

The Woman of Rome: Narcissism, masochism, and bad faith in Moravia's Adriana

Alberto Castelli
Hainan University
lamezzapunta@outlook.com

Abstract: Alberto Moravia's novel *The Woman of Rome* centers on Adriana's life, a down-to-earth someone who dreams of marriage but sinks into prostitution due to her mother's interests and her own desperate pursuit of wealth and security. Moravia wants the reader to judge this character considering her sense of self-respect and independence. However, her behavior, prone to submission and masochism of sorts, imposes a different reading. Ultimately, the identification of Adriana as a figure of Sartrean bad faith, serves as a compelling commentary on the way we approach social determinism.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Freud, *La Romana*, masochism, Moravia, narcissism, *The Woman of Rome*

Alberto Moravia (1907–1990), novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, journalist and editor, was the Italian writer whose novels scandalized the Italian public because of their brutal portrayal of bourgeois life under Fascism.¹ In his own words, "Fascism is above all that spirit of small-minded conservatism, ungenerous and opposed to every ideal through which we made known the first cause of all the deficiencies of our bourgeoisie" (1947a: 213–214).² Giuseppe Prezzolini spoke of Moravia as the greatest Italian narrator of the 20th century: an author "capable of extracting from every moment of life a plot, a character, a situation, without repeating himself, with the public's taste, with depth of introspection" (1982: 62). The success of his narrative is due to a prose that is "sober, compact, severe, yet classical, creative, and communicative" (Pampaloni 2001: 474).³ Likewise, Alberto Asor Rosa (1990: 21) speaks of a prose that is

¹ Recent studies on Moravia and Fascist censorship are Giorgio Fabre (1998) and Guido Bon-saver (2007).

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian are my own.

³ Jader Jacobelli (1990: 122–124) refers to eleven million copies sold and a narrative translated into some thirty languages.

“characteristically grey and enveloping, apparently realistic to the point of documentary and instead highly synthetic, selective, almost surreal.”⁴ Moravia is an observer of social problems; his work is grounded in adolescents betrayed by adults (a betrayal that often has sexual connotations)⁵ and the dissolution of bourgeois society.⁶ Prezzolini concludes that in retrospect “Moravia’s eye has remained fixed on the drama of life with the same cruel, impassive, disenchanted, fatalistic, razor-sharp vision” (1950: 360).

Accordingly, *The Woman of Rome* (1949) (*La Romana* 1947), is essentially an attack on the fundamental hypocrisy of the Italian ruling classes. Prostitution exemplifies the vices of a society that strives to maintain the appearance of propriety but disregards human exploitation.⁷ Moravia traced the novel’s origin to a fateful encounter on the streets of Rome, and reality became fiction.⁸ We

⁴ As far as I am concerned, the most comprehensive studies on Moravia are by Italian scholars and they are dated: Oreste Del Buono (1962), Alberto Limentani (1962), and Edoardo Sanguineti (1962). In English, Joan Ross and Donald Freed (1972) noticed the existentialist overtone of Moravia’s corpus first. An essay that I found interesting is Louis Kibler (1973) and, of course, the classic work of R. W. B. Lewis (1956). Relatively recent is Thomas Erling Peterson’s work (1996), a thorough exploration of Moravia’s life and works, featuring critical analysis of his key writings along with details of his personal and public life. It also discusses the political environment in Italy and how it influenced Moravia’s experiences.

⁵ Dacia Maraini (2000) and Valentina Mascaretti (2006) already discussed the centrality of these themes in Moravia’s work.

⁶ This is an aspect that has been analyzed by virtually every critic who has engaged with Moravia. Scholarship agrees in reading Moravia’s work as a representation of “the bourgeois and its vices” (qtd. Jacobelli 63–64). Pier Paolo Pasolini’s evaluation stands as original for he questions Moravia’s “contempt for the bourgeois condition” and simultaneously “the acceptance of the language of the bourgeoisie as a normal language, as a neutral instrument, as if it were not historically produced and developed by that bourgeoisie” (1964: 20). Recent is Pasquale Voza (1997). On the contrary, Luciano Parisi (2008: 89) challenges the view that wants Moravia as an anti-establishment writer: “It seems to me, however, that the underlying reasons for such confusing representations are different: one of an artistic nature, one of a cultural nature, and one of a psychological nature.”

⁷ In a 1947 essay, Moravia writes his critique: “They do not read but want books to be confiscated; they do not go to church except on Sundays to make a show of their clothing and their worldliness, but they shout that Christian morality is in danger; they are entirely resistant to cultural influences, but they claim to believe that Sartre’s books corrupt the soul. How many souls, then, are lost every day in countless brothels? Without doubt those brothels, disgusting and barbaric places, have infinitely more regular clients than Sartre has readers. All this uproar regarding two-or three-thousand copies sold and profound silence regarding the twenty- or thirty-thousand visits to the brothels” (1947b: 1).

