

A Psychoanalysis of Ineptitude

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In the frequent narrative of the *inetto* in Italian literature of the 20th Century, Alberto Moravia's character Michele in *Gli indifferenti* constitutes possibly the most profound example of the literary phenomenon, typically characterized by an incapacity to interpret one's own reality, highly suspect decision making, and/or an inability to act upon instinct or even proper reasoning when it becomes available. Such man-child anti-heroes began to populate the landscape of Italian novels near the advent of the 20th century, finding themselves the subject of the great novelists of the time. Among examples such as Italo Svevo's early Alfonso or Emilio, or Luigi Pirandello's Mattia Pascal, a stark distinction emerges at the entrance of two protagonists in particular: Svevo's Zeno Cosini and Alberto Moravia's Michele Ardengo. While the topos of the *inetto*, which owes its ancestry in part to the Russian novelists like Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, has typically involved a mysterious psychological affliction, it was the analysis of Freud that introduced a revolutionary facet to literary representation and interpretation, allowing an informed methodology and approach to the creation of such figures. It is through the lens of psychoanalysis that Zeno and Michele can be singled out from the rest of the field, and it is their comparison and analysis that is the objective of this paper. Although Svevo frames his novel with a deliberate and unambiguous application of Freud's theories, it is Moravia's less obvious but more categorically identifiable portrayal that provides Michele with a stronger, psychoanalytically reinforced ineptitude, creating an *inetto* of superior psychological depth.

Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*, written in 1923 directly after the publication of Freud's discoveries (*Introduction to Psychoanalysis* debuted in 1917), is among the first novels to present this obvious influence, where psychoanalysis functions as the framework and aim of the story. With the help of a very revealing title, the principal theme of the story is immediately understood in the preface offered by Zeno's psychoanalyst, Dr. S, who explains that the novel is Zeno's autobiography written for the purpose of his therapy. Svevo's interest in psychoanalysis in large part came from his city of residence, Trieste. Trieste was at the time a territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its latest trends in art, science, and literature were mostly Viennese (Medrzak-Conway 1). This influence, as well as the presence of Dr. Edoardo Weiss,

the first of Freud's colleagues to practice his techniques in Italy, made Trieste among the first destinations of the theories and practices of psychoanalysis.

Early exposure to Freud's observations, however, did not convert Svevo into a proponent of psychoanalytic treatment. In fact, he maintained a strong skepticism about any cure resulting from the new techniques. In an interview he recalled the experience in which a friend who, while not finding a cure in the care of a psychoanalyst, returned from Vienna "abulico come prima, ma con la sua abulia aggravata dalla convinzione ch'egli, essendo fatto così, non potesse agire altrimenti. È lui che mi diede la convinzione che fosse pericoloso di spiegare ad un uomo com'era fatto" (Maloney 312). A clear distrust of the reparative power of psychoanalysis provides Svevo with motivation to demonstrate its failure instead of success as a cure, and in the novel Dr. S's therapy fails to provide Zeno the cure he was hoping for.

To Svevo, the most interesting part was not the role of treatment, but rather Freud's proposed observations of the human psyche, which provided a depth of structure for portraying human behavior and personality. Along these lines, the entry published in the 1926 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, written by Freud, lists a definition of "psychoanalysis" made up of two distinct parts, separating the method of curing neurotic disorders from the "science of subconscious mental processes" (Maloney 312). This clear division allows an author to make use of a character's psychological makeup without requiring belief in psychoanalytic treatment. After the negative experience of a nephew undergoing psychotherapy, along with his friend's further complications due to treatment in Vienna, Svevo came to his own conclusion about psychoanalysis in a letter written to fellow writer and friend Valerio Jahier: "Grande uomo quel nostro Freud, ma più per i romanzieri che per gli ammalati" (Svevo 857). The author's attitude toward treatment grants context to his novel's framework of psychoanalysis as a medium for further humanizing his protagonist.

With this means of human observation in mind, Svevo created an original depth of personality and turmoil. In choosing to portray his protagonist in search of the possible causes of his neuroses, in particular his incapacity to quit smoking, readers are confronted with a series of events constituting the causes and effects of Zeno's ineptitude. For example, a clear theme can be seen in the meaningful circle involving his difficult and awkward relationship with his father, his connection with his mentor in business affairs, Mr. Malfenti, and even his desire to marry into the Malfenti family in any way possible. The reader need not be familiar with the details of

psychoanalysis to see in Zeno a person searching for a substitute father figure, whose desperation grows each time his offer of marriage is refused by a daughter of Mr. Malfenti.

