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RELIGION, POLITICS AND SEXUALITY IN MORAVIA'S *IL CONFORMISTA*

Il conformista (1957) is Moravia's most direct attempt to reveal the psychological pressures and constraints which led large numbers of Italians in the inter-war period to identify their beliefs and interests with those of Fascism. It is clearly not Moravia's aim to offer a social, economic or political analysis of the advent and development of Fascism, nor does the novel portray the struggles and contradictions of Italian society that opened the door to twenty years of dictatorship. Rather, the work considers the operations of both political and religious power in constructing the relationship of the individual (middle class and male) both to the state and to himself. Political analysis of the Italian situation is transformed into a psychoanalytical account of the problem of consent, or acquiescence to the dictatorship, and grounded in the problematic sexual identity of the individual. The novel sees Fascism in some sense as a psychological and ethical sickness resulting from the paradox whereby sexual drives both support and are suppressed by Fascism, just as they are oppressed by a Catholic conception of original sin as sexual guilt. However, although the novel sets out to demonstrate the psycho-sexual drive to particular forms of social and political conformism, the direct equation of Marcello's Fascism with his homosexuality does little to illuminate the historical experience of Italians, or the complex and dynamic links between politics and sexuality.

In an interview with Enzo Siciliano, Moravia invites a psychoanalytic interpretation of the text, whereby Marcello's adherence to Fascism is explained in terms of sexual guilt and fear:

In *Il conformista*, la cui gestazione avrà origini freudiane, ho voluto raccontare il caso di un ragazzo che ha avuto esperienze omosessuali precoci, che ha creduto di aver ucciso un uomo, e che per questo si sente segnato a dito, si sente un elemento anti-sociale e fa di tutto per integrarsi nella società che gli sembra voglia espellerlo. Vuole cancellare da sé ciò che considera una macchia d'origine, un peccato. Per far questo accetta anche la criminalità della società cui anela. Gli viene chiesto come prezzo d'integrazione il delitto? Non ci pensa due volte: lui paga l'integrazione col delitto.¹

Moravia identifies the link made by the novel between Fascism and sexuality: 'volevo amalgamarvi quello che avevo conosciuto del fascismo. Il tutto retto sull'equazione: il protagonista è fascista perchè è omosessuale' (Siciliano,

¹ Enzo Siciliano, *Alberto Moravia* (Milan, 1982), p. 71.

p. 72). Moravia sees both Fascism and Catholicism as based on repression of a certain kind, and in discussing Fascism points to the moral degradation of the 'Italia repressa di allora':

Capii che i valori negativi a livello personale si capovolgevano in valori positivi a livello nazionale. La miseria, la meschinità, della piccola borghesia diventavano patriottismo. La soffocazione morale, l'alienazione psicologica, addirittura l'omosessualità e tutto ciò che vi poteva essere di più torbido nell'Italia repressa di allora, improvvisamente poteva illuminarsi, fiammeggiare fino a riscattarsi in nome della patria. L'amor patrio di quegli anni è fatto di un sacco di porcherie. (Siciliano, p. 75)

In the figure of Marcello the equation of political choice and sexual inclination is seen to be based in sexual trauma and repression dating from early childhood; Moravia here follows Freud somewhat sketchily, and takes the findings of psychoanalysis to unprecedented conclusions. Marcello's difficulties are seen to originate in his relationship with his family, particularly his mother; it would appear that the Oedipus complex has never been resolved. Dissolution of the complex follows the recognition by the child of the mother's difference, the realization that she cannot be his exclusive love-object. Marcello's mother, however, 'non aveva mai separato la propria vita da quella di lui'.² The sight of his parents having intercourse shakes Marcello's feeling of closeness to his mother, while home life is described as 'disordinata e poco affettuosa' (p. 21).

The trauma of Marcello's encounter with Lino, together with the incident with his school-mates who dress him up and mock him as 'Marcellina', lead him to the attempted repression of his homosexual impulses. He later congratulates himself on remaining undisturbed by the memory of Lino, believing, ironically, that the episode has left no mental or psychological residue or scar. There is already some equivocation here, however, as homosexual indifference is expressed by the metaphor of lack of heterosexual desire:

Non soltanto, infatti, non provava alcun rimorso ma neppure sfioravano la superficie immobile della sua coscienza i sentimenti di compassione, di rancore e di ripugnanza per Lino che per molto tempo gli erano sembrati indivisibili da quel ricordo. Non provava nulla, insomma, e un impotente disteso al fianco di un corpo nudo e desiderabile di donna, non era più inerte del suo animo di fronte a quel remoto avvenimento della sua vita. (p. 67)

It is not Marcello's homosexuality but the repression of it which ties him to a specific cultural and political stance. To this extent, Moravia's thesis echoes the later work of Freud, as well as that of members of the Frankfurt school

² Alberto Moravia, *Il conformista* (Milan, 1957), p. 14. Subsequent references to this edition are given in the text by page number.

such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse.³ In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud puts forward his philosophy of culture which posits constraint of the libido as a precondition for the development of civilization:

It is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilisation is built upon renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilisation presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression or something else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies. This 'cultural privation' dominates the whole field of social relations between human beings.⁴

