Contempt

Moravia's Novel

Alberto Moravia was born Alberto Pincherle in Rome in 1907. His father, Carlo Pincherle, an architect and a painter, was Jewish; his mother Catholic. His aunt, Amelia Pincherle Rosselli, was a writer of plays and children's stories, and Alberto knew at a very early age that he wanted to be a writer.

> It was always my ambition to write. Just as certain religious figures are said to have had, from childhood, a religious vocation.[1]

He published his first novel, *Gli indifferenti* (*Time of Indifference*) at the age of 22 and later found that he had written an outline for it when he was 9.[2] Aside from the influence of relatives and the society in which he was raised, two things may have influenced his desire to write. One was simply that he was, as he put it, "oversensitive."

> I was a healthy baby, and my family was normal. I was the abnormal one, if anything. Abnormal because I was oversensitive. I don't believe everyone is sensitive in the same way. There are dull, stupid, insensitive children. There are others who are very sensitive, oversensitive. The oversensitive ones can become misfits, but they can also become artists.[3]
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> I have an abnormal sensitivity, like all artists. This abnormal sensitivity would have overwhelmed me, driven me mad, in other words, if I hadn't had the ability to express it. The expression of sensitivity is extremely complex, because it isn't guided by reason, that faculty I love so much, because I don't possess much of it; but I have intuitive willpower. In fact, at heart I am not a rationalist; I am a person who suffers anguish, irreality, a sense of void. Or rather, it isn't exactly suffering: it would be more correct to say that there is never a moment when I don't feel within myself an attraction toward the extremes of imbalance.[4]

He was also ill in a way that confined him to bed and even separated him from his family for extended periods when he was young. At the age of 8 he developed a problem with his hip, which he describes as tuberculosis of the bone or coxitis. He was confined to bed for months at a time and the relapses became progressively worse until he was sent to a sanatorium for a year at the age of 16.

> [I]n the sanatorium I was always alone. One day I flung my breakfast tray on the floor. I was like a mad dog. The doctor, when he heard about it, said I was schizoid. In the end I somehow grew fond of the bed and the illness. Isn't that odd? Later, when I was cured and returned to Rome, every now and then I would go to bed. All this lasted two or three years, even longer. I remember one day I said to my father, "I'm not well, I feel the

1 Moravia *Life* 21

2 Moravia *Life* p. 21

3 Moravia *Life* 1

4 Moravia *Life* 126

> tuberculosis is coming back." I was homesick for the illness. I was psychologically ill for many years after I was healthy. I regained the mental health I had enjoyed before the illness only very late, and naturally it wasn't the same health, ingenuous and innocent: it was something less one-dimensional and more complicated.[5]

He later speculated that there was a psychosomatic component in his illness, but the suffering was real and the isolation associated with it must surely have contributed to his sensitivity as a writer. He also spent much of his time reading and attempting to write. The main influence on his writing and even his conception of himself was Dostoevsky.

> …Dostoyevsky was in a sense the creator of existentialism: he took the relationship between the individual and society, as it had been in Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Tolstoy, and so on, and replaced it with the relationship between the individual and himself. *Crime and Punishment* isn't the story of an ambitious man who fails, as in *Le rouge et le noir* of Stendhal; it's the story of a man who has killed and feels remorse, and remorse is entirely interior, between a man and his self. I was born to literature at that historical moment. Besides Dostoyevsky I was greatly influenced by the surrealists. I was very sensitive to the discoveries of the surrealists about dreams and the unconscious as sources of inspiration. In reality, my avant-garde was surrealism. And this explains why my novels, even today, are distinguished by an ambiguity: they are realistic, but at the same time symbolic. Somewhat like the surrealists. It's something I have in common with a whole generation, the generation of Buñuel,say, who was exactly my age. I pick Buñuel because he is the filmmaker with whom I feel the greatest affinity. [6]

When he was released from the sanatorium, he refused to return to school. This is not to say he was uneducated by any stretch of the imagination. He read voraciously all his life and was clearly an "intellectual" in the grand European tradition. His father supported him in his efforts to write and even put up the money to publish his first novel.

He changed his name to Alberto Moravia. After the Fascists enacted anti-Semetic laws, his mother had changed the children's name to Piccinini, the surname of her grandmother. The choice of Moravia for his pen name seems to have been inspired by the ancient Moravian origins of his mother's family.

Gli indifferenti was a huge critical success and is considered by many to be the first Existentialist novel. After an initial printing of 1000 copies sold out, the publisher printing another 4000, only to

5 Moravia *Life* p 22f

6 Moravia *Life* p 41f

have them confiscated by the government. This experience combined with Moravia's natural rejection of conformity and of his family's bourgeois values, shaped his Anti-Fascist political views.

The success of his first novel did not provide Moravia with financial independence, but it assured him of a career as a writer and gave him access to literary society in England and France as well as Italy. Moravia worked as a journalist, translator, and film critic and wrote 16 more novels as well as numerous short stories, essays, plays and screenplays.

He married Elsa Morante when he was 33. She was also a writer and the marriage lasted 22 years. Towards the end of the Second World War his political views resulted in an order for him to be arrested. He and Elsa spent nine months hiding in the mountains.

He was elected as a representative to the European Parliament in 1984, and he was always a public figure; but he did not think of his life in terms of public history:

> [T]o me years are not public, they're private. And in general my years are marked by the presence of a woman. The years of the war and the immediate postwar were characterized by the presence of Elsa Morante. When Elsa Morante went, Dacia Maraini arrived. When Dacia Maraini went, Carmen Liera arrived. These are my years. The fact that Mao assumes power in China, that the state of Israel is born, certainly interests me very much, but not as much as my private events. This is a general thing, it applies to everybody, absolutely everybody, because life is private, not public. We can't get away from this. Life is so private, in fact, that for politicians, who are public individuals, politics is a private fact.[7]

The focus of most of his writing is individual relationships, and he is often associated with a ruthless exploration of love, sex and alienation. Boredom or *ennui* is a recurring theme in Moravia's novels as well as in his descriptions of his own life:

> In reality the boredom described in the novel of the same name (*La noia),* like the indifference of *Gli indifferenti,* stood always to indicate that anguish of living that I am convinced is the foundation of the existentialist current to which I know I beliong and from which, I believe, the contemporary novel is to a great extent derived. Having said this, I would only add that boredom is not a new subject in modern literature from the nineteenth century to today. You have only to remember the famous pages of Schopenhauer, not to mention the "spleen" of the decadents. Perhaps there was something new to be found, as I felt I did in my novel – in discovering noia, ennui, boredom, also in language and therefore in the impossibility of establishing through lan-

7 Moravia *Life* p 204

> guaage, any relationship with reality. I owe this new aspsect in part to my reading at the time of the works of Wittgenstein, which however acted on my more as analogical stimuli than as a direct philosoophical influence.[8]

Ross and Freed view Moravia as an Existentialist on a par with Sartre, Camus and Kazantzakis and are able to see major existentialist themes running through all of his fiction, even though they felt he might balk at the label. They agree, of course, that he was first and foremost a storyteller.

