

ALBERTO MORAVIA
TALKS TO
PAUL BAILEY

ALBERTO MORAVIA, whose real name was Alberto Pincherle, died in his native city of Rome on 26 September 1990. The most famous of contemporary Italian novelists, he achieved world-wide recognition with 'La Romana' (The Woman of Rome), subsequently filmed with Sophia Loren. He has written dozens of short stories concerned with Roman life, particularly the life of the poor and dispossessed. For many people, he is the Roman chronicler as Balzac is Paris's chronicler or Dickens, London's. He had been writing since the 1920s. The novels of his productive old age included 'The Voyeur', '1934' and, most recently, 'Il Viaggio a Roma', (The Voyage to Rome) published in Britain in 1990 in a translation by Tim Parks. Moravia was also a prolific journalist. For several years he had reviewed films for the weekly magazine, 'L'Espresso'. He also commented on politics in Italian newspapers. His fascination with sex—a constant theme in his work—notably in 'Il Conformista' (The Conformist), which was made into a remarkable film by Bernardo Bertolucci—often brought him into trouble with the authorities. Indeed, he was no stranger to scandal. His very first novel, 'e Indifferenti', translated as 'The Time of Indifference', published in the 1920s, caused an uproar in Italy for its outspoken treatment of fascist politics and sexual mores. When I talked with Moravia in Rome in July 1989, he remembered that scandal of long ago in the course of our conversation.

ALBERTO MORAVIA I began writing in October 1925. I started writing '*e Indifferenti*' in a town near Lampesto. I was not yet 17. I wanted to make a novel which could be also a play. Therefore I wrote something which took place in two days, in accordance with Aristotelian laws, because I wanted to be dramatic—to write a kind of tragedy. This one can see very well in the book: it goes on like a play, in fact, but it is only action and dialogue, with very little description. This novel is in great contrast to the literature of the time which was very analytical. The two big writers of the period were Proust and Joyce. Both were very analytical. They made a kind of

inventory of reality, Proust by exploring the past and Joyce by exploring the present. This was a road which I could not take because they had done all that it was possible to do. So I chose to write a book which would be the contrary of analysis. My idea was to write a play in the shape of a novel.

PAUL BAILEY Up until that time of writing, you had been very ill hadn't you? You'd been in bed for years. Did this shape your existentialist view of the world?

AM Well, you see I was ill from the age of 9 until 17, and this made me very different from other boys. I had never been to school, and I began to read novels very early and you know very well that writing means first of all imitating. The beginning of any writer is imitation. I used to read one book a day, more or less. I was very hungry for books. I didn't go to school and that made me precocious, but it didn't make me a writer. I was a born story-teller. When I was a child I used to talk alone to myself and tell stories to myself. I had a very strong impulse to tell stories. You can be born a novelist and *become* a writer. But you cannot become a novelist.

PB So who influenced you as a writer?

AM Mainly Dostoevski. That's why I said I was putting together the drama in the shape of a novel. Dostoevski's novels are full of dialogue; and no landscape; but full of people speaking; they speak a lot. That was the great influence of my early life. I began to read Dostoevski when I was twelve years old. I think I read '*Crime and Punishment*' when I was eleven, and it was so strong that I believed there was nothing to say because Dostoevski had said everything. That was not true. I was different from Dostoevski but for a long time I identified with Dostoevski. When I read poems—and I read the best poems in French—the poet I liked best was Rimbaud. Why? Because in some way I rebelled against my life, the life of an invalid. I had a life which was unfair to me. That made me revolt. It was unfair because I could not play with other boys, go to school or meet anybody. I was alone all the day. Well, of course, I lived with my family but they had things to do.

PB Did you read newspapers?

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AM Yes. We took two newspapers, a Venetian newspaper and a newspaper from Rome. I remember seeing a photo of the Winter Palace at St.Petersburg. I was a boy, but it struck me as something very strange.

PB When did your long battle against the fascists begin?