Marcuse makes a similar point in *Eros and Civilisation*: he writes that 'Civilisation begins when the primary objective — namely, integral satisfaction of needs — is effectively renounced'.⁵

Moravia's statement that 'Il protagonista è fascista perchè è omosessuale' is, however, an oversimplification of the issues. Political opposition to both left- and right-wing ideology has consistently been couched in accusations of sexual deviancy or inadequacy. Leaders of the anti-communist crusade in 1950s America, for example, vilified the 'effete' character of their opponents whom they labelled 'pinko queers'; pamphlets were issued about the 'homintern', a supposed homosexual conspiracy to take over the world. Fears of 'reds under the bed' take on new shades of meaning in this context. More recently, consideration of the political motivation of the women at Greenham Common has been consistently subordinated by the popular press to a prurient condemnation of their perceived sexual 'abnormalities'. In *White Hero, Black Beast*, Paul Hoch suggests that homosexuality and left-wing politics both become identified as a threat to class-stratified industrial capitalist society, which depends on competitive masculinity to carry out its work and warfare. Sexual repression and economic scarcity give masculinity its main significance as a symbol of economic status and sexual opportunity; Hoch concludes that 'sexual repression is thus one of the fundamental bases

³ 'The fascist dictatorships were assumed [by Marxist analysis] to be based largely on force rather than consent, and hence basically unstable. It was as much the belief that the fascist regimes had alienated their original mass support by their policies, as the assumption of inevitable capitalist collapse, that created the exaggerated optimism about fascism's revolutionary overthrow. The Frankfurt school's investigation into the mass psychology and cultural appeal of fascism thus filled a considerable gap in Marxist analysis.' David Beetham, Introduction to *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists from the Inter-War Period*, edited by David Beetham (Manchester, 1983), p. 59.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey (London, 1955), p. 97.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* (London, 1969), p. 16.

of class society — it is a kind of political repression transmitted through the nuclear family'.⁶

Theoretical approaches to the links between authoritarian politics and sexuality include studies by Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), Theodor Adorno (*The Authoritarian Personality*), Maria Antonietta Macciocchi ('La sexualité féminine dans l'idéologie fasciste') and Susan Sontag ('Fascinating Fascism').⁷ It is the central issue of *Il conformista*. One of the principal problems with the book, however, is its failure to connect the two in any coherent way. Marcello Clerici becomes a Fascist because he fears abnormality. Alienated from his own body and from others by a sense of guilt, the young Marcello strives for a '*comunione* multiforme' (p. 82, my emphasis) with others by imitative behaviour, fabricating an identity which will approximate as closely as possible to his vision of 'normalità'. Marcello conforms to the tasteless vulgarity of the petit-bourgeois class in which Fascism found its most fertile soil. Since the prevailing stance is Fascist, then Marcello too is Fascist. The self-imposed mask becomes the face; for Marcello to reject Fascist ideology would mean a literal collapse and disintegration of identity. It is paradoxically his search for 'comunione', a religious, transcendent sense of belonging, that marks Marcello's difference and isolation from others, and with the fall of Fascism he recognizes the nature of his failure: 'aveva fatto quello che aveva fatto per motivi soltanto suoi e fuori da ogni comunione con gli altri; cambiare, anche se gli fosse stato consentito, avrebbe voluto dire annullarsi' (pp. 266–67, my emphasis). The majority of Italians easily accommodated themselves to the astonishingly swift fall of Fascism in 1943. The regime had dragged the country into an unpopular and destructive war which, as soon became clear, it had little chance of winning. Political sentiment underwent a rapid change, and with the coup against Mussolini people saw no contradiction in declaring themselves anti-Fascist.

Marcello Clerici, on the other hand, has literally identified himself with Fascism. His political involvement is portrayed as an expiation of an individual sense of moral guilt; 'Marcello si era persuaso di una rozza e tutta infantile

⁶ Paul Hoch, *White Hero, Black Beast* (London, 1979), p. 101. The arch-male Norman Mailer sees repression as the direct cause of aggressive violence; in *The Presidential Papers* he writes that 'The accusation of homosexuality arouses a major passion in many men; they spend their lives resisting it with a biological force. There is a kind of man who spends every night of his life getting drunk in a bar, he rants, he brawls, he ends in a small rumble on the street; women say "For God's sake, he's homosexual. Why doesn't he just turn queer and get his suffering over with!"'. Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (London, 1964), p. 243.

⁷ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, translated by Vincent R. Carfagno (London, 1975); Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950); Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, 'La sexualité féminine dans l'idéologie fasciste', *Tel Quel* (Summer 1976), 26–42; Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York, 1980).

idea dell'espiazione, per cui un delitto di Stato, eseguito collettivamente, varrà a cancellare ogni sua colpa individuale', writes Carlo Muscetta.⁸ Yet his adherence to Fascism, too, is an essentially private and alienating experience, despite the pretensions to 'comunione' and 'normalità'. *Il conformista* can tell us nothing of the mass, popular appeal of Fascism. Marcello is seen as an exception, an oddity, by his colleagues and fellow activists; they are surprised, for example, by his readiness to mix business with pleasure, combining his honeymoon with a political mission that will result in the murder of a former teacher.