Moravia also wrote for the theater and cinema, and he described his novels as "plays disguised as novels: few characters, unity of time and place, little analysis, much synthesis, that is to say, action."9 His novels may have a surreal mood infusing a completely realistic setting and story – perhaps like some of the cityscapes of de Chirico – but he was at heart a realistic storyteller. His writing strives for clarity and precision in the description of the action of the story.

His comments on the difference between a poet and a novelist are a good indication of how he viewed his writing:

> [T]he poet is concerned with himself, the novelist is concerned with others. Two truisms. Another truism is that poems are short and novels are long. Final truism: poems cannot be translated, novels can be. This implies how writing is fundamental in poetry, less important in the novel. I would say this: the writing of the novel can range from a maximum of personal language to a maximum of impersonality, but it must always be objective and communicative. The language of poetry, on the contrary, is very personal; it records all the shifts of the person's character, like a seismograph, and it is not necessarily communicative. Why, after all, is poetry often avant-garde, while the novel rarely is? Because the poet is not competing with reality. What do I mean? This: the poet's reality is himself, there is no other reality. This explains why every poet is in the avant-garde with respect to the poet that preceded him. For example, Baudelaire is avant-garde compared to Victor Hugo, but Rimbaud is avant-garde with respect to Baudelaire, and Mallarmé with respect to Rimbaud. In the case of novels, on the other hand, if you take a novelist like Tolstoy and you take me, the difference as far as reality is concerned is minimal; for Tolstoy a tree is a tree, as it is also for me. Thus Tolstoy can be translated, as I can be translated. Poetry cannot be translated; all those who translate poetry deceive themselves and are in error. Poetry can be recreated, true: a poet who translates another poet is in reality writing a new poem. In short, the writing of the novelist cannot help but take into account an objective reality that limits it and is reflected in it,

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8 Moravia *Life* p. 232

9 Moravia *Life* p.34

> whereas the poet can ignore it. Furthermore, the novel is based less on its writing than on ghosts or structures that are not so much "written" as "presented" in the form of what Joyce call "epiphanies," apparitions. What, then, is the ghostly texture? It is situations and characters. Before he is "written," the character "appears," like a ghost, in fact. As for the situation, it is the relationship among the various ghosts.[10]

He elaborated on his notion of the epiphanies when asked to explain how his artistic process happened:

> I can tell you in two words. It doesn't proceed via the head; it occurs through successive illuminations. The artist is always assisted by a demon, and it is this demon that illuminates him. In short, everything I've written that is any good I received through illumination. It comes to me rather easily. I am illuminated. "I am illuminated by immensity," as Ungaretti's poem says. I am illuminated by the thing I am writing. Without illuminations, no writing, no books. Now, what is illumination? It's what Joyce called epiphany. Joyce was fond of this word "epiphany"; I prefer "illumination," which is Rimbaud's favorite term. What is illumination? I'll come to a perhaps even more interesting point, which is entirely mine, because no one else would say it. Illumination is this: a rational operation of dizzying speed. If you have a fan at home, and you turn it on, at a certain point you won't see the blades anymore, you'll see something like a blur. Now, illumination in reality is a fantastic acceleration of rationality. And this is so true that the critics, when they examine something really beautiful, have to dismantle and analyze piece by piece the dazzling and rational mechanism of illumination. If this weren't so, it wouldn't be possible to criticize a work of art.[11]

He viewed his writing as a kind of therapeutic self-examination. It was connected in his mind with his recovery from the illness of his childhood. When Elkann suggested to him that "the really great effort of your life was not writing but the mastering of yourself after the illness, in the sense of making yourself take a place in society," Moravia replied, "It wasn't just the mastering of myself, but also the recovery of health, which is the same thing. The recovery, I mean, of moral health. Because I had a psychosomatic illness; tuberculosis is a psychosomatic illness."[12] Elkann goes on to question whether Moravia every wanted to be psychoanalyzed to which Moravia replies:

> No. If anything I would say that I write books and my books are my dreams, but I possess the key to them. *Gli indifferenti,* for example, isn't a story about my family, it's a

10 Moravia *Life* p. 122f

11 Moravia *Life* p. 127

12 Moravia *Life* p. 128

kind of dream that reflects the intolerability of family life as I had experienced. It. The basic experience of the novelist is always autobiographical; the writer doesn't talk about things he doesn't know.[13]

Despite his bourgeois roots much of Moravia's fiction is concerned with the lower classes, and he was adamant about his own experiences with poverty:

> There is a legend current in Italy that I've always been well-off. It's not true: until the publication of *La romana* [in 1948] I was without possessions, absolutely, and after the war I came to know poverty in the real sense of the word. This was the situation; otherwise the *Raconti romani* and *La ciociara* would be incomprehensible, because they are descriptions of poor people, of poverty. I'm not a writer who writes only about the middle classes; I have known the working class intimately. I want this to be quite clear. I'm annoyed with Italian writers and critics who say I'm only a rich, prosperous bourgeois. Besides being false, this idea prevent an understanding of a part of my work that is totally concerned with the poor.[14]

The subject matter of *Il disprezzo (Contempt)* is directly related to two aspects of Moravia's own experience: his work as a screenwriter and his relationship with his wife. Obviously he was not Riccardo Molteni, the narrator of the novel; but he does know whereof he speaks when he explores the process of writing for films. Cinema was one of the loves of his childhood. "As a boy I would see even two movies a day. It's my favorite art, after literature and painting. Cinema and painting have a great influence in my fiction because I live very much through my eyes."[15]

In 1939 he worked with Visconti on the screenplay for *Ossesione*, but he said that only one word he contributed to the dialog ended up in the final script. From 1940 to 1945 worked as a screenwriter on a handful of films, some of which involved as many as five other writers. About the same time his novel, *La mascherata*, which was a satire on Fascism, had been confiscated by the government after its publication, and his experiences as a screenwriter were not altogether pleasant.

