

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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

A novel can encompass multiple lifetimes, or it can focus on a short period of particular significance or intensity. Alberto Moravia's *Agostino* (1945) spans a few days of its thirteen-year-old protagonist's summer holiday to tell a tale of transition from youth towards adulthood. Told fairly conventionally, it marks a return to realism in the wake of the Second World War in Europe. Just as Italian film-makers such as Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini were pioneering what came to be termed "Italian neorealism" in the cinema, so here Moravia does something similar in literature. The novel's scope is relatively limited, but its treatment of the central relationship between mother and son allows for a gritty exploration of psychology and sexuality, implicitly contesting some common models of development drawn from psychoanalysis in order instead to point to a newfound interest in an unnameable real.

1. Size Isn't Everything

How long should a novel be? *Agostino* is brief, little more than a novella. Indeed its structure is closer to that of a short story, with its focus on a fleeting period in a particular place leading up to a traumatic or uncanny event offering a sudden reversal or reframing of the situation with which it opens. Here, the setting is *Agostino*'s summer holiday with his mother, which takes a turn when, on the one hand, his mother starts to attract the attention of a young man on the beach and, on the other, her son falls in with a loose gang of local boys, rougher and less privileged than summer visitors such as himself. The trauma to which these displacements lead is the boy's visit to a brothel with one of his new companions: though he does not enter (he only peers through the window), this glimpse of a slightly seedy demimonde highlights his ambivalence about the proximity of adult sexuality and his increasingly uncertain relationship with his mother. The book closes as the holiday is about to come to an end, leaving us in the dark as to what will come next when *Agostino* returns to everyday life and leaves boyhood behind. In short, though it offers more than a snapshot, the novel is like a short film that ends without resolution, returning us to a real in which untold future plots could perhaps play out.

Classic nineteenth-century novels often contained multitudes. In terms provided by the Russian literary critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, they were polyphonic or "dialogic," incorporating difference and variety, reflecting the complexity and scope of modern

societies. For Bakhtin, this is part of the very definition of the novel: that it cannibalizes other genres and discourses without flattening them out or homogenizing them; “The novel can be defined,” Bakhtin says, “as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (*The Dialogical Imagination* 262). Novels are always hybrid, never closed-off unities. No wonder they are often expansive in both scope and length: works such as Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862), Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869), or George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871/1872) follow myriad characters over multiple storylines across several years or decades; they are also doorstoppers, many hundreds of pages long.

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. The events of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), for instance, take place over a single rather ordinary day in Dublin. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is similarly confined to less than twenty-four hours, as its protagonist prepares to host a party in her London home. But both are also long, dense books that revel in interlacing and playing off different discursive forms. More recently, novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), or Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004) show that length and complexity can still be weapons in the novelist’s armoury. 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. Which is perhaps why we sometimes associate length with difficulty, forgetting that many popular bestsellers (Harry Potter, say, or airport blockbusters) are also long, if much less dialogic.

What, by contrast, can short books do? What is gained (and lost) when an author provides us with a pared-down tale such as *Agostino*, whose style is almost as spare as its page-length is brief. What goes *unsaid* in this novel, and what might be the advantages of not saying everything? Pause the video, and write down your thoughts: what does Moravia leave out? What questions does he raise but chooses not to answer? While you do that, I’ll have a Negroni, but I’ll be right back.

The Negroni is a classic cocktail. It dates from the 1910s and was allegedly the invention of a Count Camillo Negroni, in Florence, who asked a bartender to substitute gin for the

club soda used to make the then-common Americano: Campari, sweet vermouth, and club soda became Campari, sweet vermouth, and gin, with an orange garnish. Negroni, however, was not your typical Italian aristocrat: he had spent the previous quarter century in the “wild west” of the USA, with a penchant for rodeos, gambling, and hard living. On his return to Italy, however, he transforms the Americano into something that is now quintessentially Italian, which shows once more the way in which national icons so often have hybrid roots. More recently, during the worldwide COVID-induced lockdown, the Negroni led the way in a global return to homemade cocktails; it is hard to go wrong with a drink consisting of three equal parts, each of them alcoholic.