⁸ Moravia told his biographer, Alain Elkann, about an encounter he had with a streetwalker: “She didn’t appear to be a day over twenty, and she was very beautiful. I said to Leo: ‘I like that

first meet Adriana as a poor sixteen-year-old, modelling for various artists. The narrative plot is linear and almost banal in its cruelty: a woman is betrayed and because of her impoverished environment becomes a whore. Undoubtedly, there is in Moravia, as in D.H. Lawrence, a lively awareness of the place occupied by eroticism in life without, however, the same mysticism we read in Lawrence. Dated scholarship has already dealt with the theme. It is commonly accepted by now the idea of female sexuality conceived as a regenerative and vital force: “[o]n the whole, it is Moravia’s women who possess the enchantments of sex, for while some of his heroes work at seduction, many of them turn out to be victims of a feminine imperialism—one suspects that sex for Moravia is a great female force like the earth, the Ocean, or one’s mother country” (Phillips 1952: 105). The same Moravia stresses in an interview that “sex is above all a means to knowledge” (qtd. Foster 221). Similarly, Charles Rolo (1955: 72) writes that “if sex figures so prominently in Moravia’s work, it is, I think, because it represents to him the great line of communication between the cerebral modern man and elemental nature.” On the contrary, Emile Capouya (1966: 30) reduces Moravia’s interest in sexual matters to a form of residual infantilism: “He has never gotten over the small boy’s sense of shock about sexual matter.”

However, because the sexual element pervades the entire Moravia’s work, unless we want to reduce his narrative to mere eroticism, the book’s substance must lie elsewhere. Maria Chiara Tarsi (2023: 356), for example, in line with Moravia’s indication, refers to “the deepest origin in the modern proletarian myth.” The text certainly reflects broader societal issues such as history, class, and morality. Charles Leavitt (2018: 3), for one, reads here a link between memory and literary inspiration: “the act of writing had inspired his recovery of a repressed memory, and that recovery in turn had inspired his literary invention.” More specifically, Moravia is attempting, through the text, to redress the

girl, I’ve got to go.’ And I approached her: ‘Where should we go?’ ‘To my house.’ She brought me to a small and modest apartment in an alley behind the Messaggero building. As we entered I realized it was the house where she lived with her family. At a certain point she was nude, she had a splendid body, and she reminded me of a strange short story by Henry James, ‘The Last of the Valerii,’ in which a man falls in love with a statue. Then all of a sudden an old woman entered with a pitcher of warm water and a towel, and she said with pride: ‘Tell me, have you ever seen a body like this, take a look, have you ever seen such a thing...’ We made love in a sound and simple manner. Afterwards she said to me: ‘The woman who came with the towel was my mother.’ That’s the story of my encounter with the woman who ten years later would inspire the protagonist of *The Woman of Rome*” (2007: 161). Links between Moravia’s encounter with the streetwalker and the composition of *La romana* can be found in Maria Grazia Di Mario (2013) and Renzo Paris (1996).

historical trauma of fascism. My understanding is that if Moravia's characters are obsessed by sex and its extreme manifestations, this is because society is. In this sense, Moravia is exploring a dimension of humanity, the darkest and most vicious sides of the individual and society. As Virgilia Peterson (1956: 30) well wrote, "we are all helpless victims of an instinct that tortures us without giving us that identification of self that we are seeking." Not surprisingly, characters in Moravia are taken into captivity by their instinct. They are apathetic and passive, with ambitions for action that never materialize. Spectators of their own lives, they accept the fact that they are alive. Likewise, love in Moravia is not a sublimated desire (*L'Amant*) nor an overwhelming passion that causes tragedy (*Anna Karenina*) but an instinct, an atrocious slavery that directs every step of those who are subject to it. Simply put, they do not know how to love. Sexuality, eroticism so to speak, is inserted within a system constitutive of a vision and experience of the world. Anthropologists and sociologists have shown that one cannot understand sexual practices and meanings without considering the fact that masculine action is always oriented toward prestige (Ortner & Whitehead 1981). On the contrary, masochism tends to be "an extensive part of female fantasy" (Person 1980: 622). There is thus a fundamental asymmetry between men and women in their approach to sexuality. With this in mind, while Moravia incorporates the soul of a woman in the tradition of Flaubert or Tolstoy, Adriana's sexual behavior deserves additional scholarly scrutiny.

Ergo, in the next few pages I intend to integrate literary analysis with psychoanalytic theory (Freud, Adler, Horney), sociological ideas (Bourdieu), and existentialist philosophy (Sartre) to suggest that Adriana should not be seen as merely a passive victim of her socioeconomic conditions — as Moravia want us to believe — but rather as a narcissistic-masochistic character whose journey partly reflects bad faith, in the Sartrean sense.