AM I was not anti-fascist until I published '*e Indifferenti*'. The fascists were not very different from the communists in terms of ideology. They thought that fascism was something very positive which transformed Italian society. My book, unfortunately, showed a family in a way that was not really very positive. It was hardly my fault. I did not mean to be anti-fascist or anti-bourgeois or anything like this. As I told you, I wanted to write a tragedy. I worked with the material I had to hand, and that was the Italian middle class. It was not my fault but I did not realise it. I had immediate success, selling 1,000 copies at a time when Italians did not read books. I paid for the publication of the book because everybody refused it. My father lent me 5,000 lira, which is 5 million (lira) now, and the book was an enormous success. Then the fascists turned against me, saying that I was a pessimist and corrupted because I showed a family that was not exactly the family in which they wanted to believe. Then I realised I was an anti-fascist. I discovered it. Really, when I wrote the book I was a literary man, not a politician. Even today, I am not a politician. I have political ideals, but I am not a politician—definitely not.

PB To a lot of people you are a realist but you would not admit that word, would you?

AM Realism is a very big word. It means a lot of things. Chaucer is a realist. And Shakespeare. Or Milton. When you say 'realist,' it does not mean much (as a term). I was a realist in a very modern trend, that of existentialism. I told you I was a great admirer of Dostoievski because he had created existentialism in his novels. I mean novels in which the writer is not trying to describe a relationship between individuals in society, but one between the individual and his inner self. If you take a novel by Balzac, or Tolstoy, it is always

a story of the individual in society. But if you take a novel by Dostoevski it is the story of remorse for somebody who has committed a crime and cannot live with it on his conscience.

PB To me, your style is extremely simple and unadorned, unlike a great deal of Italian writing which seems to be in love with the sound of the Italian language.

AM I wrote simply because I gave more importance to what I say than the way I say it. I like to say something very strong, therefore I try to say it strongly. I know my literature, my languages and my classics. But I feel that writing should not be too far from spoken language. Let us take Proust, for instance. He is a very complicated writer but the French he writes is not very different from the French we speak. Instead, in Italy we have a stranger phenomenon. Italian literature is the daughter of humanism—of Latin. The father is rhetoric. We had the great humanist movement in the Renaissance, some of today's authors write as they used to write in the 16th century, in a very elaborated way. A writer who makes a show of knowing the classics often is very well liked.

PB I'm going to ask you a very simple question. Why have you set so many of your novels in Rome? What is the great appeal of Rome as a city?

AM It is what we call the *coro*. What do you call it in English?

PB A set? A stage?

AM Yes, the same; no, more than that: I was born in Rome and I am Roman, I live in Rome; but of course you must remember that my books are read everywhere. What I mean is that the subjects I create are not Romans. The themes I treat are not exclusively Roman. A very great writer, a religious poet, Berli, wrote in Roman and spoke only of Rome. I am not Roman in this way. If you read my novels in English, yes, you could say they happen in Rome; but what happens could happen anywhere.

PB So they could easily have happened in some other city?

AM Yes they could very well.

PB In your *Roman Tales*, you had characters who were saying things...

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AM They were poor, yes...

PB ... and one or two critics said that those people were so poor and illiterate that they could not have used those words.

AM They were appropriate. I wrote two novels - *'The Woman of Rome'* and *'Roman Tales'*—at a moment in which I had the meat of poetry. I like poetry and poor people. I was poor myself. For ten years I was penniless. It is very difficult to explain: I believed that fascism had been made by the middle class in Italy, so I didn't want to write about the middle class. I like the people because they suffered so much in war. I suffered quite a lot myself and that was a kind of meat. You write a lot when you believe in something. Then the meat was old, and I was tired of it and dropped it; but from 1945 to 1960—fifteen years—I wrote mainly about poor people.

PB Why was *'La Romana'*—*The Woman of Rome*—such a huge success? .

AM *'La Romana'* is the story of a woman—a prostitute. I must tell you the truth, it sprang a little from admiration of Moll Flanders. The idea was from Moll Flanders but I changed my mind. It is an existentialist novel, too. It is the life of a woman who is not a prostitute, in fact. She is energy, dressed as a woman—pure energy. What is important in her is not what she does, or does not do. It is her outlook on life. She accepts life. Not only this, but she loves life even if it is very poor life, and that of a prostitute. The success of *'La Romana'* was due to the fact that I represented a character—a very poor woman who loved life.