> *How did you find writing scripts?*
> Fine. But it had two annoying aspects. First of all, it wrecked your life. You would sit for hours and hours with the other writers, smoking, drinking coffee, now and then telling obscene or anti-Fascist jokes. A constant tug-of-war. Even now many do it, but the process has changed somewhat, it's become more rational. And second, I always had the sensation that I was giving something precious, for money, to someone who would exploit it for his

13 Moravia *Life* p. 128

14 Moravia *Life* p. 159

15 Moravia *Life* p. 149

> own ends. I've defined the scriptwriter as a kind of governess. He raises the children, then he's dismissed, and the child remains with its mother. The scriptwriter, that is, gives himself totally to the script, but the director's name is on the movie.[16]

After the war he says he only wrote two screenplays, but he seems to have been brought in as a writer from time to time on more films than he wanted to remember, including David Selznick's disastrous production of *Indiscretion of an American Wife* in 1952. Bertolucci even hired him to write dialog for the scene in *Last Tango In Paris* in which Jean-Pierre Leaud interviews Maria Schneider about marriage.

Il disprezzo was published in 1954 during what Tim Parks labels Moravia's "middle period." He wrote it after *Il conformista* (1951) and before *La ciociara* (1957), the novel based on his experiences while hiding in the mountains during the last months of the war. *La ciociara* (*Two Women*) was adapted as a film by Vittorio De Sica and starring Sophia Loren and Jean Paul Belmondo in 1960. *Il conformista* (*The Conformist*) was, of course, adapted by Bertolucci in 1970.

Moravia describes the origins of the *Il disprezzo* in terms of his relationship with Elsa:

Did you fall in love with Elsa immediately?

I was never *in love* with Elsa. I loved her, yes, but I never *man*aged to lose my head: I never fell, in other words. She always knew this, and it was perhaps also the chief reason for the difficulties of our life together. I wasn't in love, but I was fascinated by an extreme, heart-rending, passionate quality in her character. It was as if every day of her life were the last, just before her death. So, in an atmosphere of impassioned aggressiveness on her part and defensive affection on mine, we lived together for twenty-five years. You may ask: Why defensive? I will answer with a contradiction:

Because Elsa tried to annihilate me and, at the same time, through excess passion, she annihilated herself.

You told me you had written Ii disprezzo *in an excess of irritation with Elsa?*

Yes, there were days when I would have liked to kill her. Not just separate from her, which would have been a rational solution, but kill her, because our relationship was so close, so complex, and finally, so alive that crime seemed to me easier than separation.

Why did you want to kill her? What had happened?

Absolutely nothing new had happened, but at certain moments I couldn't stand it any longer.

You couldn't stand her character any longer?

She had been too cruel, practically sadistic. If you read carefully *La storia*, this cruelty

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16 Moravia *Life* p. 150

Alberto Moravia with Elsa Morante at Capri in 1948.

> strangely combined with her creatural and pre-moral pity, will seem obvious to you. For that matter, pity and cruelty are only two aspects of a relationship with reality more physiological than intellectual. In any case, the idea of killing her was transferred almost immediately into a novel, *Il disprezzo*. In the first outline of this novel the protagonist, reacting against his wife's unjust attitude toward him, was to plot and carry out her murder. But this idea of a crime faded as the novel was written. The wife dies in an accident; the protagonist of the novel I actually wrote no longer has anything to do with the character I had thought of at the very beginning.[17]

In another context Moravia elaborated on the way in which is idea for a novel evolved as he wrote it:

> When I write, as I've said, I always start out from individual situations. For example, I write a story about a man who loves a woman, or doesn't love her. What he feels. This is an existential start. I start with existence; then, without willing it, going deeper into the story, I arrive at its meaning. In humbler terms we could say that I tell of an event in life and then, as I depict it, I arrive at the culture. Culture today means Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, perhaps Wittgenstein, perhaps Heidegger, and so on. But artists have always behaved like

17 Moravia *Life* p. 215

this: they told stories that in the end proved homologous with the culture of the time.[18]

So starting with his very personal reactions to some aspects of his relationship with his wife and to some aspects of his experience as a screenwriter, Moravia developed a story which acquired resonances beyond his own experiences. Looking back after he finished a novel he is able to view it as a critic and see the cultural themes that constitute its "meaning." He did not start out with abstract ideas he wanted to express, but his sensitivity and the scope of his education and intellect inevitably shaped the story to express a perspective on larger cultural or philosophical issues.

It is not too difficult in retrospect to imagine a process by which his imagination began with the agony he felt in his marriage and the frustrations he experienced as a screenwriter and found a way to tie them together in a story which also tapped into much wider concerns. The critical moment would be the realization that he could use the *Odyssey* to tie the two stories together and to provide a frame of reference for the underlying concerns. The simple device of having the narrator be a screenwriter hired to work on an adaptation of the *Odyssey* opens the door not only to a mythic framework for exploring the relationship between the screenwriter and his wife but also to a context for explicit discussion of cultural issues. It may have also provided a model for structuring the novel.

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18 Moravia *Life* p. 232

Another literary reference which may have been in the back of Moravia's mind as he wrote *Il disprezzo* is Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. Moravia said nothing to indicate that it was, but given the influence that Dosteovsky had on him it seems appropriate at least to regard Riccardo Molteni as a distant literary descendant of the narrator of *Notes From Underground*.

A claim might be made that there is only one character in *Il disprezzo*. Like "The Tell-Tale Heart," *Il disprezzo* is trapped inside the mind of its deluded and self-destructive narrator. There are other characters, of course; but everything we know about them is filtered through Molteni's somewhat suspect view of things.

The narrator is Riccardo Molteni, a 27-year-old film critic and an aspiring playwright who after two years of marriage takes work as a screenwriter in order to earn money to pay for a new apartment.

His wife, Emilia, is a beautiful woman who began working as a secretary at 16. She is from a "good" but impoverished family

Battista is a successful Italian film producer who hires Molteni first to work on a comedy and then to write an adaptation of the *Odyssey*.

Rheingold is an older German director whom Battista has engaged for the *Odyssey*.

Gino Pasetti is the director of the first film Molteni wrote for Battista and Luisa is his wife.

Other peripheral characters include a typist who worked briefly for Molteni, Emilia's mother, the Pasetti's daughter, a maid at Battista's villa in Capri, and an attendant at a boat rental concession at the marina.