A psychological reading

Adriana is presented as a good soul, "[m]y temperament, as I have already said, was to be gay, kindly, serene, at all costs; and I accepted it" (225), who lives in poverty: "the sensation of envy and of my own poverty returned and made me feel quite desperate" (43). A Character with an enveloping personality, Moravia places around her the male universe. Gino, the small-time thief and chauffeur, Astarita, the police official who rapes her because subjugated by his

silent passion,⁹ Giacinti, the middle-aged commercial traveller who believes himself to be exceptional, Sonzogno, the violent murderer, “a leopard or some other wild beast” (242), and Giacomo the idealistic intellectual, the student not ready for the revolution. Each of them is drawn in by this woman, responding to her differently—captivated by her, yet ultimately ruined. Moravia hints that while characters are questionable and the daily episodes rather squalid, Adriana manages to awaken in the reader a feeling of sympathy and pity.

Her passive attitude toward life, Moravia explains, is soon redeemed by her active femininity. She is not a victim of boredom; she does not give herself to her first lover out of a desire to break the daily monotony, but simply because she is carried away by the impetus of love. Later, partly pushed by her mother’s eagerness for money, she finds herself on the path to prostitution. However, her actions are fused with warmth, Moravia treats her sympathetically, almost tenderly.¹⁰ This is the reason why she is able to return to the path of healthy love as soon as she meets Giacomo, the young revolutionary who feels contempt for himself. He is designed to be the alternative to Astarita, the opposition to Fascism. But he is too divorced from physical reality, his principle too abstract, he cannot be a solid solution to Adriana’s concrete social struggles: “You want to educate me,” she said, “but the first condition for my education would be to free me of the necessity of earning my living as I do” (344). His political ideals and theoretical treatises not only do not offer to Adriana an escape from poverty but will also play out in the end as the cause of his death.

Simultaneously, his death is propaedeutic for Adriana’s redemption. When she fears that he has committed suicide, she takes a vow of chastity to ensure his safety. Giacomo did in fact commit suicide and left a letter (by far the most compelling moment of the entire narration). Explaining the reason for having betrayed his comrades while being interrogated by Astarita, he writes: “at that moment [...] the character [personaggio] I ought to have been collapsed, and I was only the man [uomo] I really am” (429). Moravia might here have in mind the Pirandellian mask: while confronting Astarita, Giacomo is no longer able to maintain his fictional ideal. Instead of being overwhelmed by tragedy, Adriana keeps the vow anyway for the sake of the child she is about to give

⁹ Here, of course, there is an obvious reference to Fascism’s imposition of authoritarian rule. Due to his profession, Astarita’s aberrant sexuality has political connotations. While far from my line of research, for a psycho-sexual interpretation of Fascism see Barbara Spackman (1996).

¹⁰ That Adriana’s character is essentially the author’s spokesperson is a fact that critics have noticed more than once and is now well-established. See for example Baldi (2005: 206–208).

birth to. Moravia seems to suggest here that the natural active element that is in Adriana, femininity, allows her to be restored to life. For those familiar with Moravia's work, she is certainly the closest to embodying Christian values. While sensual and superstitious, she still clings to enough faith to turn to Our Lady in her moments of deepest despair. Seemingly, she is shaped by circumstances—her poverty, her self-centered mother, her own weaknesses, and the men who exploit her. Her persistent, if faint, longing for goodness may be seen as Moravia's way of portraying the Italian working class as not entirely detached from Christianity.¹¹ Hence, Adriana wants us to believe that her approach to sexuality has something of a mystical experience. She observes the male body sleeping next to her with "reverent trepidation," the same she used to feel when she "performed certain religious duties in church" (167). On the contrary, my literary evaluation of this character is negative.

I, for one, believe we are observing the behavior of a nymphomaniac of sorts. Just a few hours after having decided to quit her profession, the gaze of a man is enough for her to go back on her decision: "[s]o, after a few hours of anguish I gave up the unequal struggle against what appeared to be my fate. [...] and I felt liberated" (225). As the novel is about to end, her promise of chastity in exchange for Giacomo's life comes with a confession: "[l]ove was the only thing I cared about in the whole world, the only thing I enjoyed" (431). With "love" being clearly synonymous with sex. Adriana is merely a woman who is available to all men, all the time. She introduces herself as an object from the start: "I had firm straight legs, curving hips, a long back, narrow waist and broad shoulders" (3). Her mother considers Adriana's body as an asset: "she kept on prodding me, just like they prod animals to persuade people to buy them in the market" (4). Because Adriana often refers to her social condition, it is clear that Moravia is creating a direct connection between poverty and prostitution. Margaret Brose (2001: 62) claims that "Moravia's novels are always 'about' sex and money. They are always 'about' failed communication and the problematics of representation." Specifically, the body becomes a commodity and Adriana does nothing more than sell the same commodity many times over to different buyers.