The form that Marcello's politics take would seem to be a matter of chance and circumstance; the nature of Fascism is irrelevant to Marcello's compliance with the regime. It is for this reason that the psychological approach of the novel is inadequate in its account of repressed sexuality as the primary basis for Fascism. This is not to discredit a psychological perspective on political ideology in favour of, for example, a strictly economic model, for Marxist analysis in the 1930s clearly failed to grasp the full cultural implications of Fascism. Marcello's reasons for supporting the regime should be seen, however, as exceptional; Fascism was a convergence of sociological, political and cultural as well as purely psychological factors.

Neither does the novel indicate the specific *difference* of Fascism in its psychological and sexual appeal. Theodor Adorno emphasizes that Fascism's techniques of group psychology are not employed by other groups seeking mass support: he sees the relationship between Fascism and the individual psyche as one of exploitation of sexual psychology for economic and political ends: 'psychological dispositions do not cause Fascism; rather, Fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely non-psychological reasons of self-interest'.⁹ In 'Fascinating Fascism', Susan Sontag discusses the 'sexiness' of Fascism, specifically as embodied in the Nazi SS uniform. Sontag links Fascism with the extreme limit of sexual practice, sado-masochism: 'The SS was the ideal incarnation of Fascism's overt assertion of the right of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior . . . the SS was designed as an élite military community, that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful (p. 99). If Fascism finds its psychological basis in sexual repression, unresolved guilts and fears, it also expresses that sexuality in the eroticizing of its rhetoric and propaganda. Several writers have pointed to the regressive, libidinal nature of the crowd which Fascist demagogues exploit freely. In his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, a work whose publication in 1922 coincided with the

⁸ Carlo Muscetta, *Realismo, neorealismo, controrealismo* (Milan, 1976), p. 322.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', *Soziologische Schriften*, 1, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8 (Frankfurt, 1980).

establishment of Fascist power in Italy, Freud linked strong group ties such as those experienced in a crowd or mob, to unexpressed homosexual desires: 'It seems certain that homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual tendencies'.¹⁰ He also writes that 'it would be enough to say that in a group the individual is brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instincts' (*Group Psychology*, p. 74). Adolf Hitler likened the crowd to a woman, subject to the dominant will of the male; he may well have known of the theories of Gustave Le Bon in *Psychologie des foules* (1895). Adorno links the passive nature of the crowd exploited by Mussolini and Hitler with the repressed, unconscious homosexual instincts identified by Freud: 'Hitler, by the way, was well aware of the libidinal source of mass formation through surrender when he attributed specifically female, passive features to the participants of his meetings, and thus also hinted at the role of unconscious homosexuality in mass psychology' (Adorno, p. 413). Susan Sontag writes of the 'predilections of the fascist leaders themselves for sexual metaphors. Like Nietzsche and Wagner, Hitler regarded leadership as sexual mastery of the "feminine" masses, as rape . . . the leader makes the crowd come' (Sontag, p. 102). She goes on to compare Fascism's exploitation of repressed sexuality with left-wing approaches, and reiterates Adorno's conclusions about the difference between them: 'Left-wing movements have tended to be unisex and asexual in their imagery. Certainly Nazism is "sexier" than Communism' (Sontag, p. 102).

In *Il conformista* Marcello Clerici conforms, not to an ideology which will by its nature relieve him of sexual guilt, but to a mistaken notion of similarity with his fellow men in adhering to the dominant political doctrine. He participates in 'normalità', or what he perceives to be the common ground of belief and practice. His abstract notion of 'normalità' as homogeneous conformism, however, splinters under the pressures of everyday experience, as he is constantly made aware of the difference of others:

Pensava di essere normale, simile a tutti gli altri, quando si raffigurava la folla in astratto, come un grande esercito positivo e accomunato dagli stessi sentimenti, dalle stesse idee, dalle stesse mete, del quale era consolante far parte. Ma appena affioravano fuori da quella folla gli individui, l'illusione della normalità si infrangeva contro la loro diversità, egli non si riconosceva affatto in loro e provava insieme ripugnanza e distacco. (p. 72)

Marcello's experience of Fascism is that it gives him a desirable image of himself as sexually 'normal', or heterosexual. His participation in this supposed homogeneous mass is primarily an intellectual rather than

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition* (see note 4), Vol. XVIII, 141.

emotional experience. The irony of his situation is that sexuality is seen in the novel to be unorthodox, equivocal and resistant to definition.

Giulia, who initially appears to embody the normal, healthy sexual ideal, has had not only an aged lover but also a lesbian relationship. Lina, Quadri's wife, is lesbian. Quadri's continuing marriage to Lina, given the absence in the text of any sexual feeling, suggests impotence, a parallel to the impotence of the bourgeois anti-Fascist movement and the inability of the 'fuorusciti' to bring about any significant change in the political situation in Italy. Quadri is an 'intellettuale negativo e impotente' (p. 168) and his virtual self-immolation is an empty gesture. Indeed, the most pragmatic political point of the text is its criticism of the 'fuorusciti', who failed adequately to analyse the nature of Fascism and whose resistance slipped into a politically incoherent form of idealism. Marcello's mother is having what he considers to be a degrading affair with her chauffeur. The rigid orthodoxies of Fascism and Catholicism, and their strictures on sexual behaviour, are undermined by the polymorphous nature of sexuality in the novel, its ambiguities and refusal to conform to ideological patterns.