The novel consists of 23 chapters. The first half of the story takes place in the fall in Rome and the second half in late spring in Capri (or on the way there from Rome). Both halves of the story begin with a car ride in which Emilia is persuaded to ride with Battista.

The novel can perhaps also be divided symmetrically in to three "acts." The first seven chapters deal with events leading up to the job as a writer on the *Odyssey*. The middle nine chapters develop the connections with the *Odyssey* and culminate in the moment when Molteni realizes Emila has locked him out of the bedroom. The final seven chapters chronicle the unraveling of everything leaving Molteni alone with his story to tell.

Chptr	Page	Description
1	3	"I'll follow in a taxi."
2	9	When and how relations began to deteriorte
3	15	Leasing the flat and becoming a Communist
4	25	Sleeping in the other room
5	37	Job of the script-writer
6	45	Lunch with Pasetti
7	59	Finding Emilia at home, lying to mother, call from Battista
8	73	Battista, Rheingold, Odyssey, Kissing the typist
9	97	Discussing Odyssey and typist with Emilia
10	111	Going out to dinner
11	125	Emilia leaving, plans for Capri
12	135	Driving to Naples with Rheingold, Emilia & Battista at beach
13	151	Battista's villa, "It's I who pay!"
14	159	On the terrace, Petrarch, Battista kisses Emilia
15	167	Dinner with Emilia & Battista, Battista's secret of success
16	175	Wants Emilia to decide, locked door
17	183	Breakfast with Rheingold, think it over
18	193	Walk, Emilia sunbathing, dream kiss
19	203	Debate with Rheingold in bar, Joyce, Dante, decision to quit
20	213	Emilia plans dinner, you don't behave like a man
21	225	Sleeping through dinner, sitting on terrace, sleeping medicine

Chptr	Page	Description
22	235	Note from Emilia, Piccola Marina, boat with Emilia, Grotto
23	245	Return to villa, news of accident, decision to write

The entire story is of course told in retrospect, but the initial portion also involves a movement back and forth in time. The story starts at the precise moment when Molteni met Battista and is given the opportunity to work as a screenwriter and then gradually fills in the background events leading up to this moment. As a result the exact timeline of the events recounted in the first half of the book is not immediately clear and can only be reconstructed in hindsight.

Very little is learned about Molteni's own background. We know nothing of his own family or even his education except that he sees himself as an intellectual destined to write for the theater. We only learn his age in chapter 15 and we don't even learn his name until chapter six. He does imply that he had other relationships with women before his marriage (No other woman he had slept with ever complained about his snoring.), but we learn nothing about them.

The selective revelation of background events is, of course, symptomatic of the distortions of Molteni's mind and of his attempts to justify himself in the telling of the story. Occasionally he lets things slip which reveal that previous descriptions of an event are not the whole story. One of the things that he reveals inadvertently is that this reticence regarding the full truth also seems to characterize his relationships with others. For example his wife did not know until after they were engaged that he could not afford any kind of home for them except a room in a lodging house.

The precise timeline of the events involved in his story is obviously less important than the way in which he reveals and comments on the events. It may be helpful, though, as a tool for evaluating some of the things he says.

Date or Time	Event
Unspecified	Riccardo and Emilia engaged
Shortly after engaged	Emilia weeps when he confesses her he cannot provide a home of their own
Unspecified	They marry and live in a furnished room in a lodging-house. He works as a film critic and tries to save money.
Two years after marriage	Riccardo purchases the lease on a flat in a new building using his savings and a loan
Unspecified	They inspect the unfurnished flat and make love on the floor
Unspecified	Riccardo joins the Communist party

Date or Time	Event
Couple of months after purchase	They move into the flat. She wants to sleep separately.
Next day (First Monday in October)	Meets Battista and offered screenwriting job
That evening	Emilia goes with Battista. Riccardo takes a cab and is late.
A few days later	They make love, but still sleep separately
Unclear	Dictating script to typist at home. Kisses her. Emilia sees.
Two months after signing to write first script.	Becomes disenchanted with screenwriting while writing a second script for another producer.
Unspecified	Battista mentions possible second, more important script before he has finished the first.
Unspecified	Finishes first script for Battista and has lunch with the Pasetti
That evening	Tests Emilia's story about lunch with her mother.
Next afternoon	Appointment with Battista. Meets Rheingold. Discuss Capri and Odyssey. Signs contract.

Date or Time	Event
That evening	Tells Emilia about Odyssey script. She says she does not love him any more. He insists on dining out. He drinks too much and makes a pass at her
Next Morning	She plans to move back to her mother's. He suggests she come to Capri. (Rheingold goes to Paris)
Ten days after meeting w Battista	Rheingold returns from Paris
Beginning of June	They leave for Capri. Riccardo rides with Rheingold. Emilia with Battista.
Same Day	Stop at beach. Lunch in Naples. Walk to Villa.
That evening	Riccardo on terrace sees Battista kiss Emilia. The three dine together. Emilia locks him out of her bedroom.
Next morning	Breakfast with Rheingold. Discuss Odyssey for an hour.
Later that morning	Riccardo walks along coast. Emilia sunbathing. He dreams of kiss. He tells her he saw Battista kiss her.

Date or Time	Event
Same day	Emilia and Riccardo have lunch together. Battista lunches with Rheingold.
After lunch	Emilia retires and Riccardo starts to doze off but jumps up to go tell Rheingold his decision not to write.
Half an hour later	Riccardo meets with Rheingold in the hotel bar. They argue. He recites Dante.
Same afternoon	Riccardo returns to villa. Looks around Emilia's room; hears her giving instructions to cook. He tells he his plan to leave in the morning; they argue. He says he will stay.
6:00 PM	Riccardo locks himself in his room and takes a nap.
~8:00 PM	Battista & Emilia go out to eat
9:00 PM	Riccardo wakes up, gets message from maid, eats alone at villa, sits on terrace, retreats to his room when he hears Emilia & Battista coming, takes sleeping pills and falls asleep.
Next morning	Emilia & Battista leave for Rome
Later that morning	Riccardo wakes up, finds letter, walks to piazza, reads newspaper
Midday	Takes bus to marina, rents boat, hallucinates afternoon with Emilia, rows into grotto, faints
Afternoon	Car accident in which Emilia dies
Afternoon	Riccardo returns to villa, receives telegram, goes to Naples, learns of Emilia's death.
Unspecified	Emilia's funeral
That evening	Riccardo returns to apartment
Next day	Returns to Capri
Unspecified	Visits beach below villa, decides to write the story.