Moravia places not only money but the sensual pleasure of money into the hands of Adriana. The first time that she is paid for her service, she discovers a feeling unknown before: "I slipped the note from my right hand into my

¹¹ An interesting but dated scholarship on the relation between Moravia and Christianity is in Kenelm Foster (1962).

left. I felt strangely thrilled, my face was burning and my breathing labored” (89). The same but reverse sensation is what Adriana feels when she pays for the first time for Giacomo: “I now discovered that paying money out is no less thrilling a pleasure” (278). The equivalence between money and sex is self-evident.¹² The implication is that if sensual pleasure can be purchased with money, the person receiving the money might derive pleasure from the act of accepting it. Therefore, when Adriana first accepts money from a man, Astarita, in exchange for sex, she discovers comfort rather than shame: “[t]he feeling I experienced at that moment bewildered me and, [...] It was a feeling of complicity and sensual conspiracy such as none of Astarita’s caresses in the restaurant bedroom had been able to rouse in me” (88). Much is questionable here, Moravia’s logical conclusion but also Adriana’s choice of prostitution after the pain of a heartbreak. Is prostitution the logical answer to poverty?

In sociological terms, the urge to receive money, similar to the desire to fulfill the sexual instinct, reflects a deeper need to establish a direct connection with the world around us. For Moravia, sex offers a means of directly engaging with and experiencing reality. But, if we were to take Adriana as an example, this is also to say that our dominant modes of sexuality are narcissistic and sado-masochistic.¹³ “Moravia [...] believes that eroticism is a form of knowledge. For his bourgeois characters, the sexual act is an expression of either vitality or escape, initiation to life or discovery of the self” (Rimanelli 1968: 46). Almost consequentially, Adriana approaches prostitution without the burden of a second thought; prostitution is neither sin nor guilt: “I had a feeling of discovery, rather than of temptation” (162). At this altitude, what seems to be deserving of additional academic scrutiny is Adriana’s attitude toward sexuality and her partners.

In tune with Moravia’s characters, Adriana is indifferent to life. Her passivity takes the form of an overall non-involvement. A simple action such as putting on a dressing gown for bed, becomes a heavy action: “I let her [*the mother*] undress me passively” (428). Her passivity is, however, better described by her sexuality. Since her first encounters with Gino, Adriana describes her body as “passive” (36). When she is first taken by Astarita, her “whole body from the

¹² Dated but original is R. W. B. Lewis’ s book (1956) and Donald Heiney’s essay (1968) on the relation in Moravia’s work between sex and art, sex and money.

¹³ I am using the term to describe a particular type of relationship dynamic that does not necessarily align with the pathological traits defined by clinicians. Specifically, I aim for an erotically charged relationship where one person takes on a dominant, controlling role, and the other willingly embraces sexual submission.

waist down was as heavy and inert as lead, and no embrace was ever accepted with greater submission and with less participation" (82). The first time that she has sexual intercourse with Giacinti, she offers herself to him with the same passivity of an object: "he labored over my body like someone over an instrument that requires much preparation before being played and urged me all the time to do the same with his" (144). Later with Giacomo (Mino), Adriana develops a sensuality that goes beyond the client's satisfaction and absorbs the whole room:

[t]he floor was covered with rugs and in the middle of the room stood the table with the carafe. I stretched myself out on the rugs, my head and breasts under the table; then I pulled Mino down by one arm, forcing him to lie reluctantly on top of me. I threw my head back, shutting my eyes, and the ancient smell of dust and fluff in the carpet seemed as sweet and intoxicating as if I were lying in a field in springtime and the smell was the scent of flowers and grass, not dirty wool (315).

This is the moment the process of objectification is complete with Adriana becoming the same as a piece of furniture: "Mino lay on me and his weight made me feel the delightful hardness of the floor, and I was happy because he did not feel it and my body was his pallet" (315). A few pages later, recalling her last intercourse with Giacomo, she refers to herself as an external object to be taken: "he [...] insisted on possessing me" (410). One is allowed to conclude that Adriana's passivity turns into an objectification of sorts, that in turn is meant to be a desire for submission. How to explain Adriana's desire?

