

On the beach

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Alberto Moravia

AGOSTINO

Translated by Michael F. Moore

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Agostino is a short novel. In Michael F. Moore’s excellent translation it runs to fewer than one hundred pages. And yet this small book may paradoxically constitute Alberto Moravia’s magnum opus.

Moravia referred to it as his “hinge” work – the one in which he rediscovered both his artistic vocation as a storyteller and his affinity for the literary themes that would propel his hugely successful writing career over the next half-century. It is easy to see why. Moravia burst onto the Italian literary scene at the age of twenty-two with *Gli indifferenti* (1929): a work that, in its unblinking portrayal of bourgeois alienation – well in advance of Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938) and Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942) – can fairly claim to be the first existentialist novel. But in the thirteen years that elapsed after that precocious debut, his career stalled.

One reason was political: Moravia’s pitiless examination of the psychological sicknesses afflicting Italian society was at odds with the vitalistic and heroic themes dear to Mussolini. Moravia’s Jewishness and his connections to critics of the regime – including his two anti-fascist cousins, Nello and Carlo Rosselli, whom, the evidence suggests, Mussolini had murdered – further heightened his outsider status. A second reason, though, was the simple uncertainty of a promising young author still unsure of his strengths. Moravia laboured over his second novel, *Le ambizioni sbagliate*, for nearly seven years – in the mistaken belief that he could produce a darkly satiric, multi-dimensional, philosophical epic to equal *Dostoevsky*. When the book appeared in 1935, the Fascist Ministry of Popular Culture ordered critics to ignore it. But they need not have bothered. The novel was a muddle, as Moravia later admitted, and readers and critics alike ignored it even in the post-war period. After this failure, he tried his hand at travel writing and literary criticism. He also produced many short stories in varying styles: some anticipating post-war Italian neorealism in their starkness, others experiments in the peculiar form of Italian surrealism known as *realismo magico*.

Nevertheless, Moravia’s ostracism continued. The enactment of the Racial Laws in 1938 eventually forced him to publish under an assumed name. Further problems occurred with his third novel, *La mascherata* (1941), a mannered political satire set in a fictitious Latin American country. The similarities between Moravia’s Latin American strongman and Mussolini were obvious. The censors pounced, and a second edition was enjoined.

Moravia’s career was still unsettled when he wrote *Agostino*. By then, he was eking out a living in Rome, in part by managing Curzio Malaparte’s magazine *Prospettive* – while Malaparte reported on the Second World War from the front lines and collected the stories that would fill his autobiographical novel *Kaputt*. Whereas Malaparte looked to outside events to fuel his writing, Moravia looked inward. On the island of Capri, he was reminded of his boyhood seaside trips to Viareggio with his mother. On one such trip he passed from ignorance to sexual awareness thanks to some older boys. *Agostino* developed from the kernel of that memory.

Agostino is a thirteen-year-old boy who is spending an idyllic summer at an upper-class seaside resort with his widowed and still attractive mother. At the start of the story, Agostino is proud and possessive of her. But when she befriends a local Lothario, he becomes unhappy at her “betrayal”. One day, after he has made what his mother takes to be a sarcastic remark about her new romantic attachment, she slaps him and he runs off. He ends up in a shabby section of the beach where he falls in with a gang of toughs, the sons of local fishermen, who are led by a repellent pederast.

The gang’s brutal and perverse behaviour is inexplicable to the innocent Agostino: they mock, mistreat, beat and humiliate him. He remains drawn to his new associates, if only because they open his eyes to the dual realities of sex and class. Agostino’s association with the gang irreparably changes him. Unable, despite his best efforts, to join their savage circle, when he returns to his mother he nevertheless remains estranged from her. His odyssey ends not in a liberating maturity but in an even lonelier alienation; he discovers the world to be hostile, sex to be corrupting, and the social fabric of life to be miserably deceptive.

There are naturalistic, symbolic and mythic levels to Moravia’s depictions of Agostino’s actions and his inner state. And while the story may be depressing, the writing itself – a strange blend of violently realistic detail, obsessively repeated words and lyrical descriptions of nature – remains engagingly alive.

Moravia, in this masterpiece, realized his full potential as a writer and the enduring themes that would drive his other, more famous books: *La romana*, *Il conformista*, *Il disprezzo*, *La noia*. And yet years would pass before he would be allowed to write and publish in Italy as he pleased, free of censorship.

In 1943 Fascist censors permitted *Agostino* to appear only in a limited edition. After the collapse of the regime, Moravia’s publisher put out a full commercial edition of the novel in 1944 and again in 1945. Yet even in post-Fascist Italy Moravia confronted censorship, imposed both by Christian Democratic governments, and the Vatican, which placed Moravia’s works on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1952.

NYRB Classics deserves praise for reprinting the novel. That said, it is regrettable that the publisher’s judgement went awry in two ways. First, Moore’s translation omits the two expressionistic lithographs by Moravia’s close friend, Renato Guttuso, that illustrated both the 1943 and 1944 editions of the novel. As Moore points out in his thoughtful afterword, Guttuso’s bold outlines visually recreate the bluntness of Moravia’s sentences. Second, Moore has worked from a faulty text. Indeed, he himself notices that something is amiss, and expresses surprise that the 1947 English translation of *Agostino* “oddly” divided the opening chapter in two. But there was nothing “odd” about this. Moravia’s original text, following the editions of 1944 and 1945, was composed of five chapters, not four as in the NYRB Classics edition. It was only in 1953 that – because of a printing error – the first two chapters of the book were inadvertently run together. When a critical edition of Moravia’s works appeared in 2002, the five-chapter text of 1945 was appropriately restored. NYRB Classics should have translated this superior text.