Faced with a range of diverse sexual practices, Marcello conflates his notion of 'normalità', with a religious, rather than legalistic, concept of innocence: 'la normalità, come capì ad un tratto, non consisteva tanto nel tenersi lontani da certe esperienze, quanto nel modo di valutarle' (p. 151). Others are normal, and innocent, insofar as they do not share his alienating sense of guilt: 'la normalità per lui si chiamava normalità appunto perché ne era escluso' (p. 101). Marcello's intellectual conformism is contrasted with Giulia's 'innocenza quasi animalesca' (p. 143), and this innocence is seen to be an innate, *natural* quality: 'Per Giulia, la normalità non era, come per lui, da trovare né da ricostruire; c'era; e lei vi stava immersa e, qualsiasi cosa fosse avvenuta, non ne sarebbe mai uscita' (p. 144). Thus there is no contradiction between her supposed 'normalità' and her behaviour, between her sexual lust and the purity represented by her wedding dress:

Si baciaron al buio, impacciati dal velo, e una volta di più, mentre la fidanzata si stringeva e dimenava contro di lui e sospirava e lo baciava, Marcello pensò che ella agiva con innocenza, senza avvertire alcuna contraddizione tra quest'abbraccio e l'abito nuziale: una prova di più che alle persone normali era lecito prendersi la massima libertà con la normalità stessa. (p. 102)

Giulia's physical conformity to the Fascist ideal of buxom womanhood, together with her strong desire for children, can only reinforce Marcello's perception of her as 'normal'. Maurizio Cesari has quoted examples of censorship which reveals Fascism's attempt to circumscribe the freedom of the woman by regulating her bodily shape to accord with her supposed

maternal, strictly unerotic function;¹¹ Giulia at twenty years old 'era formosa come una donna di trenta, di una formosità poco fine e quasi popolana ma fresca e solida che rivelava insieme l'età giovanile e non si capiva quale illusione e gioia carnale' (p. 85).

Before marrying Giulia, Marcello must submit to a ritual act of confession. 'Normality', Fascism and Catholicism, each extract from the individual an act of faith, a kind of rite of passage; as Moravia has commented in relation to Fascism: 'gli viene chiesto come prezzo d'integrazione il delitto? Non ci pensa due volte: lui paga l'integrazione col delitto' (Siciliano, p. 71). This is just one of the points where Fascist ideology and Catholic dogma appear to coverage.

There was very little conflict between Church and State in Fascist Italy; indeed, struggles were not over ideology or even morality, but access to greater power. The Patti Lateranensi of 1929, while appearing to give the church considerable temporal power, effectively put a holy seal of approval on the public and political jurisdiction of the Fascists over the Catholic population. Despite the claim to the contrary of revisionist Catholic historians,¹² the Church traded spiritual for temporal power, taking upon itself the role of policing the politics of the faithful (as indeed it still does to an extent). Ignazio Silone wrote in 1934 of the inevitable collusion of Fascist movements with the institutions and traditional structures of society that represent and protect capital: he associates the Catholic church to this extent with the army, the judiciary and the universities.¹³ In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Wilhelm Reich goes further than Silone's more orthodox Marxist analysis, and pursues the common psychological source of both Fascism and mysticism. Reich claims that Fascism is an extreme example of religious mysticism grounded in sexual perversion:

Fascism is supposed to be a reversion to paganism and an archenemy of religion. Far from it — Fascism is the supreme expression of religious mysticism. As such, it comes into being in a peculiar social form. Fascism countenances that religiosity that stems from sexual perversion, and it transforms the masochistic character of the old patriarchal religion of suffering into a sadistic religion. In short, it transposes religion from the 'otherworldliness' of the philosophy of suffering to the 'this worldliness' of sadistic murder. (p. 17)

¹¹ 'È stato raccomandato di evitare la riproduzione di figure di donne-serpenti che rappresentano la negazione della vera donna, la cui funzione è di procreare figli sani. Si è perciò fatto invito di scrivere articoli contro la moda della siluetta.' Maurizio Cesari, *La censura nel periodo fascista* (Naples, 1978), p. 36.

¹² A. C. Jemolo, *Church and State in Italy 1850-1950* (Oxford, 1960) is one example.

¹³ 'Nowadays it is impossible to fight the revolutionary worker's movement without falling prey to high finance. All Fascist movements that have achieved power have confirmed this law. There is not one Fascist party so far that has been able to avoid this fate. The support of high finance for the Fascist cause inevitably brings in its wake the support of the whole traditional superstructure of society — all the established political parties and institutions, from the general staff to the church, from the judiciary to the universities.' Ignazio Silone, conclusion to *Fascism* (1934) and quoted in *Marxists in Face of Fascism* (see note 3).

The structural organization of Fascism, Reich goes on to say, parallels that of institutionalized mysticism. His description of the situation in Germany is equally applicable to Mussolini's Italy of the state-capitalist Russia under Stalin: 'The structure of Fascism is characterised by metaphysical thinking, unorthodox faith, obsession with abstract ethical ideals, and belief in the divine predestination of the Führer' (p. 114).