Sexuality is often the vehicle for the expression of power relations, thus it becomes subject to sociological inquiry. Sex is a means to power. Sex is not pleasure, or reproduction; it is dominance over the other. Not surprisingly, one of Adriana's first conclusions is: "[f]or the first time I realized that by giving herself to a man, a woman places herself in his hands and no longer has any means of forcing him to behave as she wishes" (53). Due to the simplicity of her reasoning one is forced to wonder whether Adriana lacks cognitive abilities. One could probably argue that she lacks the ability to make choices, thus she lacks the requisites to be considered a full moral person.¹⁴ Prostitution over the

¹⁴ On a personal note, interpretatively interesting but one that I will not follow, remarks such as "[t]here was the joy of knowing Mino was free; the joy, too, of knowing he had killed a policeman" (368) make one ponder Adriana's mental ability.

comfortable life Astarita would have provided, indeed, does not seem either the best of the possible options or the only one. And one cannot overlook the fact that she is responsible for at least two of the four deaths that develop alongside the plot.¹⁵ However, dependency relations do not necessarily lead to relations of domination, since the latter undermine or lessen the value of persons, while the former respect and preserve the dignity of persons (at least so it should be). Ultimately, one has to notice that Adriana is not vulnerable to the actions, desires, and whims of the Other; she, instead, autonomously, places herself in a condition of vulnerability.

Pierre Bourdieu (2001: 5–53) would probably say that oppressive conditions lead to the formation of unequal social groups, reinforcing and legitimizing systems of domination by presenting them as natural or unavoidable. This is an interesting argument to consider if we are to explain Adriana's behaviour. Grounded on Bourdieu's logic, Adriana is reproducing, via sexual behaviors, her condition of social inferiority. This is indeed the feeling she experiences when she meets Giacomo again: "I felt irresistibly drawn to place myself on a lower, dependent plane of anxious uncertainty with him. I could not have explained the reasons for my state of inferiority—if I could have done so, it would no longer have existed" (275). Adriana is incapable of explaining her need to be submitted but she senses it must be connected to a sense of inferiority. At this altitude, one has to start reasoning on the source of her masochist attitude, certainly connected to her sense of inferiority but not explained by it. Indeed, there is a correlation between the two phenomena but not a causation.

If we are to integrate a psychological reading to the already mentioned sociological approach, the pieces of Adriana's behavior all come into place.¹⁶ She seems oppressed by a sense of inferiority as a consequence of her narcissistic scar. With Sigmund Freud, we understand that her childhood development had "no satisfactory conclusion," hence, she approaches life as one approaches a complaint: "I can't accomplish anything; I can't succeed in anything" (1961: 15). Freud suggests that narcissism is a scar the source of which is to be found

¹⁵ I have counted four deaths: the jeweler and Astarita killed by Sonzogno, Sonzogno himself, and Giacomo, the student. If Adriana had given to the police Sonzogno's name, Sonzogno would not have been shot after having killed Astarita.

¹⁶ Freud is, as Moravia himself wrote, one of his two prophets. Moravia wrote an essay, "Storia dei miei libri" (1953), in which he explains the internal reasons that have guided his work. Here, he states that in his books, there are two common threads: sex and the social fact, Freud and Marx.

in “[l]oss of love and failure” which “leave behind them a permanent injury to self-regard” (1961: 14). Indeed, Adriana grows up without a father and a woman who plays out as a pimp rather than a mother. Relevant here is the corpus of Alfred Adler’s studies, which make the inferiority complex as shame-based. Adler claimed that a child’s strongest need is to feel loved. When love is absent during key developmental moments, their personality may evolve in one of two directions: they might develop an inferiority complex, leading to persistent and generalized feelings of shame, or they may try to compensate by striving for power. Adriana, hence, develops a sense of inferiority as a reaction to the feeling of being ignored, unnoticed. She carries the burden of an old sense of shame: “[i]n the minds of all children... all ideas of being repulsed are inevitably connected with the subjective feeling of being ‘less’ than other people” (Adler 1953: 22). In short, the idea of an inferiority complex can be understood as a way of describing persistent low self-esteem—or more directly, ongoing feelings of shame.¹⁷ Likewise, Karen Horney (1950) refers to ‘the pride system.’ Shame and pride are, therefore, keys to understanding the emotional basis for vengeful behaviour. While I believe, we all have or should have a feeling of inferiority, for only so is improvement possible,¹⁸ Adriana seems to use it to evade responsibilities in life.

If one reflectively denies some state of affairs, a truth of sorts, of which one is inwardly aware of, then one is in *bad faith*. In this vein, bad faith is a lie to oneself and it clearly feeds into questions connected with self-knowledge (Moran 2001). Accordingly, Jean-Paul Sartre (1981: 48) writes: “[w]e shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself, [...] The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding.” Sartre distinguishes between bad faith and falsehood, lying in general:

We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general [...] To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am

¹⁷ On the topic, see Thomas Scheff (2000).

¹⁸ Somewhat relevant is Adler’s conclusion: “The only salvation from the continuously driving inferiority feeling is the knowledge and the feeling of being valuable which originates from the contribution to the common welfare” (1979: 304).

hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a single consciousness. [...] bad faith does not come from outside to human reality. One does not undergo his bad faith; one is not infected with it; it is not a state. But consciousness affects itself with bad faith [...] That which affects itself with bad faith must be conscious (of) its bad faith since the being of consciousness is consciousness of being (Sartre 1981: 48–49).