Given that the novel is written in the form of a journal, Svevo does not offer a distinct conclusion of diagnosis from Dr. S, nor any explicit commentary about the effectiveness of the psychoanalytic treatment. Moreover, Zeno does not believe he has been cured and resigns himself to his affliction. Zeno's decision to discontinue treatment, along with Dr. S's subsequent publication of Zeno's journal in an attempt to force him to return to therapy, indicate that doctor and patient are not in agreement on the clinical result. The novel's greater observation, in fact, is that a cure from psychoanalysis is extremely questionable, mirroring Svevo's documented sentiments.

Moravia also made use of Freud's theories for enhancing his protagonist's personality and behavior, thus requiring a comparison of how the title of *inetto* applies in both cases. For Zeno it is a self-diagnosis in light of his own self-image. In reality, in spite of his ill-advised decisions and turns for the worse in love and career, these pursuits actually result in successes beyond any expectation. The same kind of miraculous fortune was not in Moravia's plans for Michele, however, and not only is his protagonist a more appropriate fit for the label *inetto* (one whose efforts invariably result in failure), but the author's use of psychoanalytic theories achieves greater impact in enhancing the gravity of his protagonist's ineptitude, producing a truly original figure.

It has been pointed out that "Freud è, come ha scritto il Moravia stesso, uno dei suoi profeti" (Cecchetti 154), therefore in order to have a sense of Michele's psychological makeup, it is important to have in mind the theories that inform it. The most important theory of Freud's discoveries is the Oedipus complex. Freud was tasked with the clinical analysis of a 5-year-old boy he called Hans, who suffered from a serious fear of horses. Freud believed that his affliction was anchored by a greater subconscious fear of retribution from his father because of the boy's sexual feelings for his mother, a common occurrence in the natural process of sexual development (Freud, "Analysis" 41).

Another insight came from his experience one night at the theatre in Vienna, where he made a very similar interpretation of the Sophoclean tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*. Freud believed that by inevitably and unknowingly fulfilling his prophesied destiny of killing his father and marrying his mother, Oedipus demonstrated an innate human truth that resides in everyone,

ready to comprehend Oedipus's destiny:

His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were (Freud, *Dreams* 246-7).

According to Freud, dreams represent the realization of our desires, and he often saw how in children they commonly portray the death of the parent of the same gender. The field of psychology at the time held the theory that human sexual development begins in adolescence during physical sexual maturation. Freud instead proposed that the process began much earlier (Freud, *Essays* 39). In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud states that it is the natural behavior of infants to choose a parent as one's first sexual object, as parents provide the first models and experiences of love (Freud, *Essays* 89). Children then abandon these feelings in the period of latency, which runs up to adolescence, partially because of the boundary against incest imposed by society.

The influence of this theory on Moravia's hapless protagonist relates to the dynamics resulting from a parent chosen as a child's sexual object. Typically the sexual feelings for the parent of opposite gender result in feelings of jealousy towards the parent of the same gender. Intuitively an infant sees his father as a rival for the affection of his mother. For children, however, as with Freud's subject Hans, it becomes obvious that replacing his father is an impossible wish, and soon the feeling is overcome and put to rest during the latency period of sexual development. The sentiment remains in the subconscious beyond adolescence, and it can produce complexes if there are interruptions during sexual maturation, particularly in the case that the child cannot develop a substitute sexual object (Freud, *Essays* 91). Freud explains the importance of this complex:

It has justly been said that the Oedipus complex is the nuclear complex of the neuroses, and constitutes the essential part of their content. It represents the peak of infantile sexuality, which, through its after-effects, exercises a decisive influence on the sexuality of adults. Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis. With the progress of psycho-analytic studies the importance of

the Oedipus complex has become more and more clearly evident (Freud, *Essays* 92).

Given its significance as the basis of Freudian theory, and its frequent mention in Freud's writings, it would be difficult to imagine an author familiar with psychoanalysis who does not recognize the impact of the Oedipus complex. It is with this realization that an informed reader can analyze the situation of Michele and his behavior on a psychological level.

