justified in doing so as the head of State who declares war on another State," the author lamented in that essay.

> In the brothel, as in the State, reason reigns supreme inasmuch as the end, that is the preservation and prosperity of the brothel and the State, is attained with adequate means, that is with the means of man—with prostitution in one case and social and military discipline in the other. But in both the brothel and the State there reigns contempt for man, and the air is unbreathable. This is the fundamental characteristic of the modern world.[14]

In this passage, prostitution comes to symbolize something more than the hypocritical moralism of the Italian ruling classes; it now represents the quintessence of human exploitation. In Moravia's account, contemporary society— bourgeois society—strives to maintain the appearance of propriety, all the while ruthlessly disregarding any non-transactional values in the pursuit of profit, power, and expansion. We might interpret the author's self-described trauma at the memory of his encounter with the prostitute and her mother, therefore, as his recognition of the failure of solidarity at the heart of bourgeois culture. Indeed, all of *The Woman of Rome* can be interpreted in these terms, both as a representation of Moravia's indictment of the exploitation inherent in bourgeois social norms and as his emerging recognition of an alternative.

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[14] Alberto Moravia "Man as an End," in *Man as an End: A Defense of Humanism: Literary, Social and Political Essays*, trans. Bernard Wall (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1965), 32.

The key is to be found in the confluence of lived memory and literary intertextuality that underwrites *The Woman of Rome*'s penetrating analysis of Italian society under Fascism.[15] Indeed, it was this confluence that allowed Moravia substantially to transform his furtive conversation with a Roman prostitute and her mother into the symbolic incarnation of—as well as the developing resistance to—bourgeois corruption and Fascist coercion. *The Woman of Rome*, after all, is the story of a Roman prostitute, Adriana, who recounts in the first person her downward trajectory from artist's model to sex worker—a trajectory set in motion, tellingly, by her mother—in a narrative that reveals the inevitable perversion of Italian society between the World Wars, but also Adriana's essential integrity, humility, and tenacity in the face of her systemic exploitation. If the novel's debts to Moravia's remembered encounter in Largo Tritone are evident, so too are those to Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, with which *The Woman of Rome* shares its narrative conceit, as Moravia repeatedly insisted.[16] In its central moment, however, the turning-point of Adriana's life story, *The Woman of Rome* is above all reminiscent of the tale of another literary prostitute: Guy de Maupassant's "Boule de suif." This was a remarkably influential work in post-war Italy, providing a frequent point of reference for artists seeking to dramatize the country's complex politics in the mid-twentieth century. For instance, soon after the liberation Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Giuseppe De Santis, Antonio Pietrangeli, Gianni Puccini, Vasco Pratolini, and others collaborated on the screenplay for a

[15] Links between Moravia's encounter in Largo Tritone and his composition of *La romana* can be found in Maria Grazia Di Mario, *La Roma di Moravia tra narrativa e cinema* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2013), 32; Renzo Paris, *Moravia. Una vita controvoglia* (Florence: Giunti, 1996), 203. An analysis of the novel's literary models can be found in Alberto Limentani, *Alberto Moravia tra esistenza e realtà* (Venice: Neri Pozza Editore, 1962), 73-74.

[16] For the author's recognition of Defoe's influence, see Alberto Moravia, "Scrittori allo specchio," *La Fiera letteraria* 1:24 (September 19 1946): 2. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the two novels is at best imperfect, as Moravia himself noted. See Alberto Moravia, "Perché ho scritto 'La Romana,'" *La Fiera letteraria* 2:27 (July 3 1947): 3.

Resistance film modeled on Maupassant's short story, which was, however, never realized.[17] Several years later, in preparing a treatment for his own Resistance film, to be entitled *Viaggio in camion* [Truck Journey], Italo Calvino likewise drew on what he called "that formula which was already adopted by Maupassant in 'Boule de Suif' and by Ford in *Stagecoach*."[18] Beppe Fenoglio, too, appears to have patterned his 1952 Resistance narrative, *The Twenty-three Days in the City of Alba* (*I ventitre giorni della città*), on Maupassant's work.[19]

It is clear why these authors were drawn to the story. "Boule de Suif," set in the immediate aftermath of France's defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, recounts the misadventures of several citizens from Rouen who stray into enemy territory during a stagecoach journey and are detained by a Prussian officer, who will only release them if one of their number, the prostitute Elisabeth Rousset, will sleep with him. Driven by her sense of personal and national dignity, Rousset repeatedly refuses his advances, but her purportedly respectable companions—a factory owner and his wife, a Comte and Comtesse, and two nuns—eventually succeed in pressuring her to sleep with the officer so that they can continue on to Le Havre. To its Italian admirers, this story of occupation, coercion, and social corruption presented a number of powerful analogies to the post-war climate that followed Fascism's defeat.