The essence of the lie demands that the liar is actually and completely in possession of the truth that he is hiding: “a man does not lie about what he is ignorant of” (87). Thus, the liar takes advantage of the fact that his/her thoughts are invisible to the Other. However, when it comes to bad faith, there is no longer duality between the self and the eyes of the Other: “what changes everything is that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth” (49). That is, the deceiver and the deceived are one and the same. Yet, one must wonder if it is ever possible to lie to oneself. Indeed, to know the extent to which we can deceive ourselves is to know whether we can be truly accused of being in bad faith. Sartre believes that we cannot avoid knowing what we are fleeing from (83). It follows that if one is aware of the truth one is trying to disguise, then any attempt to hide it would be vain. A state of bad faith is therefore a condition of failure. The statement directly transforms Adriana into a fictional representation of Sartrean bad faith. I am here not concerned with the notion of authenticity, sincerity in Sartrean language,¹⁹ but that of responsibility. Prezzolini wrote that Moravia was “a depicter of men and morals. In his canvas he presents men and women as irretrievably condemned to the life they are leading; absolutism is implicit in his judgment of them” (1950: 360). On the contrary, I believe that one of the reasons why we cannot absolve Adriana is because of her condition of bad faith. That is to say, Adriana never assumes responsibility for her actions. Instead, she introduces herself as the outcome of someone else’s fault: “my poverty, my profession, mother, my ugly house, my simple clothes, my humble origin, my misfortunes” (227). However, following Sartre’s reasoning, I might not be able to escape my class, family and nation, but this cannot be a reminder of impotence. The most common and familiar

¹⁹ Sartre insists on claiming that the demand of sincerity is a natural condition and it is impossible to fulfil since it requires someone to “be what he is” in that sense which Sartre thinks impossible for human beings (1981: 58) for its meaning is in contradiction with the structure of our consciousness.

form of bad faith is when we over-identify with our facticities, by Sartre's account: "freedom is what we do with what has been done to you" (1963: 11). Otherwise stated, freedom is not a lack of limitations but how one responds to the limitations (constraints) that are imposed. Implicit is notion of personal responsibility. Sartre here stresses the idea that even when reality is imposed on us, in the form of limit situations, as a war or death can be, one still has the freedom to choose how to understand, respond to, and interact with those circumstances. This means we maintain until the end the power to determine our meaning, behavior, and identity. In contrast, Adriana stands a monument of self-pity:

I would have liked to have been born into a family as well-to-do as yours, which would have given me a good education. I would have liked to have lived in a lovely, clean house like yours. I would have liked to have had good teachers and foreign governesses, as you had. I would have liked to have spent the summer at the seaside or in the mountains, and to have had good clothes, and be invited out and to receive guests. And then I would have liked to marry someone who loved me, a decent fellow who worked and was well-to-do, too, and I would have liked to live with him and bear his children (334).

I certainly do not want to minimize the structural constraints bearing on a working-class woman in Fascist Italy, but there is a tension between facticity and transcendence that she clearly ignores. Adriana accepts what Sartre denies and that is a fixed, victimized identity. Thus, she wants to convince the reader that prostitution was an unavoidable path. She does not rebel against her given conditions, she does not find meaning in suffering, she does not choose a different path, despite what 'has been done to her.' She responds by accepting. And yet, it is far easier to accept an unworthy but profitable life than to renounce it. At this altitude, a few elements should be clearer. Adriana's complex of inferiority is an outcome of her sense of shame that she carries since childhood. Not being loved, or not being shown love, has generated low self-esteem that Adriana has used to avoid responsibility. Hence, prostitution, which she embraces as if it were someone else's choice, is an example of bad faith. However, there is an aspect that remains open to discussion, and that is her sexual behavior. Adriana approaches sexuality with a mix of disgust and wonder. But it is a sexuality that always tends toward a pain of sorts.

Adriana conceives love as a struggle for dominance and with Frank Lovett (2010: 121) “[t]o have a master [...] is to be subject to domination.” When Adriana finally accepts Astarita as lover, she describes their encounter in almost militaristic terms: “[o]nce and for all time I had rendered him inferior, dependent, subject to me; once and for all I had disarmed him, hypnotized him and placed him at my mercy” (173). When she first met Sonzogno, he shook her hand so hard that “a little cry of pain escaped *her*” (228). But this is also the man who made her pregnant and the man who most gave *her* pleasure: “[a]t last he took me and I felt a pleasure made sinister and atrocious by fear” (243). Undoubtedly, she is attracted by male violence and she knows it: “my goodness did not exclude a taste for blood, admiration of violence and delight in crime” (253). Famously, in the essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), Freud introduced the concept of the death drive (*Thanatos*), which he contrasts with the life drive (*Eros*). “It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (30). If the furthest back instinct can go is the time before life existed, then there must be a natural urge to return to a lifeless, inorganic state. The drive for destruction and aggression can be linked to domination and humiliation, as individuals may, in extreme cases, seek power over others to exert control, or be subjected to feelings of humiliation as a form of aggression turned inward. Adriana’s life choice (prostitution), sexual attraction (Sonzogno), attitude, a mix between humility and need for humiliation, seem to comply with the theory.