Crucial to Michele's ineptitude is Leo Merumeci, who, through his many roles and responsibilities, is far more than a simple friend of the family. Moravia makes no mention of who Michele's father is or why he is no longer in their lives, but Leo clearly has been making family decisions for a while, not Michele. Since he controls all financial and real estate decisions, including payment of the mortgage on the family villa himself since the mother, Mariagrazia, is out of money, Leo's title of family friend is decidedly insufficient, which causes much of the tension between him and Michele. All of these unusual responsibilities, along with his amorous relationship with Mariagrazia, or what remains of it, gives him further definition as a father figure.

When Michele first enters the family home, Moravia writes that he "ebbe tempo di percepire un *tu* che si trasformò in *lei*" while Leo and Mariagrazia were fighting (Moravia, *Indifferenti* 10). Such a change from informal to formal address indicates an intimate familiarity that they want to keep hidden from Michele. The relationship has apparently changed considerably, yet the narrator continually refers to the couple as "la madre e l'amante." In any case, Mariagrazia sees Leo as a lover and still harbors the accompanying feelings of hope and jealousy for his affection. Because of his many roles, Leo's place in the family is as close to patriarchal as possible for someone who can be called neither father nor husband, and it is Michele's interaction with Leo that reveals most of his inept moments.

Early in the story Michele goes to Leo's administrator in order to assess the situation of the mortgage, as the family's waning finances are putting them in danger of losing their villa. Seeking out this important information may suggest that he has some worries about the future of the family, or at least about his own. Since he has no job, no friends, nor any other significant relationships, an existence for Michele outside the family doesn't seem likely. Without a *pater familias*, the obvious conclusion would be that the young adult male assumes his natural place and tends to the well-being of the family. However, in his first conversation with Carla about

possibly losing the family home he tells his sister, “tutto questo mi è indifferente... e quasi mi fa piacere” (Moravia in Carpi 701). This confession becomes a *leitmotif* that sums up his attitude and principal obstacle throughout the novel: an inability to perform his perceived duty of confronting Leo.

Whether Michele wants to be the head of the house or not, the fact remains that the role is occupied by Leo. If Michele were to learn the true value of the property, he would see that selling it would leave the family with more money and options than Leo leads them to believe. Instead, upon the advice of their trusted family friend, they believe the villa to be worth considerably less and continue to rely on him to make payments in his name, thus giving him the authority to eventually take possession away from the family. Leo even pretends to offer help to Michele in his search for a job and a career in order to keep him away from the truth. Moravia diffuses their conflict with bitter irony when, in their first conversation while entering the dining room, Leo says to Michele, “cediamo il posto al padrone di casa” in his usual mocking style. In response Michele thinks to himself, “eccone una bella...: il padrone di casa sei tu” (Moravia, *Indifferenti* 12). This exchange shows the dynamic and tension between the two men in the story, and that Michele clearly considers Leo the man of the house and surrogate patriarch.

Michele’s paralyzing indifference creates his very original profile of an *inetto*. While some of the common traits of such characters may apply to him infrequently, such as poor decision-making or a lack of common sense, one area in which he is decidedly not inept is his ability to interpret his own reality. There are many examples in which he recognizes and convinces himself of a proper emotional reaction in the moment, but he can never put his interpretations into action. As a result, either he does nothing, or, forcing himself to react, he fails in his objective. The conflict that festers inside of Michele is manifested mostly in his relationship with Leo. In his internal monologues he explains the reasons why he must confront Leo, slap him, throw an ashtray at him or, in Freud’s likely opinion, replace him as the protector of the family. For Michele, however, these desires come more from his interpreted obligation to react than his actual desire. He is always struggling to feel a true passion for these feelings and tries to convince himself to do what he feels is necessary, while in the end he never succeeds because he cannot find the passionate will that action requires. Moravia represents this succinctly when, in the first scene at the dining room table, Leo delivers an insulting observation and Michele sees an opportunity for the necessary confrontation:

“Non è vero Michele, che pure a te le cose vanno male?” Anche il ragazzo prima di rispondere lo guardò. “Ecco,” pensava “ora bisognerebbe rispondergli per le rime, ingiurarlo, far nascere una bella questione e infine rompere con lui”; ma non ne ebbe la sincerità; calma mortale; ironia; indifferenza. “E se tu la facessi finita?” disse tranquillamente. “Lo sai meglio di me come vanno le cose.” (Moravia, *Indifferenti* 14).