In her article 'Sexualité féminine dans l'idéologie fasciste', Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi points to the appropriation by Fascism of religious, liturgical language and imagery. Women were particularly vulnerable to the persuasive power of the liturgical discourse of Fascism. For Macciocchi, 'le fascisme offre une relève de la garde à l'église, grâce à la soumission des femmes, dont il canalise les instincts dans une sorte de religiosité nouvelle, servant de support aux dictatures de masse ou aux régimes totalitaires de masse' (p. 27). According to this view, the Duce becomes a kind of potent Pope, a semi-divine spiritual leader to whom women owed their first sexual allegiance. This was symbolized, says Macciocchi, during the Ethiopian war effort when Mussolini asked women to give up their gold wedding-rings: 'en échange le Duce distribuait un petit cercle de fer, comme s'il était devenu le *Mari*, qui conduisait à de nouvelles noces, des noces mystiques, sous le signe de la Mort (la guerre) et des Naissances (les berceaux)' (p. 32).¹⁴ Macciocchi underlines the similarity of Fascism and Catholicism in their generation of comparable, sacrificial, masochistic discourses; the aim of both, she says, 'c'est la mort de la sexualité: les femmes sont toujours appelées au cimetière pour honorer les morts en guerre; pour leur apporter des couronnes, et elles sont exhortées à offrir leur fils à la patrie' (p. 35). Adorno similarly notes the appropriation of religious language and imagery, and sees the conflation of political and mystical discourse as an instance of the regressive, ritualistic (and murderous) underside of Fascism: 'religious language and religious forms are utilized in order to lend the impression of a sanctioned ritual that is performed again and again by the same community'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Macciocchi quotes the first congress of Fascist women in Venice, 1923 as an example of the sexual discourse generated by the appeal of Fascism to women: 'Les femmes ont mis au monde les enfants mais vous [Mussolini], vous les avez inspirés et conçus. Il est vrai que c'est au plus profond de la femme que l'on trouve l'arôme stimulant de la vigueur mâle du combattant que nous vous sentons prêt à répandre à pleines mains, de même que nous, à pleines mains, nous avons donné nos fils à la patrie'. Macciocchi, 'Sexualité féminine,' pp. 36–37. Of the same phenomenon, Elsa Emmy has written that, under Fascism, 'bisognava annientare nella donna ogni istinto sessuale con lo scopo di consolidare il legame con la famiglia autoritaria . . . Egli [Mussolini] era sempre presente, infatti, anche a letto poiché la donna in quel frangente evocava il suo sguardo magnetico, e l'uomo la Sua potenza virile . . . Si affoga in un mare di misticismo coatto, di fermentazioni criminali, di retorica . . .' Elsa Emmy, *L'arte cambia sesso* (Catania, 1975), p. 67.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, 'Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda', *Soziologische Schriften*, 1, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8 (Frankfurt, 1980).

'Normal' sexual behaviour, according to both Catholicism and the Fascist state, is defined by the priest who hears Marcello's confession. Normality is further divorced from sexuality by the Catholic church, which rejects not only homosexuality but all sexual activity whose aim is not reproductive. After confessing the episode with Lino, Marcello gives an account of his subsequent sexual activity:

'Sono un uomo, per questo aspetto, simile a tutti gli altri . . . ho conosciuto la donna per la prima volta in una casa di tolleranza, a diciassette anni . . . e poi non ho mai avuto rapporti che con donne.'

'E questa la chiami una vita sessuale normale?'

'Sì, perché?'

'Ma anche questo è anormale' disse il prete vittoriosamente, 'anche questo è peccato . . . non te l'hanno mai detto, povero figliolo? . . . Normale è sposarsi e aver rapporti con la moglie al fine di mettere al mondo la prole'. (p. 109)

Both Church and State prescribed exclusively genital, monogamous and procreative sexual behaviour. Under Mussolini's regime unmarried people and childless couples were taxed, and fathers were given jobs in preference over their childless rivals. Women who bore numerous children were invited to special celebrations and given prizes; the optimum number of children was considered to be twelve. In the scene with the priest, political and religious systems converge to protect their mutual interests; while Fascism adopted the sexual mores of the Catholic church, the priesthood act as guardians of political orthodoxy, and the priest finishes their discussion by enquiring into Marcello's political attitudes. Indeed, the priest is compared directly to a police officer in his response to Marcello's confession: 'Niente orrore, niente meraviglia, soltanto uno sdegno di ufficio per non aver confessato a tempo un peccato così grave. E ne fu grato al prete, come sarebbe stato grato ad un commissario di polizia che, di fronte a quella stessa confessione, senza perdersi in commenti, si fosse affrettato a dichiararlo in arresto' (p. 107).

