

Ailments of the Spirit

The Lie, by Alberto Moravia, translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 334 pp. \$5.95), reshapes in a journal that serves him as conscience the scabrous elements of the narrator's life. A free-lance critic, Emile Capouya is chief editor of Grosset & Dunlap's Universal Library.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

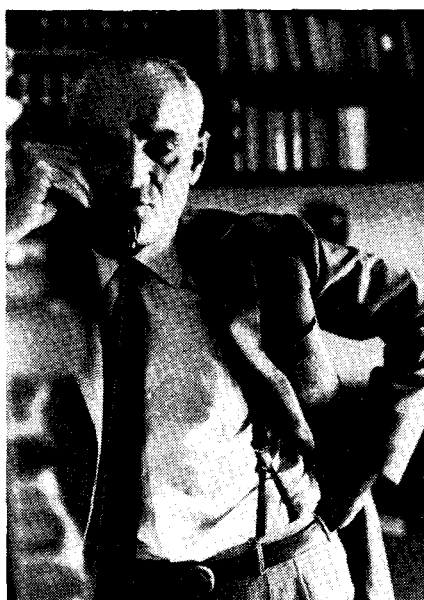
ALBERTO MORAVIA is a gifted man of letters—a writer of short stories, novels, and essays. In his novels he retreats, along with his times, farther and farther from the possibility of greatness.

Now, no artist worth maligning, and no audience worth baiting, will sit still for the proposition that this age inflicts mediocrity on its writers as inevitably as it contrives political convulsions. Why should artist or audience be willing to see their future foreclosed against the possibility of rapture? But it is true, nevertheless, and will be until men learn to have an easy conscience while doing what they know to be wrong. Our century is particularly hard on consciences, being especially fertile in crimes on the grand scale—everything from deporting whole populations in Russia and Germany to working them to death or asphyxiating them, from starving children by naval blockade in Cuba to setting them afire in Vietnam. With better means of communication available, the strong can oppress the weak more effectively, and we learn about it sooner and in greater detail. Under such conditions, the writers who are worth a damn are moved to say to the powerful what Kent says to Lear: "Whilst I can vent clamor from my throat, I'll tell thee thou dost evil." And plenty of black books have expressed just that sentiment.

Alberto Moravia is a good example of an artist of middling talent cornered by this extraordinarily demanding century. He is a writer we must be very glad to have—unless we look on him from the standpoint of what literature has been in the past and what we hope it may be again. His essays on literature, particularly American and English literature, are most intelligent. Some of his short stories are like Turgenev's for their power of drawing a song out of unhappy, sordid things. In "The Woman from Mexico" Moravia does literally that. A

ridiculous little man is wandering through hot city streets, too warmly dressed for the season, half fainting with hebetude and discomfort. He finds a woman, and he goes home with her, not for lust but out of desperation, so that he can peel off his clothes. He is comical and defeated. The woman is Mexican, a flamenco singer. She sits on the bed, her waistless Indian figure as hieratic as an Egyptian sculpture, and she begins to sing a *cante hondo* lament. The little man, the author, and the reader are all transformed. The "occasion for sin" that was really an occasion for futility is rebuked and transformed by the song, for art, like faith, is the evidence of things not seen and most needful.

AS a novelist, Moravia is at once subtle and coarse-grained. He has never gotten over the small boy's sense of shock about sexual matters, and his preoccupation with offensive varieties of sex is one of the grounds for his popular success. Here, too, the impatient reviewer has to remind himself that in a world in which an effective public role is denied to the individual man and woman, only the most intimate aspects of their private lives still appear—misleadingly—to be areas of free choice. Sex necessarily becomes the field for baroque imaginings, in life and in books. So that Moravia is not the only laborer



—Marilyn Stafford (Pix).

Alberto Moravia — "at once subtle and coarse-grained."

in this dubious vineyard, merely one of the most successful.

He is ingenious as a contriver of surprises that do not seem just willful but appear to make real connections. In his novels, odd juxtapositions and peripeties testify to the strength of what we might call the cubist impulse of the modern mind—the project of ridding time of direction and matter of volition. As a thinker he is not exactly original; no powerful innovating intellect would have troubled to write *The Empty Canvas* when the theme had been treated with such authority by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea*. But to see best the kind of difficulties under which Moravia labors, and that so severely penalize his genuine talent, it may be useful to make an excursion to our own literature.

