

# Mary Casolin

## CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *AGOSTINO*

by Alberto Moravia

*Agostino* is a short novel which was published in Rome in 1944, after being censored two years before. The story is partly autobiographical: its style is one of simple elegance. There is no superfluous word to detract from the theme of the story, which is the corrosion of innocence that parallels a growing self-awareness. *Agostino* is a thirteen-year-old boy spending a summer holiday by the sea with his widowed mother. He takes great pride in rowing his mother out to sea, as she is a beautiful woman still in the prime of life; and he feels that everyone admires her and envies him.

The sequence of events that takes place in the short space of time covered by the story serves to destroy his pride and trust in, and affection for, her. He realises that she is a separate human being with needs of her own, instead of a person existing just to grant his wishes.

One morning a young man appears on the beach and the three of them go rowing. Immediately *Agostino* becomes jealous, especially when he sees the joy with which his mother invites the youth to accompany them. His mind is tortured as he recognises the same impulses within himself that he witnesses in his mother and his mates, and that he initially tries so hard to repudiate. At first this recognition hurts him, as he cannot admit to himself that his mother either dares or desires to share her love with anybody besides her son.

Her reaction to the young man brings back to *Agostino*'s mind an occasion when a cousin refusing his offer had preferred to dance with another man. Twice he has felt the sting of rejection.

From then on the youth associates with them. Both of the adults appear to ignore *Agostino*'s presence. With a sense of repugnance he becomes aware of the growing intimacy between his mother and the youth. One day *Agostino* earns a slap from his mother when he says mockingly:

“Ma è proprio vero? Oggi non si va in mare?”

(A. Moravia, 1945:22)

["Mamma, do you mean to say that we're  
not going out on the *patino* to-day?"  
(A. Moravia, 1947:26)]

His intention to sting her has succeeded.

Feeling wounded he runs away to a cabin, and while he is there crying, a lad enters. Agostino bribes him with cigarettes to allow him to join his game. Berto and Agostino then go to a tent where there is a group of youths. The boys start discussing Agostino's mother and he feels embarrassed and vindicated simultaneously for all the humiliations that his mother has inflicted upon him of late. His hostility towards her grows until he sees her as just another woman.

With great delight the boys explain to Agostino the sexual activities of males and females. After brawling with them he goes home and awaits his mother's return. When she appears she looks happier than she usually does.

Agostino's experiences with his mates serve to give his evolving maturity that impetus that makes total mother love undesirable, unwanted and unnecessary.

The more Agostino observes his mother the more disappointment he feels, and his soul is invaded by new and obscene feelings. He entertains doubts and harbours unsatisfied curiosity.

Agostino starts to spy on his mother when she is in her bedroom undressing. He becomes aware of a new thought:

[...] "è una donna ... nient'altro che una  
donna" [...].  
(A. Moravia, 1945:65)

["She is a woman, nothing but a woman"  
[...].  
(A. Moravia, 1947:61)]

He is on his way back to join the band of boys when he thinks:

Perché poi desiderasse tanto di non amare  
piú sua madre [...]. Forse per il  
risentimento di essere stato tratto in

inganno e di averla creduta così diversa da quella che era nella realtà [...].

(A. Moravia, 1945:67)

[Why he so much wanted to stop loving his mother [...]. Perhaps because he felt he had been deceived and had thought her to be different from what she really was [...].

(A. Moravia, 1947:63)]

Saro, a homosexual, lures Agostino into going rowing with him alone. Too late, Agostino becomes uneasy about the situation. Later, when the boys question him about the trip, Agostino is ignorant of the import of their curiosity. When he realises the implications of their questions he denies the insinuations. By his silence, Saro encourages the boys to believe that their accusations are true.

Frustration after frustration unfolds. At every attempt to gain acceptance and recognition he is rebuffed. Agostino sees his mother preferring the company of a youth, and his new-found mates mocking him for his naïveté, until in despair he admits to the very actions of which his taunters are accusing him.

Finally Agostino feels that

[t]utto era oscuro in lui e intorno a lui. Come se invece della spiaggia, del cielo e del mare non vi fossero state che tenebre, nebbia e forme indistinte e minacciose.

(A. Moravia, 1945:86)

[[e]verything seemed dark around him and within him, as if instead of beach, sea and sky, there had only been shadows and vague, menacing forms.

(A. Moravia, 1947:79)]

When Tortima, one of the group of youths, confronts Agostino with an obscene suggestion involving his mother, he denies its possibility. He feels like running away from his old life to

[...] un paese dove tutte quelle brutte cose  
non esistevano.  
(A. Moravia, 1945:91)

[[...] a country where none of these horrible  
things existed [...].  
(A. Moravia, 1947:84)]

He wishes himself dead, so infected and morally corrupted does he feel by the impurity of the boys' thoughts. Agostino's eyes have been opened forcibly. He cannot tolerate his new-found knowledge nor his mother's nakedness. Now he sees her only as female flesh. His new perception awakens in him the desire to scream at her:

[...] "copriti, lasciami, non farti piú vedere,  
non sono piú quello di un tempo".  
(A. Moravia, 1945:99)

["Cover yourself up, go away, don't let me  
see you any more, I'm not the same as I  
used to be".  
(A. Moravia, 1947:90)]