In his acquiescence to the higher aims of Church and state, his attempt to free himself of guilt by ritual (marriage to Giulia, or the ritual expiation of Lino's murder by collective crime), Marcello consistently seeks a mystical, transcendental solution to his dilemma; he tries to reach a state of grace through atonement, a ritualistic, and in his case masochistic process of confession, judgement, punishment and absolution. His surname, Clerici, suggests a participation or involvement in the ritual processes of the Catholic church. Marcello seeks absolution, without finding it, from his childhood friend Roberto, Roberto, insieme con la sua solidarietà, gli aveva negato l'assoluzione che egli cercava (p. 12)

his mother,

Lei soltanto poteva condannarlo o assolverlo e, comunque, far rientrare il suo atto in un ordine purchessia (p. 13)

Desiderava questa scoperta e questa punizione (p. 19)

from the priest,

Egli avrebbe saputo raccontare il fatto come era realmente avvenuto e il prete, dopo il solito esame e le solite raccomandazioni, non avrebbe potuto non assolverlo (p. 104)

and from Giulia

In realtà, aveva previsto e anche sperato l'orrore e un severo giudizio. E invece non trovava che il solito amore cieco e solidale. (p. 275)

In the absence of the desired absolution Marcello invokes a ruling fatality in his life, thus evading moral responsibility for his actions and passively submitting to his burden of guilt.¹⁶

Metaphors and images in the novel are primarily religious. Marcello has on him the mark of Cain (p. 142). Quadri is seen, ironically, as priest speaking in 'tono dolce, accorato e struggente come un prete che parli ad un ateo' (p. 198), as saint (described by Lina on page 200 as 'una specie di santo'), and apostle for the bourgeois anti-Fascist movement directed from Paris: 'Era diventato ben presto uno dei capi dell'anti-fascismo, forse il più abile, il più preparato, il più aggressivo. La sua specialità, a quanto sembrava, era l'apostolato' (p. 171). The murder of Quadri is justified by Marcello not in terms of political expediency or pragmatism but as mystical expiation for his previous sin: 'Così, la morte di Lino, che era stata la causa prima della sua oscura tragedia, sarebbe stata risolta e annullata da quella di Quadri, proprio come, un tempo, l'offerta espiatoria di una vittima innocente, risolveva e annullava l'empietà di un precedente misfatto' (p. 249).

Marcello's role in the assassination of Quadri is repeatedly compared to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, or Peter's denial of him. The three telephone calls which Marcello receives on page 174, for example, are reminiscent of the three cock-crows. Marcello himself is aware of the parallels; indeed, he seems to seek them out:

Marcello rabbrivì e, mentre il pendolo continuava a battere quei suoi colpi pieni di lugubre e solenne sonorità, tese la mano a stringere la mano che Quadri gli tendeva. Il pendolo battè con forza l'ultimo colpo ed egli, allora, premendo la sua contro la palma di Quadri ricordò che quella stretta, secondo gli accordi, doveva designare la vittima a Orlando e provò, tutto ad un tratto, quasi la tentazione di chinarsi e baciare Quadri sulla guancia sinistra, proprio come aveva fatto Giuda al quale, scherzosamente, si era paragonato quel pomeriggio. (pp. 224–25)

The religious framework shared by the political opponents Marcello and Quadri marks both political ideologies as inauthentic. While Marcello sees himself as Judas, Quadri is an ironic Christ figure, a willing sacrificial victim

¹⁶ The child Marcello is convinced of a 'cerchio maledetto dei presagi e delle fatalità' (p. 28); he is 'predestinato a compiere atti di crudeltà e di morte' (p. 18). This refusal of responsibility persists into Marcello's adult life: 'Che poteva fare, aveva ancora pensato, così egli era e non poteva cambiarsi' (p. 142), and again, 'Lui era lui e il giovane era il giovane e non c'era niente da fare' (p. 188).

and martyr to the cause of anti-Fascism, which is the only path to redemption: 'Non sa che i movimenti politici hanno bisogno di martiri e vittime?', he asks Marcello (p. 233). His statement to Marcello that 'Lei, in realtà, ha mosso un primo passo verso la redenzione' (p. 241) is ironic; for Marcello the word 'redemption' signifies something completely different: the murder of Quadri himself. As Umberto Eco says in *Il nome della rosa*, 'Possibile che cose tanto equivoche possan dirsi in modo così univoco?'.

In *L'età del fascismo*, Cristina Benussi writes of the spiritual image which Fascism promoted of itself, effected through ritual and the demand for faith: 'Il fascismo si era presentato come una rivoluzione spirituale identificata con i valori del patriottismo, dell'ordine e della fedeltà allo stato, propagandato attraverso un rituale di massa'.¹⁷ In *Il conformista*, Fascism is seen to have spiritual authority even over the Church, and Marcello's primary allegiance is to the State:

Egli non doveva parlare della missione, ecco tutto: questo glielo intimava con autorità quella stessa coscienza che era rimasta muta e inerte allorché aveva annunciato al prete: io ho ucciso. Non del tutto convinto, cercò una volta di più di parlare, ma sentì di nuovo, con lo stesso automatismo di una serratura che scatti se si gira la chiave, quella ripugnanza fermargli la lingua, impedirgli la parola. Così, di nuovo e con tanta maggiore evidenza, gli era confermata la forza dell'autorità rappresentata, laggiù al ministero, dallo spregevole ministro e dal suo non meno spregevole segretario. Autorità misteriosa, come tutte le autorità, la quale, a quanto pareva, affondava le radici nel più profondo dell'animo suo, mentre la Chiesa, apparentemente tanto più autorevole, non raggiungeva che la superficie. (pp. 110-11)