Providing Michele with internal monologues, Moravia slowly builds a palpable tension between the two men of the family.

Michele’s indifference to his reality confuses him greatly, and his uncertainty prevents all abiding sincerity in his interaction with Leo, and, consequently, all momentum toward a meaningful change in his life. Even in rightfully defending himself from Leo’s insults, Michele finds himself void of passion in his desire to confront him. He admits that his attempt to slap Leo was a failure because his aggression lacked a necessary will. His mother, speaking of her poorly realized plans to celebrate Carla’s birthday, blames the disappointment on the worthless cook who lacks passion in his work. Michele responds, “‘Hai ragione’, approvò Michele con gravità ironica, “proprio così... senza passione non si fa nulla... io per esempio, per quanto mi sia sforzato di dare uno schiaffo a Leo, non ci sono riuscito... mi manca la passione” (Moravia, *Indifferenti* 63). This reference to his fundamental emotional state demonstrates his consciousness of what prevents him from experiencing a sincere feeling throughout the novel. The lack of passion, which is the source of the indifference on which the story hinges, is the condition that Michele suffers throughout his life. It has most often been related to the general malaise that was seen as a product of the bourgeois lifestyle in fascist Italy, where material possessions, ease of living, and shallow interpersonal relationships were seen as the cause of a common moral apathy and inertia of the time (Wlassics 302). While these social conditions can explain some of the indifference in Michele’s attitude, the anesthetized emotional disconnection he experiences when repeatedly insulted by a man who is the cause of personal and financial damage to his family comes from a deeper internal struggle, and any hope for a normal future depends on having the passionate will to confront Leo.

This conflict reaches its pinnacle in the scene of the failed murder attempt. When Michele learns unexpectedly that his sister Carla and Leo are lovers, he feels neither rage nor a need for revenge. While in front of Lisa, a friend of the family and potential lover, he doesn’t

want to appear to be anything but a loving brother who respects his sister, yet he confesses internally that his sister really isn't important to him at all. He decides in that moment to feign, even exaggerate, the obligatory rage that he is unable to find within. As a result, when he decides that he must go kill Leo, he spends the whole journey to Leo's apartment convincing himself that it is his duty to avenge Carla. Masking his uncertainty and indifference, however, fails to induce any desire for revenge whatsoever, resulting in his attempt to shoot Leo with an unloaded gun.

This failed act that Moravia writes as the climax of the novel reflects a strong influence of Freudian theory. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, Freud applies his Oedipus complex to another famous literary example. In the character of Shakespeare's Hamlet he sees a man who suffers from indecision in his attempt to commit a similar act of homicide that is not clearly explained in the course of the drama:

What is it, then, that inhibits him in accomplishing the task which his father's ghost has laid upon him? Here the explanation offers itself that it is the peculiar nature of this task. Hamlet is able to do anything but take vengeance upon the man who did away with his father and has taken his father's place with his mother—the man who shows him in realization the repressed desires of his childhood. The loathing which should have driven him to revenge is thus replaced by self-reproach, by conscientious scruples, which tell him that he himself is no better than the murderer whom he is required to punish (Freud, *The Major Works* 248).

Between the figures of Michele and Hamlet the situations and causes of indecision are different, but they are uniquely linked at the fundamental basis of neurosis. For Michele, who is aware enough to note the disastrous effects of his apathy, the act of homicide signifies a pivotal opportunity. Margaret Brose gives context to one of Michele's monologues:

This lost “paradise of reality and truth,” [...] is that place “where everything—gestures, words, feelings—would have a direct connection with the reality in which they had originated.” Michele seeks, erroneously, to attain his hypostatized edenic immediacy by means of an authentic action (primarily that of killing Leo, his mother's lover, for having deflowered Carla, his sister) (Brose 71-72).