Moravia was among the first to explore these analogies, drawing cogent parallels between the contemporary Italian situation and that which faced Maupassant in the late nineteenth century in two seemingly little noticed but highly instructive essays: 1944's "Paragone col secondo impero [Comparison with the Second Empire]" and 1945's "La carrozza

[17] Gianni Rondolino, *Luchino Visconti* (Turin: UTET, 1981), 154.

[18] Italo Calvino, "Viaggio in camion," in *Romanzi e racconti*, eds. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 499 [Originally published in *Cinema Nuovo* 4:57 (April 25 1955)].

[19] On this line of influence, see Luca Bufano, *Beppe Fenoglio e il racconto breve* (Ravenna: Longo, 1999), 71-84.

di Maupassant [Maupassant's Carriage]." Moravia recognized in Maupassant's short story a mode of implicit social commentary, one in which the interactions between various classes and factions of a defeated society could be represented figuratively but not mechanically in a work of fiction. In the various characters of "Boule de Suif," Moravia identified symbolic embodiments of France's ruling classes: "the French nobility, so proud and so ostentatious; […] the haute bourgeoisie, covetous of honors and positions, respectable and conservative; […] the mercantile class, cunning, coarse, dishonest," as well as what he called "the two faiths that divide France: Catholic" and "secular and democratic." Moreover, in the interactions between these representative individuals, Moravia isolated what he called Maupassant's

> moral argument: a reprehensible action […] often becomes commendable because of the thought that inspired it. That is: the ends justify the means. All this, without the backdrop of the lost war, would merely offer a general satire. But introduced into the broader context of the military disaster, it seems to imply a denunciation and an accusation, as if to say: here are those responsible for the defeat; here are the people who led France to its present state. The accusation and denunciation are not at all explicit, it is true; instead, they are suggested by the arrangement of the material and by the insistence on the characters' class status.[20]

Moravia thus traced in "Boule de Suif" Maupassant's indictment of the moral bankruptcy of the ruling classes, whose pretense to national loyalty had been pulled away to reveal their venal expediency. In Moravia's reading, the story demonstrated that the French leadership, while

[20] Alberto Moravia, "La carrozza di Maupassant," *Domenica*, February 18 1945, 1, 6.

espousing high-minded principles and demanding self-sacrificing obedience, was in reality driven by a disreputable ideology of base consequentialism.

That reading, which chimes with Moravia's critique of the Italian bourgeoisie under Fascism, presents in condensed form the moral and social analysis, as well as the fundamental narrative structure, of *The Woman of Rome*. Like Maupassant's Elisabeth, Moravia's Adriana finds herself the subject of unwanted sexual advances during a journey in the countryside, and she too is coerced into acceding to her assailant by companions driven by selfish ambition rather than by concern for her liberation. In *The Woman of Rome*, this fateful event takes place during a drive from Rome to Viterbo, to which Adriana—still a model and not yet a sex worker—has been invited by her friend Gisella, an experienced escort, as well as one of Gisella's lovers, Riccardo. The invitation is based on an initial deception, however, since "Riccardo's friend," as the fourth companion on the journey is introduced, is in fact the same "gentleman"—the same "very nice, decent fellow," Stefano Astarita, "a big pot in the police"—to whom Gisella has been trying to introduce Adriana, who has repeatedly refused to meet him.[21] "Come on! […] What are you waiting for?" shout Gisella and Riccardo as Astarita gropes Adriana, who makes clear that his advances are entirely unwanted.[22] Describing herself as "entirely overcome," stressing her "sharp and lucid sensation of pain," and concluding that, after this assault, her "spirit was entirely changed," Adriana recounts her rape as a decisive moment in her formation, after which she would abandon her "once fresh and ingenuous hopes" and, with "a feeling of complicity and

[21] Alberto Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, trans. Lydia Holland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), 63, 66.