A new concept of love is posited in the novel, an alternative to Fascism as a source of moral judgement and commitment, but then revealed to be equally spurious as a moral basis. Marcello believes for a short time that he has found, in Lina, a spiritual love which transcends the demands made upon him by society. This love is equated with 'disponibilità', freedom:

Marcello provò ad un tratto un sentimento nuovo per lui, inebriante, di libertà e di disponibilità; come se, improvvisamente, qualche gran peso che l'opprimeva, gli fosse stato tolto di dosso . . . Che cos'era l'amore per cui adesso, come si rendeva conto, stava forse per disfare tutta la propria vita, abbandonare la moglie appena sposata, tradire la fede politica, gettarsi allo sbaraglio di un'avventura irreparabile? (pp. 203-04)

Lina is seen in some sense as a corrective to the experience with Lino; the coincidence of names suggests that her function is to erase the previous episode or be superimposed on it:

Il ribrezzo della decadenza, della corruzione e dell'impurità che l'aveva perseguito tutta la vita e che il suo matrimonio con Giulia non aveva mitigato, adesso comprendeva che soltanto la luce radiosa, di cui era circondata la fronte di Lina, poteva dissiparlo . . . Così, naturalmente, spontaneamente, per sola forza d'amore, egli

¹⁷ Cristina Benussi, *L'età del fascismo* (Palermo, 1978), p. 24.

ritrovava attraverso Lina, la normalità tanto sognata. Ma non la normalità quasi burocratica che aveva perseguito per tutti quegli anni, bensì altra normalità di specie quasi angelica. (p. 207)

Marcello recognized his own 'disponibilità' before meeting Lina. On page 176, for example, 'lo colpì la propria disponibilità, nonostante tutti gli impegni che l'opprimevano'. 'Disponibilità' is the potentially limitless freedom of action flowing from the inescapable absurdity of his condition: "Ecco", pensò freddamente, "io sono quel fuoco laggiù nella notte . . . divamperò e mi spegnerò senza ragione, senza seguito . . . un po' di distruzione sospesa nel buio" (p. 154). Yet his freedom to love Lina appeals to an alternative transcendental order of things indicated by the 'luce radiosa di cui era circondata la fronte di Lina'. Lina's refusal to play Beatrice to his Dante reveals the inadequacy of Marcello's concept of freedom which, grounded in a superstitious mysticism, divorces itself from social and moral responsibility.

The difficulty of dismissing the past is forcefully demonstrated by the disturbing encounter with the old Englishman; this re-enactment of the episode with Lino, occurring immediately after Marcello's declaration to Lina herself, refutes his hopes of erasing the incident:

Avrebbe voluto non aver mai provato tanto orrore alla sola vista di una macchina simile a quella di Lino; e già questo era motivo per lui di turbamento. Ma ciò che lo spaventava di più era il vivo, torbido, acre senso di soggezione, di impotenza e di servitù che si accompagnava al ribrezzo. Era come se tutti quegli anni non fossero passati o, peggio, fosser passati invano. (p. 208)

It is not until the simultaneous fall of Fascism and the reappearance of Lino, the collapse of political ideology and the moral and sexual guilt that led him to conform to it, that Marcello is able to conceive of a new ideal which transcends sexuality. He sees love as an illusion in a world dominated by sexual desire:

Capiva di aver creduto per qualche ora, durante quel pomeriggio, all'amore; e si rendeva conto di aggirarsi, invece, in un mondo profondamente sconvolto e inaridito, in cui vero amore non si dava, ma soltanto rapporto dei sensi, dal più naturale e comune al più abnorme e insolito. Non era stato amore, certo, quello di Lina per lui; non era amore quello di Lina per Giulia; d'amore non si poteva parlare nei suoi rapporti con la moglie; anche Giulia, così indulgente, quasi tentata dalle profferte di Lina, non amava lui di vero amore. (p. 218)

The new source of value and ethics for Marcello is a reinterpretation of the consequences of the existentialist perception of the individual's relationship to the world as absurd. Marcello perceives a universal condition of absurdity, and begins to acknowledge that any mystical 'comunione' through some conformist notion of normality which will identify him with the society in which he lives, is an illusion:

Il primo e maggiore errore era stato di voler uscire dalla propria anormalità, di cercare una normalità purchessia attraverso la quale comunicare con gli altri. Quest'errore

era nato da un istinto potente; disgraziatamente la normalità in cui quest'istinto si era imbattuto, non era che una forma vuota dentro la quale tutto era anormale e gratuito. Al primo urto, questa forma era andata a pezzi. (p. 267)