She is often heard to say “I obeyed” (48, 144) instead of “I agreed.” When Giacomo asked her to turn off the light, she obeyed: “I obeyed and he undressed in the dark and got into bed beside me.” Finding herself sleeping next to him, she begins thinking about the sea and soon she is taken by a “longing to drown myself.” She imagines herself dead, “my lifeless body would float from wave to wave beneath the sun for ages,” but the image assumes gothic tones the moment she pictures her body subject to decomposition: “[t]he gulls would peck my eyes, the sun would burn my breast and my belly, the fish would gnaw my back.” Her sense of inferiority becomes metaphorically a corpse that sinks: “I would sink to the bottom, would be dragged head downwards.” In the end, nothing remains but a handful of white bones that the tide has cast on the shore. Adriana’s death drive complies with Freud’s theory because it is aimed toward the self: “[w]hat we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (1920: 33). Adriana longs for destruction, hers is a craving for self-annihilation: “I liked the idea of being dragged to the bottom of the sea

by my hair. I liked the idea of being reduced to a little heap of bones one day, without human shape, among the smooth stones of a shore." And yet, death and dissolution seem not to be enough. She wants something more, she wants to be humiliated "[a]nd perhaps someone without noticing it would walk on my bones and crush them to white powder" (407–408).

Feet, more precisely kneeling down to someone's feet, is the symbol Moravia chooses to indicate humiliation. Thus, the devotion of Astarita's love is a form of submission: "[h]e even seemed unable to face me, he lost his head and felt driven irresistibly to throw himself on his knees before me and kiss my feet" (173). Similar is Adriana's reaction to the indifference shown by Giacomo, the man she loves: "[t]hen I knelt down and taking his foot onto my lap, like a shoemaker, I pulled off his shoes and socks and kissed his feet" (206). When next to him, she is driven on by a desire to submit as a form of both humility and deference: "[e]ven if you hit me, I'd kiss the hand that did it" (282). Likewise, the animalesque Sonzogno, the man who treats Adriana as his private property, is about to leave her room; as he bends down to tie his shoelaces, she prevents him from doing it: "I saw him bend down to tie his shoelaces. I immediately knelt down in front of him." "Let me do it," I said" (248). Adriana is irresistibly drawn to place herself on a lower plane, she seems comfortable only when she is placed in a position of dependency and uncertainty. She sinks, she is stepped on, ultimately, she longs for death. However, it would be a mistake to believe that she is searching for redemption. It is not redemption she is after but some punishment of sort; this is the reason why, to a priest, she confesses her theft (a valuable gold-plated compact) and Sonzogno's murder: "I felt a kind of voluptuous delight, in fact, in letting myself sink to the depths of what I imagined must be the last stage of despair" (307).

For some masochism is a form of perversion (Richard von Krafft-Ebing).²⁰ Feminist critics the like of Simone de Beauvoir (2009: 784) considered female masochist submission as a participation in one's own objectification: "masochism is one of the paths the unsatisfied woman takes, disappointed by the other and by herself."²¹ Christine Williams (2002: 103) explains that

²⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) was the Austrian psychiatrist who coined the term "masochism" in his 1886 foundational work *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

²¹ In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir does not see masochism as an innate or natural characteristic of women, but rather as a psychological response shaped by patriarchal oppression. She suggests that, due to being forced to live as the 'Other' (the passive object) rather than the 'Subject' (the active, independent agent), women may resort to masochism as a means