[22] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 76.

sensual conspiracy," would accept the money that Astarita had offered and begin her life as a prostitute.[23]

As in "Boule de Suif," the behavior of Adriana's companions is suggestive of debased tendencies in Italian society. Not for nothing did Giacomo Debenedetti, one of Moravia's most insightful readers, insist in an early review that "*The Woman of Rome* appears to reproduce a *Sacra Rappresentazione* [liturgical drama] in modern garb."[24] Each character who enters into Adriana's orbit can be seen to embody a particular Italian vice, and to do so precisely in the way that he or she responds to her rape and its aftermath. First, and perhaps most significantly, in light of Moravia's traumatic memory, is Adriana's mother, who has imparted in her daughter a kind of mercenary desire to use her beauty to escape poverty, and who thus accepts the girl's newfound wealth without asking too many questions. No less complicit is Gisella, whose envy of her friend's virtue compels her to debase Adriana, corrupting her so that her righteousness no longer stands as a rebuke. Like Gisella, Gino, Adriana's putative fiancé, who—like a perverted simulacrum of Vittorio De Sica's Bruno in Mario Camerini's 1932 *What Scoundrels Men Are!* [*Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!*]—has tricked the girl into a relationship by pretending to be a wealthy car owner rather than a lowly chauffeur, is both too dishonest and too jealous to be a reliable confidant.[25] Similarly, the businessman Giacinti, the client to whom Gisella next introduces Adriana after the affair with Astarita, cannot offer anything approaching human companionship, since he is so consumed by money that his every relationship must be purely

[23] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 77-78, 83.

[24] Giacomo Debenedetti, "Moravia e i sette peccati," *L'Unità*, September 14, 1947: 3. On the characters of *The Woman of Rome*, see too Vittorio Spinazzola, "Moravia, la vitalità della Romana," in *L'egemonia del romanzo. La narrativa italiana nel secondo Novecento* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2007), 158; Sharon Wood, *Woman as Object: Language and Gender in the Work of Alberto Moravia* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 13.

[25] That the echo of Camerini's film is intentional is suggested by Gisella's warning to Adriana, after learning of Gino's designs: "[m]en are all scoundrels ['gli uomini sono tutti dei mascalzoni']." Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 116.

transactional. Even the priest to whom Adriana first confesses what has happened can offer only spurious counsel, preferring as he does the semblance of propriety to genuine rectitude and thus falsely accusing the girl of giving in to avarice while at the same time advising her, against the entreaties of her conscience, not to return Astarita's money.

Above all, two characters come under particular scrutiny in the course of the novel. The first, for obvious reasons, is Astarita, the Fascist police officer who rapes Adriana, and whose remorse for his crime is offset by his prurient delight at the thought of stealing Adriana's innocence. It is Adriana herself who identifies the social and historical connotations of her tormentor's debauchery, expressing her suspicion that his

> strange excitement at imagining me degraded by his own fault had been suggested to him by his profession as a member of the political police; his function, as far as I could understand, was to find the weak point in the accused, and corrupt and humiliate them in such a way that they would be harmless ever afterwards. He told me himself, I cannot remember in what connection, that every time he succeeded in persuading an accused man to confess or break down, he felt a peculiar kind of satisfaction, like the satisfaction of possession in love. 'An accused man's like a woman,' he used to say, 'as long as she resists she can hold her head up. But as soon as she has given way she's a rag and you can have her again how and when you like.' But more probably his cruel, complacent character was natural to him and he had chosen his profession simply because that was his character, and not the other way round.[26]

[26] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 159.

This passage lays bare the structure as well as the substance of the novel's political critique. By employing rape as the governing allegory for his narrative of national degeneracy, Moravia adapted the central conceit of Maupassant's "Boule de Suif" to the context of Italian Fascism.[27] As this scene makes clear, however, he also innovated upon this archetype by allowing his protagonist to perform her own allegoresis. In Moravia's fiction, that is to say, the prostitute not only embodies but also identifies and analyses the narrative's political connotations, recognizing—and forcing the reader to recognize—how her rape incarnates Fascism's imposition of authoritarian rule. Adriana thus takes on a kind of power over Moravia's text, as well as over her assailant, by controlling the meaning of her assault, making it both literal and metaphorical, and in this way marking Astarita as both individual Fascist and the personification of Fascism.