Two things emerge from this attempt to unravel a consistent timeline for the events underlying the story. The first is the trivial issue of when Riccardo worked at his second screenwriting job for the other producer. The narrator makes it clear that the job Battista offers him on the first Monday in October is his first screenwriting job. He says that his disenchantment with screenwriting developed during his second job for a different

producer at a point two months after he signed the initial contract with Battista. So far as I can tell there may be a contradiction between the timeline of events associated with his two jobs for Battista and the description of his second job for another producer, unless he worked on both scripts simultaneously at some point. The completion of the first script with Pasetti is tied to the meeting with Battista and Rheingold the next afternoon. At the meeting it is agreed that they will all depart for Capri when Rheingold returns from Paris in ten days. By the time they depart for Capri it is June.

The other more significant thing that struck me as I unraveled the timeline for the story is the fact that Emilia announces she wants to sleep separately the day before Riccardo encourages her to ride with Battista after their initial dinner meeting. The attentive reader may well realize this immediately as he reads the fourth chapter, but I confess I did not. In any event the novel is set up to delay this realization as an indication of the narrator's own obtuseness about his marriage. The story starts with the description of the ride from the restaurant to Battista's house, and the narrator himself encourages the reader to see the event as having pivotal significance in the deterioration of his marriage. The reader in all likelihood will immediately sense that Riccardo's version of the events is suspect, but the first direction one is encouraged to explore is the possibility that Riccardo is offering his wife to Battista as a means of securing his own career advancement. This is made more explicit in the second half of the book in connection with Rheingold's interpretation of the Odyssey. If the reader began by knowing that Emilia had refused to sleep in the same bed as her husband the night before, it is very likely that one's initial reaction to Riccardo's description of the evening with Battista would be different. This is just one example of the quicksand of Riccardo's narration of the events of his life.

Obviously what matters most is Riccardo's experience of the events or his interpretation of them rather than some objective description; but part of what the reader is being asked to do is evaluate Riccardo's interpretation and to see how his interpretation is colored by his own demons.

The opening paragraph of the novel immediately sends up red flags. He begins by saying that during the first two years of his marriage his relations with his wife were perfect. I may be more skeptical than normal, but I am suspicious of anyone who starts by telling me his marriage is, or ever was, "perfect." He concludes the paragraph by saying, "This story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her and not to judge her, Emilia, on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me." Already the account reeks of self-justification and self-deception. My initial reaction was to laugh at the way he was giving himself away, and my first reading of the book found it darkly humorous because of this maddening characteristic of the narrator. On a second reading, however, the laughter

was dampened by having the witness again the excruciating way in which his obtuseness seems to destroy his wife's love for him.

He is clearly right that Emilia did love him, but came to despise him. At no point, however, does he ever develop a convincing explanation of how or why this happened. As a reader one may or may not feel that one understands Emilia, but one clearly sees that Riccardo does not. Their marriage may have been doomed from the start given what Riccardo gradually reveals about his attitude towards Emilia.

Some readers may react strongly to what can be perceived as "male chauvinism" in Riccardo. I personally do not think this is a helpful characterization of his attitude towards her and casting the relationship in terms of chauvinism typical of the Fifties runs the risk of missing the real point of the novel. Certainly Riccardo exhibits traits that warrant the label of male chauvinist, but ultimately I do not think the novel is about the need for feminist liberation. Some readers may interpret the novel as an indication that Moravia, himself, was chauvinistic or even misogynistic, but again I believe this misses the point. Aside from the obvious fact that Moravia ought not to be identified with the narrator of the novel, the real focus of the book is on the mind of Riccardo. The chauvinistic traits are symptomatic of a deeper issue in terms of how he interprets experience and relates to reality on the most basic level.

Riccardo professes unwavering love for Emilia and says that he does not judge her, but during the course of the story we see him almost strangle her in a fit of fury and contemplate killing her with a glass ashtray (109). He also describes her lack of education and sophistication condescendingly in a way that borders on contempt. He resents having to earn money to pay for the things he believes she needs to make her happy. He jumps to a conclusion that she is lying to him, and he does not hesitate to lie to her mother in order to test Emilia's veracity. He insists repeatedly that he only wants to hear the truth from her, but he cuts her off when she attempts to express something he fears. The most telling example of this is the moment when she agrees to accompany him to Capri under one condition, but he refuses violently to hear what that condition might be.

Riccardo's unwavering love for Emilia really seems to be more a desperate and even childish need to be loved by her. It is also clearly a sexual connection, the meaning of which may be ambiguous. The simplest explanation of their relationship may be that, for whatever reason, he found her sexually attractive (just as he found another typist sexually attractive) and she, for whatever reason, chose to devote herself to him. The combination of her devotion and the sexual attraction was potent enough for him to invest in her his need to be loved. This is certainly a volatile, but not uncommon, basis for a marriage.

I doubt that the reader is meant to understand fully why Emilia chose to devote herself to Riccardo. To cynically assume that she saw him as a meal ticket would be to take Riccardo's bait and fall into his own private hell. She may or may not have been attracted to him because she needed a provider to enable her to build her nest. This is certainly suggested by some of the behavior he attributes to her, but we have no reason to assume this is the whole truth. Whether Moravia believed one thing or the other about her may also be beside the point. All we have to go on is what Riccardo tells us about her.

What we have is a confession of an experience of a disastrous marriage. There are numerous clues indicating how unreliable the information may be, but there is not enough information to enable us to reconstruct an objectively verifiable version of the events. This is surely part of the point of the novel. It paints a picture of isolation and of a way it can be exacerbated by egotistical and willful behavior which is unconsciously motivated but cloaked in hyper-analytical, self-justifying thought. It presents self-consciousness as a kind of disease. Riccardo can not help himself. There are several moments when he has resolved to refrain from pushing Emilia only to blurt out the worst examples of his unrelenting questions and challenges designed to prove that what he fears most is in fact true.

Beneath Riccardo's need to be loved by Emilia there is an anxiety about his own identity, which seems to be fueled by self-loathing. His image of himself as "an intellectual, a man of culture, a writer for the theater" seems more of a desperate need for status than a genuine commitment. He claims he always had a great passion for "art" theater and was drawn to it by a natural vocation; but he never mentions any actual attempts to write for the theater. The main function of the self-image seems to be to bolster his own ego and to enable him to look down on his wife or on the commercial hacks he encounters in the film business. This is not to say he is not well-read or educated. He can recite Dante from memory and is familiar with Freud, Joyce and O'Neill as well as Homer and Petrarch.