PB Did it cause any scandal, the fact that you were writing about a prostitute so soon after the war?

AM There was a scandal when I wrote *'e Indifferenti'* because I wrote about a family. Since then my books have always been considered a scandal, more or less. They say I am provocative. No, the case of *'La Romana'* was not considered a scandal for the reason I gave you: she is so sympathetic. She is a prostitute but she is very kind, and compassionate. It is not Moll Flanders; it is different; but in some ways it is not so very far away, because I like her and she liked herself.

PB Have you been attacked by women critics for

your portraits of women?

AM Well, the feminists criticise me but on the whole, no. I was criticised by the Church. In 1952 I was put in the Index of books forbidden to Catholics. Now the Index does not exist anymore. The Vatican Council abolished it, but just the same I was prescribed as *fabula anatolia*.

PB How often have you written about sex from a woman's point of view?

AM Quite a lot. I wrote ninety stories in which a woman speaks in the third person. Then I wrote '*La Romana*' and I wrote '*Two Women*', that's all. '*La Romana*' was translated into Russian. The Chargé d'Affaires came to me and said, "Listen, you must cut this line." I looked at the line and it was a description of a male sex—but very poetical. The woman character said that it looked like a flower. I don't see anything pornographic about it. It took twenty years to publish! I think that on the whole the scandal comes from the fact that I did not accept the convention—convention not only as regards sex, but the family, the individual, psychology and so on. My most recent book '*Voyage to Rome*' was also a kind of scandal.

PB What was the scandal?

AM Some cleric said I am too explicit about sex, that's all. Some clerics are against it. You see, I consider sex as a fact of life, no more, no less. And I don't see why I should not speak about it. I consider that sex is sometimes necessary—that is my opinion. I think sex is interesting in itself. The moment it has no significance, then it begins to be interesting.

PB Has the cinema influenced your novels?

AM Yes, very much; but not now—when I was a boy. I used to go to the cinema twice a day. It affected me very much, being a realist. There is a description of a boarding house in a work by Balzac. It takes fifty pages, yet in a movie you see it in a few seconds—people, maids, everything. It is useless to describe reality. What the movie cannot give is psychology and ideas. But reality it does well.

PB Is there a great interest in the novel in Italy?

AM Italy did not have during the 19th century such a great tradition of novels compared with England, France or

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Russia. It had only one novel: that of Manzoni and another one called *'The Confession of Enitale'*, which was quite good but not a great book. The novel became à la mode afterwards. There was also a great fashion for Americans—the lost generation: Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and so on. Probably society was not ready for the novel until very late. In some way it was like the fashion for novels in South America. The problems in Italy were so difficult, social life was unbalanced, but suddenly what was a promise emerged in the form of a novel. I think that the novel gained popularity in countries like France or even England, because the degree of change in society was very strong, and the novel reflected this change. In Italy the change came in the 20th century when peasant Italy was a desperately poor country. You see, the unity of Italy was achieved by a small country called Piedmont. Originally a small country, a small part of Europe—some parts were very rich, other parts of it were very poor, especially the south. So the problems of Italy influenced the writers, led them to write novels. Italy had problems and, the novelists felt that these problems were important, as happened in South America.

PB Are you still writing?

AM Yes, of course. I am writing a novel. This morning I wrote, and I grew tired and thought I could not get through this interview with you.

PB Do you write every day?

AM Every day. From half past seven to half past ten. Three hours, that's all. I don't write in the afternoon or at night; but it is quite enough—if you have something to say, of course. If you have nothing to say, it takes days, weeks.

PB What is your new book about?

AM My new book is called *'The Woman Leopard'*. You know I have been to Africa about twenty times. I travelled quite a lot.

PB You went with Passolini once, didn't you?

AM I went twice with Passolini, yes. It is the story of two couples who go for a Christmas vacation to Gabon, ex-French colony. That's all. They have a vacation that is a little bit dramatic.