There is much that is omitted from Moravia’s text. For one thing, the fact that the story takes place entirely during a summer holiday, a time of exception, means that 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, where the boys there give him the nickname “Pisa” to signal his status as an outsider. Who he may be in his native Pisa is scarcely addressed! Also absent is almost any mention of his father: when Agostino briefly gives the local kids some glimpses of his life back home (which only emphasize further the distance between him and them) he mentions that his father “passed away,” “almost hoping that this detail would attract the boys’ sympathy” (33). But they hardly seem interested to inquire further about the reasons for his father’s demise, nor does Moravia pause to explain. 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.

2. *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 what Sigmund Freud termed the Oedipus complex. Freud claims that “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” (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 143). After a period of latency, these desires return in full force around puberty, at which point “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 cease to be a child and 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" (380). Those who are able to pass through the complex at this stage can then develop what Freud thought of as a "normal" sexuality and a healthy psyche. Those who remain trapped within the Oedipal configuration are destined to the kinds of psychic burden that psychoanalysis sets out to treat, for the complex is "the nucleus of the neuroses" (380). In fact, Freud tells us, few pass through it entirely unscathed.



The Italian Riviera in the 1950s

Agostino's initial attachment to his mother is undeniable. At the novel's outset, they have established a routine whereby every day 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). Far from the shore, they swim off the boat: "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." It is as though he is seeking to be enveloped within the

trace of her flesh: "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). When his place is taken by the young man the mother soon meets, the eroticism of this bathing ritual is once again underlined: "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). But now the difference is that the boy is cast out from this charmed circle, without even a father figure on whom to vent his rage.

The rest of the novel could then be interpreted in terms of Agostino's attempt to rid himself of this attachment, and to transfer his libido to another love-object and so become a fully adult social being. But this effort falls short, with the "failed venture" to the brothel. "In fact," we are told in a statement that could either be his own projection or the narrator's forewarning of future neurosis, "years and years would go by, empty and unhappy, between him and the liberating experience" (100). In the meantime, he feels he will remain stuck in "this awkward age of transition" (101). The narrative ends with an image of his mother in a transparent negligee that reminds Agostino of the gown worn by the prostitute he has glimpsed through the brothel window: "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). In short, this would be the tale of a botched attempt to slip the bonds of the Oedipus complex; it would be less a coming-of-age story and more an account of getting stuck on the threshold. Hence the novel's final line: "But he wasn't a man, and many unhappy days would pass before he became one" (102). Thus are neurotics born.

Yet it is surely a mistake to try to psychoanalyze literary characters, who are after all just that: characters, who lack a psyche of any sort. Moreover, this short novel may not exactly contain multitudes, but it cannot be reduced to the Oedipal triangle. In fact, despite (or even because of) the father's absence, a plethora of potential father figures open up: the mother's young lover; or Saro, an older lifeguard who is a kind of Fagin figure to the local gang and is both "the very picture of a good father surrounded by his children" (59) and a threatening seducer. There is also another father-and-son pair, who mistake Agostino for a boatman's helper and for whom the boy briefly reinvents himself as a labourer's

offspring. Indeed, this incident convinces Agostino that he is no longer the pampered middle-class child of the novel's opening, even if "he had lost his original identity without acquiring through his loss another" (78). But this is less a symptom of psychic distress than a recognition of the ways in which performance (playing a role) both establishes and destabilizes all claims to identity. *Agostino's loss is inherent to language, whose powers to name always fall short.*

Finally, then, Moravia's book exemplifies both a return to and a revision of realism. This is no longer the nineteenth-century novel that endeavours to give name and voice to all parts of an increasingly complex modern society. It is, rather, ironically perhaps in a novel whose title comes from its protagonist's proper name, 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 symptomatic distortions or wrinkles that it induces in such representation, in the gaps or lacunae of any text, short or long.

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Image: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SV-Andora-1953-spiaggia.jpg>

Song: "The Boys of Summer" (Don Henley)