Marcello now defines normality as the search to escape the consequences of original sin: 'la normalità era proprio questo affannoso quanto vano desiderio di giustificare la propria vita insidiata dalla colpa originaria e non il miraggio fallace che aveva inseguito fin dal giorno del suo incontro con Lino' (p. 287). Lino, in some ways an icon of Marcello's homosexual desire, has not been killed; indeed, it is he who points out to Marcello that his life has been regulated by a wholly illusory concept of guilt and innocence: 'Ma tutti, Marcello, siamo stati innocenti — non sono forse stato innocente anch'io? E tutti la perdiamo la nostra innocenza, in un modo o nell'altro — è la normalità' (p. 287). The past is to be reckoned with, but no longer accepted as a burden of guilt: 'Questa volta non ci sarebbe stato bisogno di giustificazione e di comunione, pensò ancora, ed egli era risoluto a non permettere che il delitto commesso davvero, quello di Quadri, lo avvelenasse con i tormenti di una vana ricerca di purificazione e di normalità. Quello che era stato era stato' (p. 293). Marcello restates the classic existentialist view of man's continual, daily struggle in the face of an absurd and indifferent world: 'Vivere, per gli uomini, non voleva dire lasciarsi andare alla pace torpida offerta dalla natura indulgente, bensì essere continuamente in lotta e in agitazione, risolvere ogni momento un minimo problema dentro i limiti di problemi più vasti, contenuti a loro volta nel problema complessivo, appunto, della vita' (p. 292). The new moral order entails not limitless freedom but commitment and responsibility, centred on the other. Marcello's first act of spontaneous, selfless love is also his final speech, a prayer that Giulia and his daughter Lucilla should be saved: 'Dio, fa che non siano colpite . . . sono innocenti' (p. 297). His manner of death parallels that of Quadri and can be seen as the true moment of expiation in the novel, for the real crime.

Il conformista appeared in 1957, fourteen years after the overthrow of Fascism in Italy. The novel appeared at a moment when the Christian Democrats had gained effective political control of the country; the PCI had lost their struggle for power, and their alliance with the Socialists was seriously weakened. Catholicism was a revitalized force both in the national consciousness and in politics. Fulvio Longobardi sees *Il conformista* as an accommodation with the past by a newly strengthened bourgeoisie; according to this account, Marcello's story amounts to a declaration of innocence by the middle classes, a refusal to acknowledge the burden and guilt of Fascism, the statement of a clear conscience:

La società a cui Marcello appartiene, rimasta intatta, può raccontare il proprio passato come un errore, un equivoco: il fascismo è stato, ora dice, un violento e sproporzionato difendersi per un peccato, un delitto che non è stato commesso . . .

Il conformista, assai più che il romanzo, non diciamo del fascismo, ma di un fascista, pare il libro sommario e frettoloso del modo frettoloso e sommario con cui la borghesia degli anni '50, ripresa tranquillità dalla minaccia sovvertitrice, rigettati i comunisti dal governo, all'inizio della ripresa industriale, si dichiara appena nata, ignara e innocente di fascismo.¹⁸

However, the novel is more than an oblique reflection of the inauthentic position of the post-war Italian bourgeoisie with regard to their own past, vital though this is, for the ending to the novel is more ambivalent than Longobardi's analysis would allow. Marcello's solution to his problems can be seen as both regressive and ironic, in that he does not so much escape the constraints of conformism as shift them to others. That his last few words should be addressed to God is perhaps an ironic indication that his own reformed vision is largely an illusion. His new pragmatic vision defines itself against the 'pace torpida offerta dalla natura' (p. 292) and implicitly excludes both the female and those of different class and intellectual experience. Giulia is transformed into an archetype of maternal femininity and described in terms of her functions as 'la madre' (p. 294, lines 8 and 12), or as a petit-bourgeois Eve driven out of her comfortable home: 'Era veramente, pensò, Eva scacciata dall'Eden; e l'Eden era quella casa con tutte le cose modeste che conteneva: la roba negli armadi, gli utensili nella cucina, il salotto per ricevervi le amiche, le posate argentate . . .' (pp. 289-90). Her 'innocence', the consequence of her lack of participation in history, is contrasted with Marcello's 'experience', now transformed into a virtue.

The lower, peasant classes, at the only point of the novel in which they are mentioned, are similarly and summarily excluded by their *nature* from participation in Marcello's intellectual vision. Driving from the city, Marcello observes them working in the fields:

Le facce dei rari contadini che si scorgevano appoggiati alle staccionate, o in mezzo ai campi, la vanga ai piedi, non esprimevano che i soliti sentimenti di stolidità e pacifica attenzione per le cose normali, consuete, ovvie della vita. Tutta gente che pensava ai raccolti, al sole, alla pioggia, ai prezzi della derrate o, addirittura, a nulla. (p. 292)

Marcello's solution, if such it can be called, to his dilemma, is to return, indeed regress, to a perspective which is firmly and exclusively male and middle class. This new moral vision can account for sex and class difference only in terms of a revised and more insidious conformism which locates Nature in the (female) other and the intellectual workings of History with the middle-class male self. Sexuality and politics are realigned in the person of Marcello to form a vision of social relationships which is if anything more reactionary than his idiosyncratic adherence to Fascist doctrine. Marcello's untimely death as his car is strafed from the air is perhaps an indication of the

¹⁸ Fulvio Longobardi, *Moravia* (Florence, 1969), pp. 60-61.

vacuity of this new ideological perspective; his solution is no solution at all, and his reversion to heterosexuality is, like Quadri's self-martyrdom, an empty gesture. And if Marcello has no solution to the problematic appropriation and harnessing of sexuality and psychology for specific social and political forms, neither does Moravia himself. *Il conformista* raises the question not so much of sexual politics perhaps as of institutionally politicized sexuality. While the text, as I have shown, only touches on the complexities of the question, perhaps simply to have raised it is enough.

Strathclyde

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