Agostino suffers ambivalent feelings. He recognises his growing sense of indifference towards his mother, and of understanding for her young man. Coupled with this dawning detachment is the realisation that she is more than ever his mother. The schism that Agostino experiences in his emotions precipitates a psychological struggle within him. In his exertions to become accepted for his own sake, Agostino compromises himself by admitting that

[...] era stanco di negare la verità, che era  
realmente accaduto ciò che essi dicevano e  
che lui non aveva alcuna difficoltà a farne il  
racconto.  
(A. Moravia, 1945:105)

[[...] he was tired of denying it, and that  
what they accused him of had really

happened, and that he didn't care whether they knew it or not.  
(A. Moravia, 1947:95)]

However, upon further questioning, his mates interpret his silence as one of shame, instead of as his incapacity to lie.

Agostino forces himself to deceive a man and his son about his way of life until he feels

[...] di essersi cosí incanaglito ormai da non poterci piú vivere senza ipocrisia e fastidio.  
(A. Moravia, 1945:111)

[[...] he had got so used to living with the poor that the hypocrisy of any other kind of life bored him.  
(A. Moravia, 1947:101)]

Nevertheless, he still confesses to himself that he has not yet changed completely.

Agostino's first steps towards attaining an adult self-sufficiency and self-reliance drive him to attempt to obtain the services of a prostitute.

One summer day while adventuring together, Tortima tells Agostino about a brothel and its occupants, and the idea comes to him that

[e]gli doveva, la sera stessa, andare in quella casa e conoscervi una di quelle donne. Questo non era un desiderio o un vagheggiamento, bensí una risoluzione fermissima e quasi disperata.  
(A. Moravia, 1945:118)

[[he] had made up his mind to go to that villa this very night and sleep with one of the women. This was not just a vague desire, it was an absolutely firm, almost desperate resolution.  
(A. Moravia, 1947:105-106)]

Tortima and Agostino set out for the brothel. However, on arrival, the woman in charge turns Agostino away because he is too young. Feeling doubly betrayed, because he has consigned all of his money to Tortima, and because of the refusal, Agostino departs.

He goes home and in response to his complaint that she treats him like a child, his mother promises that henceforth she will treat him like a man. As he falls asleep Agostino cannot help dwelling on this idea:

Come un uomo, non poté fare a meno di pensare prima di addormentarsi. Ma non era un uomo; e molto tempo infelice sarebbe passato prima che lo fosse.  
(A. Moravia, 1945:144)

["Like a man", he couldn't help thinking, before he fell asleep. But he wasn't a man. What a long, unhappy time would have to pass before he could become one.  
(A. Moravia, 1947:128)]

During the process of his maturation Agostino repudiates all of the standards and values of his usual lifestyle in order to become one of the gang of young hoodlums who are his mates. In Agostino's desire to take immediate action we witness the ultimate stage of awakening and self-knowledge. The attempt frustrated, Agostino realises that his emotional and social maturity will have to catch up to his biological development before he can really consider himself to be a man.

In addition to this insight, another component of his awakening that is quite as shattering to the protagonist is the acknowledgment that his mother, the woman of whom he is so proud, wants sexual activity. Reluctantly, Agostino has to admit that if he desires sexual expression he cannot deny the same experience to his mother. The opposite social expectation goes hand in hand with one aspect of the Italian way of thinking of that time.

If a woman is respectably married or, as in this case, a widow, she has no right even to admit to herself a *penchant* for sexual activity. Once hallowed with a husband and a child, the *only* fate is to remain a Madonna for ever — on the surface anyway. The hypocrisy and double-standard of this expectation are made apparent by what happens in real life.

The attempts to deny this reality are as treacherous to innocence as are those that are made to perpetuate a *status quo* that always advantages the man and always betrays the woman.

Here Moravia's views surface. Autobiographically he remarks that "[t]he dominant theme of my work, appears to be man's relationship with reality" (L. Rebay, 1970:3).

With the destruction of the traditional set of values after the First World War, man's environment suddenly became indecipherable and obscure. It was a situation that he found difficult to operate in.

Coupled with the view of the undesirability of the Italian family being "in most cases a temple for the worship of such divinities as Prudence, Self-interest, Ignorance, Hedonism" (L. Rebay, 1970:6-7), Moravia thinks that for the nurture of the young mind any alternative to this household group must be an improvement.

In the microcosm of Agostino's mind the reader sees him coming to grips with his own personal reality. His contact with moral disintegration precedes this struggle, and we are left in some doubt as to the outcome.

Suffice it to say that the pain of the final blow that severs the umbilical cord between Agostino and his mother carries the compensation of the vague but undeniable promise of personal fulfilment in the future.

As in his other works, Moravia depicts a small segment of society rife with "indifference, cynicism, cruelty, and boredom" (L. Rebay, 1970:7). The reader can trace a continuum of irresponsibility and puerility, starting with the overt alienation of the affections of Agostino's mother, to the insensitivity and obscenity of his companions' activities.

At the end of the story, the reader is left with the feeling that although Agostino's innocence is dead, he is at the threshold of a stronger blossoming which will be made healthier by virtue of the accrued wisdom following his adjustment to reality.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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