Powerful Christian sermons occur in two American novels—that of Father Mapple in Melville's *Moby Dick* and that of Gabriel Grimes in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Father Mapple delivers his sermon in a seamen's chapel. His text is "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah." And he tells how, being commanded by God to preach against the iniquity of Nineveh, and fearing men more than he feared God, Jonah fled from his duty and took ship to the ends of the earth. But a storm arose upon the waters; the sailors suspected that Jonah was the cause, and they laid hands upon him, and cast him, "not unreluctantly," into the sea. Jonah was swallowed up by the whale. For three days and nights he lay in the fish's belly, and then, chastened and repentant, he called upon the Lord, and the whale vomited him out on the dry land. Father Mapple draws the moral that we must serve God's truth and our conscience rather than human convention, deal always with our ultimate values rather than consult mere convenience, mere expediency. (All this in a book that denies any beneficent moral authority or standard in the world.) And at that point the preacher offers a further reflection. The duty to speak according to conscience is every man's duty, but it presses with special urgency upon a minister of the Gospel, "an anointed pilot-preacher of the living God." He, of all men, must speak truth to the proud gods and commodores of this earth, even if to do so means martyrdom.

In James Baldwin's novel, the Negro preacher, Gabriel Grimes, takes his text from Isaiah: "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." And Gabriel reminds his listeners that the self-accusing prophet had been called the eagle-eyed, because he had looked down the centuries to come and

had foreseen the birth of Christ. And yet this man had cried, Woe is me. Wherefore?

To explain the prophet's self-reproach, Gabriel recalls the divine plan for man's salvation, and the sacrifice of which no man is worthy, not the most righteous. In words as simple as the theme is grand, Gabriel says:

Dearly beloved, when God saw how men's hearts waxed evil, how they turned aside, each to his own way, how they married and gave in marriage, how they feasted on ungodly meat and drink, and lusted, and blasphemed, and lifted up their hearts in sinful pride against the Lord—oh, then, the Son of God, the blessed lamb that taketh away the sins of the world, this Son of God, who was the Word made flesh, the fulfillment of the promise—oh, then, he turned to his Father, crying: "Father, prepare me a body and I'll go down and redeem sinful man."

To our surprise, these grim memorials of Christian and Jewish cosmology, bodied forth in antique thunders, come to seem more apposite as each day of this secular age wreaks its new horrors. But, to depart for a moment from our deepest preoccupations, there are two points of a merely literary kind that these inspired passages suggest.

The first is the manner in which—precisely because of the secularization of Western society since the Renaissance—the moral animus and unction, the moral vocation even, have tended to desert the province of organized religion for the province of art. All the fine arts in some measure reflect that new burden, but the literary arts are morality's chosen vessel, since they are by their nature discursive and can name directly the objects of their concern. That is so true that we have seen in our resolutely secular era the progressive sanctification of serious literature. I mean now not the shallow worship of art that has served the undemanding as a substitute for religion, but the assumption by literature of essentially religious functions. Of course, that was generally true of the literature of the ancient world. The novelty is that in our own time, when, in a spiritual sense, the altars have been deserted even by the priests, poetry and the novel have taken on the duty of celebrating, castigating, denying the absent God. The nay-sayers themselves of modern letters—Joyce, Céline, Kafka, Beckett—are so many modern Ezekiels, eating dung in the marketplace to stigmatize their own collusion with the familiar abominations of daily life.

The second literary hint offered us by the strangely parallel sermons of Melville and James Baldwin is the suggestion that, if religious concerns have come to color the arts, so have the artists come more or less consciously to assume the functions of priest and prophet. The