His physical description of himself as "a young man whose thinness, short sight, nervousness, pallor and carelessness in dress all bore witness, in anticipation, of the literary glory for which I was destined" seems to read as a dead giveaway. And this is before the stress of his debt has caused him to alter his view of himself to that of "a poor devil who has been caught in a shabby, pathetic trap."[19]

Riccardo is probably a classic case study in "bad faith" as formulated by Sartre. He is completely at odds with the identity he has chosen or the identity he feels he has been given or forced into. He projects his anxiety onto the world at large, and ultimately the contempt Emilia ex-

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19 Moravia p. 20

presses for him seems to be his own contempt for himself which he projects onto her and then pulls from her. The source of his investment in being loved by Emilia becomes apparent when he begins to realize that their sexual relationship is no longer what he had always thought it was:

> And now, as if my eyes had been at last opened to a fact which was clear and yet, till that moment, invisible, I was conscious that this communion might no longer exist between us, in fact, no longer did exist. And I, like a person who suddenly realizes he is hanging over an abyss, felt a kind of painful nausea at the thought that our intimacy had turned, for no reason at all, into estrangement, absence, separation.[20]

Later when Emilia tells him of her plan to leave him and return to her mother's, he gives another description of the terror induced by his condition:

> I do not remember at all what I did after she had spoken these words: or rather, I remember only a few sentences, a few movements. As though in the grip of some kind of delirium, I must have said and done things then of which I was not in the least conscious. I believe I went around and around the room with long strides, in my pajamas, my hair all untidy, at one moment beseeching Emilia not to leave me, at another, explaining my own position, and then simply addressing my remarks to the air, as if I had been alone. The *Odyssey* filmscript, the flat, the installments to be paid, my sacrificed theatrical ambitions, my love for Emilia, Battista, Rheingold, all the aspect of my life and all the people in it were jumbled up in my mouth, in a rapid, incoherent rush of words, like the little pieces of colored glass at the bottom of a kaleidoscope when a violent hand shakes it. But at the same time I felt that this kaleidoscope was nothing but a poor, illusory thing – simply, in fact, a few bits of colored glass with no order or design about them; and now the kaleidoscope was broken, and the pieces of glass lay scattered on the floor, under my eyes. I had at the same time a very precise feeling of abandonment and of fear of being abandoned, but beyond this feeling I could not go; it oppressed me and prevented me not merely from thinking, but almost from breathing. My whole self rebelled violently at the thought of the separation and of the loneliness that would follow; but I realized that, in spite of the sincerity of this feeling of rebellion, I was not speaking convincingly; on the contrary. And indeed every now and then there was a rent in the clouds of alarm and terror that enveloped me, and then I would see Emilia sitting on the divan, still in the same place, and calmly answering me: "Riccardo, do be sensible: it's the only thing for us to do now."[21]

20 Moravia p. 30

21 Moravia p. 128

In addition to being a wonderful example of the power of Moravia's prose, this passage sums up what has been building throughout the first half of the novel. Riccardo has, largely through inadvertent revelation, peeled away the layers of his self-deception so that we can see the isolated and desperate individual that he is. In the course of the events he has been describing, he accomplished the moral equivalent of this process. Despite his professed desires he did everything in his power to alienate Emilia in a way that forced him to confront his own need for validation through her love. The second half of the novel is an exploration of the meaning of this process. To the reader it seems clear at this point that the marriage is over.

There is another theme which has been developed during the first half of the novel which may be particularly relevant to Godard's interest in the novel. At one point Riccardo describes Emilia's willingness to make love with him as the willingness of a prostitute to accommodate her client.[22] He also describes his work as a screenwriter in terms which also conjure up the image of prostitution:

> Working together on a script means living together from morning to night, it means the marriage and fusion of one's own intelligence, one's own sensibility, one's own spirit, with those of the other collaborators; it means, in short, the creation, during the two or three months that the work lasts, of a fictitious, artificial intimacy whose only purpose is the making of the film, and thereby, in a last analysis (as I have already mentioned), the making of money. [23]

There can be little doubt that Moravia shared Riccardo's perspective on screenwriting. Riccardo's image of the screenwriter as the governess who raises children only to have them taken away is one Moravia himself used to describe his own feelings. One of the beauties of irony in a novel is that the author can have his cake and eat it too. The existential angst, terror of abandonment, violent frustration and even self-loathing that Riccardo experiences were obviously not unknown to Moravia, but clearly he is not to be identified with Riccardo. And Riccardo is not without some redeeming or even sympathetic qualities. His insights are often legitimate even though they may quickly get distorted by his desperation.

Riccardo himself connects the dissatisfaction in his work with the deterioration of his marriage. He says essentially that he would be happy to prostitute his talent if he felt that the money was providing him with the means to be happy with Emilia. In truth it seems that he resents having to prostitute himself to earn money to pay for an apartment. At the very least one can assume that given his image of himself as an artist and intellectual he would have eventually rebelled against

22 Moravia p. 35

23 Moravia p. 40f

the prostitution of his talent. He expresses ambivalence about his natural gift for solving the problems in a screenplay because he feels he is being exploited and carrying more than his fair share of the load in the writing process.

Riccardo also attributes his membership in the Communist party to the problems in his marriage. He maintains that it is only because he had to overextend himself financially in order to provide Emilia with "the home of her dreams"[24] that he let himself be persuaded by a friend to join the party. In a typical turn he uses his willingness to join a party as whip to flagellate himself so that he can preserve some remnant of his feeling of superiority. He had never joined a political party because he felt he could only do so if he were motivated by intellectual convictions, and he despises himself for letting his own personal financial condition dictate his political sympathies.

> "So I'm really just like everyone else," I thought furiously; "does it only need an empty purse to make me dream, like so many other people, of the rebirth of humanity?"…[O]nce again I had behaved, not like the young, unrecognized genius, but like the starving journalist or the scraggy employee into which I was so terrified that time would transform me.[25]

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24 Moravia p. 21

25 Moravia p. 22f

Initially the opportunity to write screenplays seems to offer a way out of his dilemma. He can write a few screenplays, pay off the lease on his apartment and then return to journalism and the theater. One suspects though that unless Riccardo can become an internationally celebrated playwright, he will always resent having to work for money. Having a wife who by his reckoning is eager to spend money only heightens his resentment at having to work for pay and provides him with a surrogate target for his resentment.