She does something similar with Giacomo Diodati, the middle-class student and anti-Fascist activist with whom she has fallen in love, but whose aromantic asexuality leaves her dissatisfied and alone.[28] Ineffectual both erotically and politically, Giacomo presents a rather unflattering portrait of the putative opposition to Fascism; divorced from physical reality, he cannot offer a substantive solution to Adriana's concrete social struggles. Although he tries to tutor her politically, therefore, he fails entirely to communicate anything of value, since his abstract principles do nothing to respond to—or even to acknowledge—her needs and desires. Again, it is Adriana who correctly identifies the problem. "You want to educate me," she chides

[27] Representing Fascism as a manifestation of Astarita's aberrant sexuality, Moravia offered one of many psycho-sexual interpretations of Fascism, borrowing from a tendency that had gained notable cultural prominence in the decade before he published his novel. For the historiography on Fascism as sexual dysfunction, see A. James Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Press, 1974), 49-77. For an analysis of the Italian contributions to this tendency, see Barbara Spackman, *Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 24-33.

[28] On the textual and ideological implications of Mino's troubled relationship with Adriana, see Valentina Mascaretti, *La speranza violenta. Alberto Moravia e il romanzo di formazione* (Modena: Gedit Edizioni, 2006), 348; Guido Baldi, "La Romana: Alienazione e naturalità innocente," in *Eroi intellettuali e classi popolari nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2005), 193; Tommaso Soldini, "Alberto Moravia e la figura dell'intellettuale. Da *Gli indifferenti* a *La ciociara*," *Versants* 49 (2005): 93-94.

Giacomo, "but the first condition for my education would be to free me of the necessity of earning my living as I do."[29] A valid politics, that is to say, would aspire to free her from prostitution. While Adriana wants a material improvement in her situation, however, Giacomo offers only his empty political ideals. While Adriana wants to escape from poverty, Giacomo offers only his hollow indictment of bourgeois luxury. While Adriana wants no longer to sell her body for money, Giacomo, one of her clients, offers only the disembodied reflections of his theoretical treatises. Giacomo is helpless, therefore, against Astarita's violence, both that suffered by Adriana, in the rape at Viterbo, and that with which he believes himself to be threatened, once his meager resistance cell is discovered and he is arrested. More out of indifference than fear, he confesses everything to Astarita before ever being interrogated: his ideas, he tells Adriana in order to explain his lack of opposition, "suddenly didn't seem to matter at all." "Perhaps I only talked because it didn't matter to me whether I did or not—because everything suddenly seemed absurd and unimportant and I didn't understand any of the things I ought to have believed in."[30] Without any deeply-felt convictions, without any deep-seated desires, he has no reserves of strength with which to combat his Fascist antagonist. Contrasting the impotent posturing of Giacomo with the sadistic devotion of Astarita, then, the narrative of *The Woman of Rome* offers an unstinting critique of bourgeois anti-Fascism.

It may also be understood to offer a critique of bourgeois culture. It is striking, in this regard, that the suicide letter Giacomo writes to Adriana before taking his own life in penance for his betrayal of the anti-Fascist cause echoes Moravia's critical appraisal of contemporary literary representation. Explaining his acquiescence to Astarita, to cite one resonant instance,

[29] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 302.

[30] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 338-339.

Giacomo writes that "*at that moment* […] *the character* [*personaggio*] *I ought to have been collapsed, and I was only the man* [*uomo*] *I really am*," reifying a dichotomy that Moravia had developed in his 1941 essay "L'uomo e il personaggio [The Man and the Character]."[31] Moravia's point was that in the modern novel "the character is in danger of being eliminated in favor of exclusive interest in the writer."[32] Authors no longer sought to produce characters, Moravia was saying, but only to reproduce themselves. "This crisis in the character [personaggio] obviously corresponds to a similar crisis in the concept of man [uomo]," he therefore went on to explain, ascribing the limitations of literary representation to the limitations of contemporary reality, which was no longer conducive to the independent existence of the self-fashioning individual.[33] Giacomo's personal crisis, his failure to maintain his self-fashioned image as anti-Fascist intellectual in the face of social pressure, can thus be understood as a fictionalization of Moravia's critique of contemporary fiction, which lacks the capacity to fashion fully-formed, independent individuals, and which thus fails substantially to represent reality. That critique, in turn, can be understood in political terms, since Moravia believed that the failure of fiction resulted from and also reinforced the deficiencies of the modern world, which it was helpless to combat.