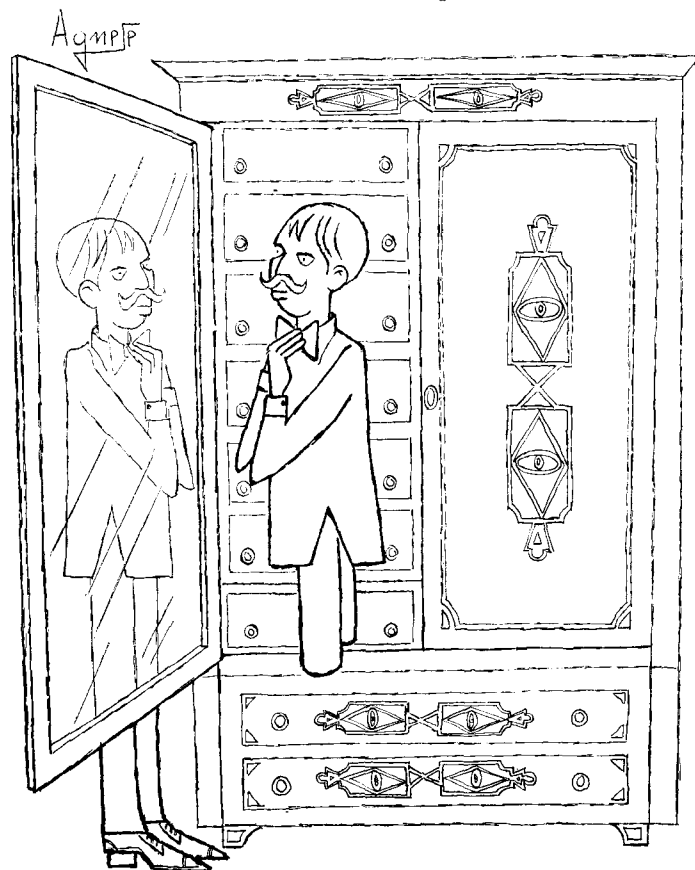
sermons of Father Mapple and Gabriel Grimes are each a defense and illustration of the idea of the religious calling, of spiritual election, in books that otherwise explicitly deny the validity of any such consecration. That is, in a world that no longer supports a system of moral meanings, the artist must smuggle in as contraband the values that might sanction and justify his unreasoning need to create. The love that moves the sun and the other stars is also the virtue that makes the poem and the story; at a time when even the Pope believes in the internal combustion engine, the poet must sometimes invoke his own mystical function, beginning with the celebration of love, and going on to establish an order of preferences, a moral order. The sermons in *Moby Dick* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are professions of faith in a creed that the authors have consciously discarded but to which they half-consciously adhere. The self-accusatory themes of the preacher-authors bespeak guilty awareness that they are living in a way that sets at nought the artistic and the sacerdotal vocation.

In his new novel, *The Lie*, ably translated by Angus Davidson, Moravia has the narrator speak in the first person, and tell how he wrote the book that we are reading. Years ago he had fallen in love with a woman of the working class who had a daughter from an earlier liaison, and he had married her. Shortly thereafter he had written a novel that recreated the love affair and the marriage; he had been disturbed to discover

that everything recounted in the novel seemed false and conventional. He had lost faith in the book, and lost faith retrospectively in the life it reflected. While continuing to live with his wife, he arranged matters so that their relations were like those of a lodger and his landlady rather than like those of a married couple. To make the informal divorce even more complete, he took a post as foreign correspondent for a newspaper, and the next ten years found him abroad a good deal.

The story opens during one of his infrequent homecomings. The narrator enters his home as he would a rented apartment, but something is stirring in him; he is ready for the shock that awaits him. It comes in the form of an anonymous letter, telling him that his wife, who runs a dress shop, is really a procuress. He decides to try to make a new life for his wife and his stepdaughter, a genuine life. He feels responsible for his wife's monstrous avocation. He is going to try to save her from it. At the same time he wants to keep a journal in which the events of his new life will be recorded, and from which he hopes in time to extract a novel, a sincere one, in keeping with his changed outlook.

His stepdaughter is now a student at the university. He discovers that he is in love with her, and he duly enters the fact in his journal. He sets down other things as well—his daughter's confession that her mother had prostituted her when she was fourteen years old, and his own attempts to recreate the event, visit the





**A flat tire.
Now what do I do?**

When there's no man around,

The loneliest place in the world is anywhere a lady gets a flat tire.

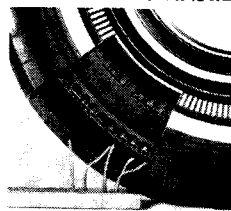
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scene of the horrible incident, etc. He also notes that not everything he has thus far reported is really true. Some things have been altered for the sake of the novel-to-be. Some of those rectifications are denied in their turn, and the narrator announces that his novelistic intention is shaping the events of his life—that is, he cannot permit himself a banal or theatrical action because it would strike a false note in the novel, which has become his conscience. He was conscienceless before. Now art is all the conscience that he has.

The story makes much of the erotic tension between stepfather and stepdaughter, resolved only in dreams, or—who knows?—in portions of the journal that may be true or false, a record of actual happenings or a record of happenings demanded by the novel.

The scabrous elements of the story are most disturbing. The narrator is not merely tempted to commit what amounts to incest, but he incessantly commits casuistry on the subject—and that amounts to a kind of abstract pornography. The twists and turns of plot, the small, dreadful revelations, are sprung upon the reader in a way that suggests that the author is the first victim of his own imagination. The journal's successive avowals and disclaimers are maddening at first. Eventually we are indifferent to them, Moravia has lost us.

What does all this add up to? Art is the only religion we have, but its priests have lost faith in the efficacy of their dubious sacraments. Nevertheless the novelist of the story tries to live under the aspect of esthetics, that is to say, tries to give his life moral contours, form. He asserts that the attempt is successful, and he offers us a novel as the testimony of his moral rebirth. But Moravia himself, a novelist writing about a novelist, does not believe in his own values. Accordingly, the process of novelistic creation becomes problematic for him; the high-wire artist says, what the devil am I doing up here, Niagara rushing below me? And begins to argue and explain, and loses his footing.

