



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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*Agostino: Alberto  
Moravia and the  
Return of the Real*

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## *Agostino: Alberto Moravia and the Return of the Real*

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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*Agostino* marks a return to realism in the wake of the Second World War in Europe. The novel's gritty exploration of psychology and sexuality contests common models of development drawn from psychoanalysis in order instead to point to a newfound interest in an unnameable real.



**SIZE ISN'T  
EVERYTHING**

How long should a novel be?



The Italian Riviera in the 1950s

*Andora - La spiaggia*

Classic nineteenth-century novels often contained multitudes. They were polyphonic or “dialogic,” incorporating difference and variety, reflecting the complexity and scope of modern societies.



“The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.”

(Mikhail Bakhtin)

Novels are always hybrid,  
never closed-off unities.

With modernism, the novel's voracious embrace of diversity and dialogism scarcely diminishes, but sometimes its scope narrows to reveal and amplify the diversity and polyphony to be found even in previously overlooked milieux.

Long books construct worlds that may feel  
at first as much cacophonous as  
polyphonous, as different voices and  
discourses merge, overlap, or struggle  
to be heard amidst the din.

What, by contrast, can short books do?  
What is gained (and lost) when an author  
provides us with a pared-down tale?  
What might be the advantages of  
not saying everything?

What does Moravia leave out?  
What questions does he raise  
but chooses not to answer?

A close-up photograph of a glass filled with a dark amber liquid, likely whiskey, over ice. A black straw is inserted into the drink, and a slice of yellow lemon is perched on the rim. The glass is set on a dark, textured surface, possibly a bar napkin. The background is dark and out of focus.

What does Moravia leave out?  
What questions does he raise  
but chooses not to answer?

We hear almost nothing about the protagonist's day to day life: we only see him in a setting where he does not quite belong. Also absent is almost any mention of his father. Agostino's world is whittled down to himself and his mother, surrounded by strangers who represent both promises and threats to this mother/son microcosm.





# OEDIPUS AT SEA

It is tempting to read Moravia's novel in psychoanalytic terms. With a dead father and jealous of his mother's new lovers, Agostino would seem to be caught in a classic instance of the Oedipus complex.

“While he is still a small child, a son will already begin to develop a special affection for his mother, whom he regards as belonging to him; he begins to feel his father as a rival who disputes his sole possession.” (Sigmund Freud)

“The human individual has to devote himself to the great task of detaching himself from his parents, and not until that task is achieved can he [. . .] become a member of the social community. For the son this task consists in detaching his libidinal wishes from his mother and employing them for the choice of a real outside love-object.” (Sigmund Freud)

Agostino's initial attachment to his mother is undeniable. The two of them go out in a small boat, and as they head towards the sea the son is proud of the way in which "all the bathers on the beach seemed to be watching, admiring his mother and envying him" (3).

“Agostino would see the mother’s body plunge into a circle of green bubbles, and he would jump in right after her, ready to follow her anywhere, even to the bottom of the sea. [. . .] He would dive into the mother’s wake and feel as if even the cold compact water conserved traces of the passage of that beloved body.” (4)

“In the clear water you could see the two bodies rubbing against each other, as if they wanted to intertwine, bumping their legs and their hips.” (10)

The novel could be interpreted in terms of Agostino's attempt to rid himself of maternal attachment, and so become a fully adult social being. But this effort falls short, with the "failed venture" to the brothel. "In fact, years and years would go by, empty and unhappy, between him and the liberating experience" (100).



“Except the negligee was wrinkled, making it even more intimate and his glimpse of her even more furtive. So, Agostino thought, not only did the image of the woman at the house not act as a screen between himself and the mother, as he had hoped, but it had somehow confirmed the mother’s womanhood.” (101)

“But he wasn’t a man, and many unhappy days would pass before he became one.”

(102)

This short novel may not exactly contain multitudes, but it cannot be reduced to the Oedipal triangle.

This short novel may not exactly contain multitudes, but it cannot be reduced to the Oedipal triangle.

Agostino's loss is inherent to language, whose powers to name always fall short.


Moravia's book exemplifies both a return to and a revision of realism. It is a text that acknowledges that the real is what is unnameable.

The real is silent, outside of discourse or representation, though it makes itself known through the distortions or wrinkles that it induces in such representation, in the gaps or lacunae of any text, short or long.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



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# PRODUCTION

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