Moravia's critique may thus be understood, additionally, as a critical self-assessment of his own literary project, especially given the form in which it is embodied in the narrative of *The Woman of Rome*. It is worth recalling, in this context, that Giacomo Diodati was not only the name of Adriana's lover but also one of the aliases under which Moravia was forced to publish

[31] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 376 (emphasis in the original).

[32] Alberto Moravia, "The Man and the Character," in *Man as an End*, 70.

[33] Moravia, "The Man and the Character," 70.

during the Fascist *ventennio*.[34] It is worth recalling, too, that Moravia's visit to the Roman prostitute, like that of his fictional doppelgänger, took place in 1936, "the year of the Abyssinian war," as Adriana identifies it in the course of the novel.[35] When Giacomo's political posturing is laid bare by Adriana's probing questions, therefore, the novel may also be holding up to scrutiny the self-identified shortcomings of its author. By the time of the encounter in Largo Tritone, after all, Moravia was seven years removed from the publication of *The Time of Indifference*, whose unmasking of the small-mindedness and dishonesty of the Italian bourgeoisie had made the author one of the most prominent social critics of his day. Yet the account of his dalliance with the prostitute suggests real limits to Moravia's bourgeois critique, contrasting his privilege with the girl's privations, his sexual hypocrisy with her mother's unembarrassed sexuality. In short, Moravia's repressed memory suggests that, like Diodati, he remained an "anti-bourgeois bourgeois," wedded to his class even as he criticized it and, more damningly still, unable to envision a social order different from the status quo.[36] If *The Woman of Rome* shows Giacomo Diodati to be a failed anti-Fascist because he is unable to realize his fictional ideal, that is to say, it may also imply that Moravia was guilty of a similar offense. Appearing to adopt Giacomo as his proxy—and the identification between author and character is precisely the limitation identified in "The Man and the Character"—Moravia may well have crafted his novel in such a way as to critique his fiction as well as his politics.

[34] This point is noted but only briefly explored in René De Ceccatty, *Alberto Moravia*, trans. Sergio Arecco (Milan: Bompiani, 2010), 312, 364 n. 13.

[35] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 191.

[36] I have borrowed this description from Vittorio Spinazzola, "Un borghese antiborghese," in *Per Moravia. Press Book della sua morte*, ed. Jader Jacobelli (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1990), 174-177. On the novel's critique of Mino as a reflection on Moravia, see Edoardo Sanguinetti, *Alberto Moravia* (Milan: Mursia, 1962), 101-104.

Yet if *The Woman of Rome*'s narrative can thus be understood to problematize aspects of Moravia's literary practice, it can also be seen to represent his realization of a solution to that same problem. The distance between the author's remembered encounter and the moment of literary composition is in this sense of the utmost significance. In writing *The Woman of Rome* Moravia was no longer the callow young man traumatized by the frankness of the prostitute's mother—he was, in other words, no longer Giacomo Diodati—and he could thus aspire to subject both his past self and his fictional double to critical investigation. More powerfully still, in so doing he could aim to critique the whole of Italian society under Fascism. The success of Moravia's fiction, we might therefore say, is predicated on its ability to demonstrate why Giacomo's fiction fails. Confronting Astarita, Giacomo is no longer able to maintain his fictional ideal, what he has earlier called "the world of 'as if,'" ceasing to believe any longer in his own words.[37] Moravia's fiction, in contrast, sought to represent that failure, and to hold it up for scrutiny. It sought to encompass Giacomo and his bourgeois alienation; Astarita and his Fascist perversion; the priest with his sanctimonious casuistry; Giacinti, with his cynical entitlement; Gino with his craven duplicity; Gisella with her shameless rivalry; Adriana's mother with her consequentialist morality. Above all, Moravia sought to encompass the experience of Adriana herself, making the Roman prostitute, rather than the bourgeois intellectual, the interpreter as well as the narrator of the text's socially symbolic events. Attempting to transcend his limited viewpoint, in this way, and to embrace all of his representative characters in the manner of Maupassant's "Boule de Suif," Moravia sought to identify the characteristic inclinations of an entire society corrupted by Fascism. More significantly still, he sought to suggest the contours of a possible response.

[37] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 306.