The novelist's priestly vocation requires that he confess openly his most atrocious imaginings. He does so as a kind of oblique philippic against his life and ours. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." The modern novelist makes his confession to the *Deus absconditus*, and withdraws it in pain and fury. To have better novels we should have to be better men, rediscovering or reinventing an exacting idea of what it is we owe to ourselves. Until we do, the art that should be our sustenance will be little more than a symptomatology, as in the novels of Moravia, indications of spiritual sickness.

The Constant Loser

The Stranger in the Snow, by Lester Goran (New American Library. 211 pp. \$4.95), pursues the funny, sad adventures in Pittsburgh, Miami, and Louisville of a likable schlemiel. Joseph Haas is an editor and staff writer for *Panorama magazine of the Chicago Daily News*.

By JOSEPH HAAS

HARRY MYERS is a loser, a nice Jewish man with good intentions and daydreams of greatness as a lover, a flashy gambler, or a big-time racketeer. But at forty-five, balding, paunchy, unmarried, living with his widowed mother and spinster sister, without a steady job, dreams are hard to keep. And then he's haunted, too, by the ghost of a Methodist soldier named Wilson who was killed in Myers's stead twenty years ago in Italy, during World War II.

Wilson's ghost, in soiled fatigues, helmet, and muddy, bloody combat boots, causes Myers to waken often, screaming, "I am a murderer!" When Myers is awake, the ghost frequently displays a far-out sense of humor. Once when Myers is using a public pay toilet, he sees the gory boots, with the fatigue pants crumpled around the ankles, beneath the wall in the next booth.

To assuage his guilt Myers sends small monthly checks to Wilson's widow in Louisville, and he never forgets Wilson's son on the Christian holidays. After twenty years of this, Myers has sentimental fantasies about the pretty blonde woman and the boy in the photograph he found in the slain Wilson's pocket, and he sometimes pretends to strangers that they're his own family.

Myers's jobs are losers' jobs—plumber's helper, house-to-house salesman of storm windows and aluminum awnings. He avoids his sister's spinster girl friends and takes his pleasure with the sexy widow Rappaport, who has "breasts like fists," but runs scared when she talks of matrimony. When a backroom poker game is raided, Myers is the only one jailed; the "numbers tickets" he allowed a friend to slip into his back pocket turn out to be marijuana cigarettes.

That's the way it is with Harry in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, where author Lester Goran took us in an earlier novel to describe the bitter-sweet life of the Jews and Poles and

other descendants of immigrants. As in *The Paratrooper of Mechanic Avenue*, Mr. Goran writes of his people with sympathy and honesty, and makes them real and credible.

At last it looks as if everything has changed for Myers. He makes enough money cheating people on awning and window deals to finance a vacation in Miami. Norma Rappaport stalks him there, Lillian Wilson writes that she's willing to join him, and a wealthy young Jewish woman from New York proposes marriage.

For forty-five years, he thought, women used to walk around me as if I were a fire hydrant, and suddenly rich girls want to marry me and divorcées with good tail want me so bad they will shoot to kill for the love of me. He smiled slowly, a ladykiller with his tan. He had also, he thought, just for the record, dropped eight pounds swimming and walking. Twelve more and maybe I'll put my body on sale, he thought, and continued to grin.

But this is Lester Goran, not Horatio Alger, to savor like a sourball until the sad, sweet taste is gone. It's real, and Myers is the constant schlemiel. His dreams and his women crumble around him and, when the fun is over, he asks his old friend Cedunsky, ex-neighborhood political power and smalltime con-man, about the riddle of Wilson's death: "Tell me, Oscar, why did one loving father die there and Myers from the whorehouses live? . . ." And wise old Cedunsky replies, "Who said the earth was home? Men are like flowers in the snow. . . . Born only to be frozen."

LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

1. (*The Oresteia*) Agamemnon, *The Eumenides*. 2. *Childhood, Boyhood*. 3. (*The Forsyte Saga*) *In Chancery, To Let*. 4. (Kristin Lavransdatter) *The Bridal Wreath, The Mistress of Husaby*. 5. (*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*) *The Way Home, Ultima Thule*. 6. *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan, Judgment Day*. 7. *Mutiny on the Bounty, Pitcairn's Island*. 8. (U.S.A.) *The 42nd Parallel, 1919*. 9. *The Hamlet, The Mansion*. 10. (*The Lord of the Rings*) *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers*.