“[m]asochists accept this mistreatment because they consider themselves fundamentally unworthy of love and respect (they have very low self-esteem), and because they see the sadist as their only hope for redemption from their wretched condition.” The reader often spots Adriana looking at herself though a mirror. She adores what she sees: “shapely beauty” (143) made of “[...] bosom, [...] legs, [...] hips, which gave men such pleasure” (149). She does not think twice before making of her own body a “convenient means for achieving the aims which hard work and honesty had not enabled me to attain” (123). Adriana does not ponder the consequences nor seems to regret anything. Moravia has Adriana going for confession twice, and yet, given the aim of the confession - to seek absolution for a fault - can one re-confess for the same fault? Is confession not aimed at avoiding repetition? If Adriana has to repeat the confession, one must wonder about the intensity of her contrition. Instead, sentences such as “I suddenly felt splendid, and this movement gave me a sense of pleasure because my body felt young, strong, satisfied” (150) point out a key of interpretation. Adriana is a narcissistic character who, in turning into masochistic, must reorganize her own ego. In his essay “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915), Freud discusses how the drive for domination or submission can be a manifestation of unconscious desires. In Freud’s words, “the narcissistic *subject* is, through identification, replaced by another, extraneous ego” (131). In other words, Adriana switches her interest from herself to the object, which in this case is represented by Giacomo. She tries to incorporate the object into her ego, but without success. Giacomo remains external to herself: “[e]very time I believed I had reached the very core of his intelligence, he repelled me with some joke or amusing trick, to distract my attention” (335). The same process is at stake with her mother. Adriana considers her mother responsible for her condition, “[w]hen I was a little girl, you never took me into the cakeshops” (223). She clearly identifies with the suffering object. In a certain sense, she goes through life by punishing herself not to punish her mother. With Freud, “[t]he enjoyment of pain would thus be an aim which was originally masochistic, but which can only become an instinctual aim in someone who was originally sadistic” (128). That is to say, Adriana’s life choice and her need to be humiliated, undermined, submitted, made used of, is the reaction against the opposite instinct. In Freud’s words: “masochism is actually sadism turned round upon

of either ‘possessing’ the dominant male figure or deriving meaning from their own subjugation: “she takes pleasure in a masochism that promises her supreme conquests” (351).

the subject's own ego" (126).²² Adriana, the masochist, enjoys the assault upon herself; "we have every reason to believe" Freud writes, "that sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition, for the sake of which the subject will even willingly experience the unpleasure of pain" (127). Adriana is taken and raped. She sinks and kneels. Pain is no longer pain but a masochistic need.

A last remark

Moravia was a confessor of lost souls, of men and women living in static desperation, and it is understandable how, in a dispersive and sad century like the twentieth century was, full of alienated figures, thirsty for experiences and longing for approval, he immediately found a wide audience. *The Woman of Rome* ends with Adriana pregnant and the prospect of being adequately supported by Giacomo's family. Moravia gave an equation to explain for Adriana's supposed happiness: "[p]assive characters can't fail because they don't have a plan, a commitment. But active characters fail" (1947: 3). Hence, we are compelled to believe that Ariana will eventually succeed. She converts from lust to love, from an abstract desire to possess money to chastity. Doubts remain. Moravia reads the century correctly when he wrote: "[t]he nineteenth-century novelist, believed in the existence of a language and a reality that were common and universal," whereas twentieth-century novelists represent "various worlds of contemporary relativism" (1965: 168). Adriana remains a character out for scrutiny. She might as well be one of those who accept gifts from men in exchange for their beauty. While posing nude for a painter (without being a model), she could never quite say when the moment was she traded her private dream of home and children for the life of a prostitute. A rather shallow character in the end, full of clichés, "[t]wo lovers never meet on the same level of emotion and desire" (275) and poor judgment.²³ The text promises a climax that is never reached, neither a love story nor a crime. One tends to conclude that

²² This discussion about the relation between sadism and masochism is also in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, originally published in 1920.

²³ There is here a gendered dimension that I am not considering because it would be material for another manuscript. Also, I want to emphasize the fact that it is not my intention to express a moral judgment of Adriana. It seems evident to me that if we place this character against Sartre's notion of bad faith the final product is something less than the one meant by Moravia.

the most appealing part is the suicidal letter with its reminiscence of Pirandello (the mask) and Virginia Woolf's suicidal letter.²⁴

In contrast, the text can be considered a compelling commentary on the way we approach love and sexuality. This is fiction that deals with the clinic of love, a malaise, if we consider fiction as a reference, with submission of sorts as an option. Love, as described by Moravia, is not harmonious; it does not bring the utopia of a calming wisdom. Instead, it is uncomfortable, sadistic, masochistic, unbalanced, demanding, fanatical, possessive, invisible, silent, fragile, and absent. Masochism is essentially the desire to harm oneself, yet the concept of masochism has to do with a mental realm far more complex and subtler, than the mere enjoyment of pain. Indeed, pain is not the masochist's chief desire. Masochism is the temporal attempt to eradicate, systematically, the most profound memories of the self. That is also to say that pain is the tool that gradually obliterates previous psychological content. The masochist finds pleasure as everyone does; the difference is that for the masochist, pain, punishment, or humiliation are necessary prerequisites to obtaining gratification. In Adriana's case, as in many of us, extreme pressure on the self might produce a desire to escape from the self masochistically. When the past is a haunting presence, when the self becomes a burden, masochism shifts into an escape from autonomy, thus transforming love, falling in love, being loved into a pathological experience.

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²⁴ Giacomo writes to Adriana: "If it had been possible, I would have lived and would have married you" (436). The line closely recalls Woolf's suicidal letter addressed to Leonard when she took her life (1941): "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you."

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