Embedded in this is an ironic commentary on Marxist activism which is difficult to untangle. The feeling that work is exploitation or prostitution is tied to a suspect project of elevating oneself above "everyone else." Dreams for the rebirth of humanity can only be valid if they are not determined by economic conditions. Envy of financial security and class privilege make the desire for social justice seem more like a selfish desire for revenge and self-aggrandizement. The garden behind the villa wall across the street from Riccardo's apartment is only something he can fantasize about walking in. The pride he takes in his small car as well as the humiliation he feels because his car is small seem to indicate the extent to which he has bought into a system he theoretically opposes.

Bourgeois values are primarily associated with home and family and an unselfconscious conformity. The Pasetti family functions in the story primarily as a foil for Riccardo's ambivalence

about family life. He is contemptuous of Luisa's deference to her husband and seeming lack of any mind of her own, but he is also envious of the devotion that Gino enjoys. He may look down on the trendy way in which the Pasettis have furnished their home, but he took delight in Emilia's efforts to give their room in the lodging house the feel of a true home when he felt it was an indication of her devotion to him. The Pasettis' daughter is displayed almost like another piece of furniture in their home and underscores the way in which Riccardo seems to make no connection between his own marriage and any interest in procreation or even having a "home."

From what we learn of Riccardo in the first half of the novel it is not at all clear what the "rebirth of humanity" would mean to him except that it would enable him to feel loved and financially secure.

The second half of the novel expands the frame of reference for the story by introducing the natural world and an historical consciousness. The two are related by the idea that modern man has lost the ability to participate immediately in the natural world in the way that was possible for ancient civilizations. This theme becomes an analog of the deterioration of Riccardo's marriage and of the difference between his complicated, self-destructive self-consciousness and the implicit image of Emilia as a more instinctual, non-verbal being. There is something in their relationship which reminds me of a line of dialogue in Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* when Anna Karina says to Belmondo, "You speak to me in words; I speak to you in feelings." The net result of this expansion of the story is that Riccardo's situation begins to read as a metaphor for modernity.

The discussions about the screenplay for the *Odyssey* serve several functions in the novel. They put Riccardo in the middle of a second conflict which becomes entangled with his conflict with Emilia. The triangle of Riccardo, Emilia and Battista is augmented by the triangle of Riccardo, Battista and Rheingold. Battista and Rheingold want to make very different movies, and Riccardo is expected to serve them both. Battista's interpretation of the relationship between Ulysses and Penelope is a direct parallel with Riccardo's relationship with Emilia. Riccardo's nostalgia for the world of Homer becomes associated with his longing to return to the "perfect" relationship with Emilia during the first two years of their marriage. His discussions with Rheingold provide an opportunity for the presentation of ideas about the modern man that give a metaphorical dimension to the psychological case study of Riccardo's marriage.

For Rheingold the *Odyssey* is a tale told by a blind man whose interpretation of the events in the story is not to be trusted. Homer talks about Ulysses' desire to return home and his love for his wife, while relating events that imply very different motives. The key to Rheingold's interpretation of the *Odyssey* is a psychological explanation of

why Ulysses had to slaughter Penelope's suitors rather than just show them the door. Riccardo applies Rheingold's interpretation to his own situation, casting himself as Ulysses and Battista as a suitor of his wife, concluding that his desire to avoid offending Battista is the root of Emilia's contempt for him. He also concludes that it may be possible for him to retrieve his manhood and her respect (and love) by taking a stand against Battista. When Rheingold explains that Penelope let Ulysses know that the only condition on which she could recover her love for him was to slay the suitors, one is reminded of how Riccardo cut off Emilia when she began to say that she would only accompany him to Capri under one condition.

It is easy to be seduced into concluding that Riccardo has finally hit upon the correct interpretation of the events he has been describing. Clearly Riccardo is maddeningly passive in the face of Battista's advances towards his wife and clearly his passivity contributes to Emilia's contempt for him. As she puts it, "[Y]ou're not a man, you don't behave like a man."[26] The way she looked at him each time he failed to insist that she ride with him certainly implies that she felt he was offering her to Battista or at the very least was too timid to refuse to let Battista take her. In this reading the point of the novel seems to be that Riccardo should have been more assertive and possessive.

There is, however, enough irony in the novel to undermine this reading or at least to complicate it. For one thing there is the question of whether it is at all possible for Riccardo to be anything other than the way he is. At the same moment Emilia says he is not a man, she says she despises him, "because you're made like that, and however hard you try, you can't change yourself."[27] Riccardo's attempts to rise to the occasion are always futile and ineffective. Perhaps it is because he is not "really" rising to the occasion but only making a test gesture to see if it gets the response he wants. Nonetheless he seems unable to be a "man."

Secondly as Rheingold points out, it is not possible for a modern man to be like an ancient Greek. He casts the difference in terms of "civilization."

> Ulysses in the *Odyssey* is, simply, civilized man, he represents civilization. Amongst all the other heroes who are, to be precise, non-civilized men, Ulysses is the only one who is civilized. And in what does Ulysses' civilized quality consist? It consists in not having prejudices, in always making use of reason, at all costs, even in questions as you say of decency, of dignity, of honor…in being intelligent, objective, I would almost say scientific.[28]

26 Moravia p. 220

27 Moravia p. 219

28 Moravia p. 190

His description of the "archaic, feudal, aristocratic" and traditional or barbaric culture represented by Penelope in terms of blood and honor conjures up enough associations with Nazi Fascism to make one cringe at the thought of what happens when "modern" man attempts to return to this way of life. He even makes an explicit reference to Hitler in explaining that civilization, "to all those who are not civilized, may appear – in fact often does appear – to be corruption, immorality, lack of principles, cynicism."[29]

He has turned the tables on Riccardo so swiftly that Riccardo, who had prided himself on his self-awareness and sophistication is now dizzyingly aligning himself with barbarism: "If by civilization you mean that a husband should give a helping hand to the man who is courting his wife, well, my dear Rheingold, in that case I am, and I feel, a barbarian."[30] Earlier in the discussion Riccardo had described Rheingold's interpretation of the *Odyssey* as one in which "everything was debased to the level of a modern play, full of moralizings and psychologizings."[31] The "man of the theater" is now using the idea of the modern theater as an indication of debasement.

Riccardo is making a desperate stand for Romanticism in the face of a sterile modern "scientific" approach. For Rheingold "everything depends on psychology; without psychology there is no character, without character there is no story."[32] Riccardo, who initially had wanted to be reassured by Rheingold's insistence that they were going to make a psychological film rather than a crass spectacle, now finds a psychological interpretation of the *Odyssey* repulsive.