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In 1936, in the apartment of a Roman prostitute, Moravia experienced a moment of social dislocation, one that forced him to perceive the limits of his bourgeois experience: "it revealed to me an entire human panorama," we have seen him recount to his biographer, "that a sociologist would need a whole book of reflections adequately to explain and to illustrate."[38] *The Woman of Rome*, I would suggest, is precisely that "book of reflections," but filtered through a resolutely literary rather than a sociological sensibility. This is a crucial distinction, because it was Moravia's literary approach that allowed him not only to reclaim his repressed memory but also to redeem it, transforming the Roman prostitute into a potent cultural symbol. Revisiting his repressed memory and reworking it into the narrative of *The Woman of Rome*, I mean to say, Moravia was able to recognize his experience as typical of a historical moment—indeed, as representative of a historical trauma. Not only, but he was also able to reexamine his experience from the prostitute's perspective, and by placing her at the center of an intertextual narrative he was able to discover something more than an apt symbol for Italy's traumatic history. Adriana is deprived, exploited, and assaulted, it is true, and in this way she can be said to stand in for a populace victimized by Italian Fascism.[39] Yet in her resiliency, and most pointedly in her hopeful resolution—that is, in the child she is expecting at the novel's conclusion—she suggests the persistence of an implicit popular sovereignty whose ingrained opposition to Fascism is far more potent than is Giacomo's idealized resistance. If the characters who betray and violate her can be said to represent incarnations of the ideologies that upheld Mussolini's Fascist regime, therefore,

[38] Moravia and Elkann, *Vita di Moravia*, 161.

[39] Prostitution was a frequent cultural symbol for Italy's post-war struggles. See Millicent Marcus, "The Italian Body Politic is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Postwar Italian Film," in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife. Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, eds. Dana E. Stewart and Alison Cornish (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 329-347.

Adriana herself should not be taken merely as a representation of society's oppression by that regime. She also embodies an undertaking intrinsically opposed to the inescapable authoritarianism of the bourgeoisie.

Moravia imbued his Adriana with a host of figurative associations that lent her narrative—and her narrating voice—a profoundly transformative significance. That significance structures *The Woman of Rome*: as Adriana recounts her descent into prostitution she becomes Defoe's Moll Flanders; as she resists the descent into the depravity that perverts the surrounding society she becomes Maupassant's Elisabeth Rousset. This symbolic structure, moreover, is reinforced within Moravia's fiction, as each character imposes additional symbolic resonances onto the protagonist: in the eyes of the artist who first paints her Adriana recalls Danae, mother of Perseus; to her own mother she evokes Mary, mother of Jesus; to Giacomo she figures first as Venus and then, most significantly, as Italy, that "loveliest of ladies [formosissima donna]" of Leopardi's poem.[40] The surfeit of literary symbolism the prostitute thus assumes in Moravia's novel stands in significant contrast to the repression she had formerly undergone in his memory. If in her apartment behind the *Messaggero* building she had suggested the existence of a reality the author was unprepared to face, in other words, in her representation in *The Woman of Rome* she symbolizes the superabundance of reality that had come to supplant his bourgeois moralism.

Through the figure of Adriana, we might therefore say, Moravia was not only reclaiming his repressed memory but also revealing the structures of bourgeois social domination, which had governed his encounter with the prostitute, and of bourgeois morality, which had caused him to repress that encounter for a decade. More to the point, he was exploring the power of literary

[40] Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, 1, 9, 250, 276. There may be another allegory implied in Giacomo's suicide letter, when he instructs Adriana to contact his lawyer: *Francesco Lauro, Via Cola di Rienzo, 3*" (377). Is this perhaps an invocation of Petrarch's "Spirito gentil," which tradition holds was dedicated to Cola di Rienzo, and which in its 3rd stanza offers what might be read as a hopeful message for Moravia's protagonist: "My Rome shall be beautiful again! [Roma mia sarà ancora bella!]"?

symbolism to transcend those structures, and to dismantle them. Put differently, if for the bourgeoisie "the truth, *tout court*, was unhealthy," as we have seen Moravia argue, Adriana can be said to embody the truths that bourgeois society sought to deny, the reality it had sought to restrict.[41] She can be said, as well, to represent the author's rejection of those bourgeois restrictions, his determination to pursue truths formerly denied, and his developing ability to represent them in his fiction. Indeed, as the subjective center of his fiction, and as the symbolic embodiment of the confluence between his remembered encounter and his intertextual exploration, the prostitute Adriana can be said to signify Moravia's renewed commitment to unseating the established order through the unfettered representation of uncensored reality.

[41] Moravia, "Ricordi di censura," 97.