On some level Michele sees the forced act as a way to break out of his current state of emotional

paralysis toward a reality that is true and sincere. His failure to complete the task, however, goes beyond the symptomatic, socially-induced apathy that serves as a passable explanation for his previous inaction and disconnection in the novel. Without question he has both motivation and justification to murder Leo, and he knows such feelings must reside in him somewhere. Yet, when he seizes the opportunity to shoot Leo, not only does his indifference negate all passion in his decision to act, but he mysteriously forgets to load the gun. In the moment when the stakes could not be higher and his motivation could not be greater, his failure highlights a neurotic ineptitude symptomatic of an Oedipus complex. His defensible reasons for murder along with an innate psychological instinct to supplant Leo should result in an act of triumph. By being unable to kill him, however, Moravia pushes the root of Michele's affliction beyond social discomfort, probing into the psychological bedrock of a subconscious foundation and creating an ineptitude that is as fundamental as it is insurmountable.

Such an interpretation goes from speculative to convincing when placed in context of a lesser-known work of Moravia's that predates *Gli indifferenti*. His *Dialogo tra Amleto e il principe di Danimarca* is often overlooked because although it belongs in the collection of Moravia's dramaturgy entitled *Teatro*, first published in 1958, there are several editions that leave out this small dialogue. First seen in January of 1928 in the Roman publication *I lupi*, Moravia's telling exchange is easily recognized as an initial attempt at portraying the indifference that would be interpreted by Michele a year later. Asking Hamlet's ghost for advice, the prince explains that he cannot avenge his father because committing such an act would require a corresponding sentiment that he does not possess, saying that "tutto questo mi lascia completamente indifferente" (Moravia, in Carpi 701). The prince goes a step further: "...è possibile andare da un uomo, dirgli: "me ne dispiace tanto, non ti odio, anzi mi sei simpatico, ma è necessario che ti ammazzi," e subito tirargli una revolverata?" This description, which could be a synopsis of the climax of Moravia's debut novel, gives striking evidence that the author had Hamlet's haunted indecision in mind when he was constructing the indifference and the neurosis of his protagonist Michele.

Moravia's vision of Michele, understood through this Shakespearean conflict, is not surprising, once his affinity is revealed for the preceding publication of Freud's observations. In his essay *La psicanalisi* he writes that he has always been Freudian, well before he was familiar with Freud's work (Moravia, *Psicanalisi* 85). He reinforces his shared philosophy with

Freud in an interview he gave in 1979, in which he declared, “l’incesto... è completamente contrario alla famiglia. Perché per formarla, si ha dovuto proibire ciò che realmente è naturale: il fatto di desiderare la prima donna che si vede” (Moravia, intervista TV). In another interview he is asked about his interpretation of the myth of Oedipus as “a primary social phenomenon of our age, of our youth.” Moravia affirms, referring to how recent the problem is: “Before Freud, it didn't exist. It was thought that the young loved their parents and the parents loved their offspring. Freud discovered, instead, that the family was full of guilt. And the main guilt derived from the taboo of incest” (Moravia and Bachmann 30). These statements could be taken almost verbatim from Freud’s own writings:

By the postponing of sexual maturation, time has been gained in which the child can erect [...] the barrier against incest, and [...] the moral precepts which expressly exclude from his object-choice, as being blood-relations, the persons whom he has loved in his childhood. Respect for this barrier is essentially a cultural demand made by society. Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family (Freud, *Essays* 89).

Moravia’s unequivocal affirmation of Freud’s observation gives very good reason to believe he not only openly espoused the same philosophy Freud explained in his Oedipus complex, but that it was the driving force behind the Hamletic climax of his novel exploring incest and the psychological obstacle between decision and action.

Moravia and Svevo were both masterful in using the new discovery of psychoanalysis to broaden of the personality of their characters. However, in *Gli indifferenti* an added layer of depth results in more than just providing the background causes of ineptitude—it creates a contextual foundation by defining the degree of neurotic paralysis suffered by Michele. While the author’s objective may have been in part to demonstrate the negative effects of a socio-economic environment, the climax highlights an equally compelling story of psychological characterization. Moravia makes use of contemporary theories of psychoanalysis to create an *inetto* of unique measure. As a character that can neither act on his instincts nor liberate his simplest desires for the sake of justice, nor even seize control of his own fate, Michele cuts an extremely memorable and tragic figure.

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