The association of the *Odyssey* with Riccardo's marriage cuts both ways. Riccardo is repulsed by Rheingold's interpretation because he sees in it a judgment about his own behavior. On the other hand Riccardo's despair over the disintegration of his marriage is expressed in a way that seems to take on cultural, existential overtones: "I…was left with a feeling of astonishment and terror in face of the rupture – to me incomprehensible – that was preventing my dream from coming true."[33] Civilization seems to be a "rupture" in man's relationship with the world. Man dreams of existing in a way that may have been possible in the past but is no longer.

The alternatives for modern man besides Riccardo's delusional desperation seem to be Rheingold's sterile scientific inquiry and Battista's egomaniacal materialism. Battista is like a degraded caricature of an ancient hero, at least in Riccardo's eyes. While one may find his vitality more appealing than Riccardo, one cannot dismiss

29 Moravia p. 190

30 Moravia p. 191

31 Moravia p. 189

32 Moravia p. 185

33 Moravia p. 161

Riccardo's judgment of him as crass, materialistic, egotistical, manipulative and ultimately dangerous. Riccardo may destroy Emilia's love, but Battista's driving actually kills her. Just as Emila can be taken to represent the natural world, Battista can be seen as technological exploitation and Rheingold as soulless objectification.

Presumably for Rheingold the natural world, like ancient culture, is something to be dissected and analyzed:

> "We've now got to do with the *Odyssey* what O'Neill did not wish, or did not know how, to do with the Oresteia…that is, open it up, as a body is opened up on the dissecting table, examine its internal mechanism, take it to pieces and then put it together again according to our modern requirements.[34]

Riccardo at least is able to view nature as well as culture with a poetic or romantic appreciation:

> Farther off, the sea was in movement but there were no waves, and the green color changed into an almost violet blue, over which, driven by the wind, appearing and disappearing, white curls of foam ran swiftly. The same capricious, lively disorder reigned in the sky: there were white clouds traveling in all directions, vast blue spaces swept by radiant, blinding light; sea-birds turning and swooping and hovering, as though taking care to follow, with their flight, the gust and eddies of the wind.[35]

Whatever other judgments one may feel inclined to make about Riccardo, one must concede that he is able to see and feel the attraction of beauty. This is surely his most positive trait and one with which Moravia sympathizes completely. The problems arise with the dreams that are aroused by this beauty. The need to feel embraced and loved gives rise to a terror of rejection and separation which spawns self-deception and neurotic behavior. When Riccardo comes upon Emilia sunbathing on the beach, his perception of her and his arousal again take on a metaphorical resonance:

> All of a sudden I wondered what could be the source of this feeling in me, of this sense of largeness and power, so profound and so disturbing, and then I realized that it arose from the desire that had been re-awoken in me at this unexpected moment. It was a desire which, in its immediacy and urgency, was not so much physical as spiritual, a desire to be united with her, but not with her body, not inside her body; rather, through the medium of her body. I was hungry for her; yet the satisfaction of this hunger did not depend on me but only on her, on an act of consent on her part that would reach out to meet my hunger. And I felt that she refused me this consent, al-

34 Moravia p. 139

35 Moravia p. 143

> though, naked as she was, she appeared by an illusion of the eye to be offering herself to me.[36]

So strong is his desire for union that this "illusion of the eye" becomes a full-fledged hallucination or a dream so vivid he cannot tell when it began. With her lying next to him he dreams of kissing her and having her return the kiss. Later when he has found the letter telling him she is driving back to Rome with Battista, he succumbs to a sustained hallucination of her in the boat that he rents. Even after he has realized he was hallucinating, he continues to immerse himself in the memory of it: "believing in it and joyfully reliving it in my memory; and little did it matter to me that it was a hallucination, seeing that I was experiencing all the feelings with which one usually remembers a thing that has really happened."[37]

During one of the endless turns on the merry-go-round of his self-conscious ruminations Riccardo concludes:

> And, in order to have the Emilia I loved and to bring it about that she judged me for what I was, I should have to carry her away from the world in which she lived and introduce her into a world as simple as herself, as genuine as herself, a world in which money did not count and in which language had retained its integrity, a world – as Rheingold had pointed out to me – after which I could aspire, certainly, but which did not in fact exist.[38]

What would it mean for language to retain its integrity? On another round Riccardo had earlier concluded:

> It seemed to me, however, that, whether I was despicable or not – and I was convinced that I was not – I still retained my intelligence, a quality even Emilia recognized in me and which was my whole pride and justification. I was bound to think, whatever the object of my thought might be; it was my duty to exercise my intelligence fearlessly in the presence of any kind of mystery. If I abandoned the exercise of my intelligence, there was indeed nothing left to me but the disheartening sense of my own supposed, but unproved, despicableness.[39]

While this does not read as an example of language which has retained its integrity, it is perhaps a clear indication of the root problem and a possible solution: Thinking is not just a duty; it is an inevitable destiny. It is both the rupture with the world and the response to that rupture. It is literally what separates mankind from the "natural" world, and it is why he feels out of place in the world. Man's hope lies in the possibility of thinking "fearlessly" in the presence of mystery.

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36 Moravia p. 198

37 Moravia p. 246

38 Moravia p. 232f

39 Moravia p. 229f

Clearly there was nothing "fearless" about the way in which Riccardo attempted to discover the reason for Emilia's contempt for him. Once he has accepted the fact that he has lost her forever, it seems that his attitude may have changed:

> I said to myself that Emilia was now, like Ulysses and Penelope, in those great sea spaces, and was fixed for eternity in the shape in which she had been clothed in life. It depended upon myself, not upon any dream or hallucination to find her again and to continue our earthly conversation with renewed serenity. Only in that way would she be delivered from me, would she be set free from my feelings, would she bend down over me like an image of consolation and beauty. And I decided to write down these memories, in the hope of succeeding in my intention.[40]

This is apparently the ultimate irony. No longer able to dream Riccardo must now resort to a forced march – a systematic revisiting of all the self-deception and agonizing questioning which destroyed the woman he loved – undertaken in the hope that he can feel her consoling presence in a way that he never could while she was alive.

At the same time, of course, the ending is a pointer to the meaning of Moravia's novel. Even when language cannot retain its integrity, a kind of clarity is still possible with irony. The image of Riccardo's delusional state can enable us to apprehend something Riccardo cannot describe.

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40 Moravia p. 250f