

DETERMINING THE SELF'S SPACE IN MORAVIA'S *GLI INDIFFERENTI*, *LA DISUBBIDIENZA*, AND *LA NOIA*

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The process of forming the self is the basis for Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*, *La disubbidienza*, and *La noia*. Taken in relationship to one another, these three novels reveal the stages involved in the movement from existence to being. The self, or being, can be understood in Kierkegaardian terms as a series of relationships that constitute a whole able to relate both to itself and outside itself. Michele of *Gli indifferenti* suffers from a conscious indifference that torments and mocks his inactivity without ever motivating him to act. He is unable to shift away from the material world that gives birth to his alienation and gain strength from an infinite source. Another character, Carla, more actively searches for a new life, but her search is misdirected. She moves to and from the source of her alienation but is unable to reconcile its duplicitous nature within a unified space, or being. Hovering at the threshold of self discovery is the adolescent Luca of *La disubbidienza*. Luca, unlike Michele and Carla, is both conscious and active. He recognizes the distance that must be traversed in order to arrive at the point where he can become a self. The adult Luca, is then Dino of *La noia* who, also alienated by his material environs, seeks the meaning necessary to move from existence to being. Though both Dino and Luca are initially misdirected and try to access the real through false images, they eventually comprehend the nature of their misapprehension and are able to obliterate their original sense of alienation.

In order to better understand the stages involved in the development and maturation of Moravia's protagonists, it is useful to examine their movement from existence into being as it is represented both by external,

physical structures and internal, imaginative processes. In so doing, Moravia's protagonists can be understood within a theoretical framework that incorporates the Kierkegaardian definition of the self and Merleau-Ponty's observations on vision and space. In that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is believed to have developed out of Kierkegaardian theory, Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception and space can be regarded in conjunction with Kierkegaard's notion of the self. Though it is impossible to ascertain whether or not Merleau-Ponty and Kierkegaard had any direct influence on Moravia, it is clear that Moravia's novels incorporate these contemporary currents in thought. A reading of Moravia with respect to these particular trends therefore elucidates the movement and development of the protagonists.

According to Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death* the self is understood as able to relate to itself and outside its own self.¹ The formation of the self can then be visually delineated by observing the spatial movements of the protagonists within their fictive worlds. They move between opposite poles, occupied by material objects that alienate them from reality on one side, and an abstract notion of the infinite on the other side. For Moravia's characters the infinite is not a religious spirit, rather it is an unknown region of boundless space, light, or freedom that must be realized in order to find meaning. Significance results from a willful comprehension that reality is not only place but space, rather, when meaning is derived from combined internal and external relationships with environment.

The interchange and subsequent juxtaposition of the finite and infinite are then defined through a spatial analogy. Confined and open spaces are the first spaces identified, within which further polar relationships can be delineated. Within the internal space the finite finds its home in corners or decentralized regions whereas the infinite exists beyond the doors or through the window openings. The light allows for conscious perception of this infinitude whereas darkness traps the finite. Mirrors then reflect the imprisonment of the spirit in itself. In them one senses the potential impact of a familiarity with the infinite, all the while exacerbating an awareness of being trapped by the finite. Proximity between characters that represent diverse stages in self formation are indicative of psychological development and maturation. Space can be

seen piecemeal through an inwardly shifting definition of the process of self formation. It is when the outside and inside enter into a sensible rapport that the self is comprehensible for the individual.

Fundamental to self formation is the ability of the individual to *choose himself* rather than merely *know himself*. This is what distinguishes passivity from willful activity. The ability to *know* oneself can be understood in terms of perception whereas the ability to *choose* oneself additionally requires a thought process. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty observes, "Pour le sujet pensant, un visage vu à l'endroit et le même visage vu à l'envers sont indiscernables. Pour le sujet de la perception, le visage vu à l'envers est méconnaissable."² The relationship between seeing and *knowing*, rather than thinking or *choosing*, is at the root of the development of the characters in these novels. Michele and Carla are able to perceive, yet they are unable to act. Luca and Dino, however, are able to perceive and decipher meaning from their perceptions that will enable them to forge a meaningful relationship with reality.

These distinctions are made clear in each of the three novels. In *Gli indifferenti*, Michele can be said to *know* himself rather than *choose* himself. He is conscious of his indifference and inability to act. However, this knowledge is not a sufficient motivation for him to develop the *self*. As Michele stands outside in the street he realizes that "*tutta questa gente...sa dove va e cosa vuole, ha uno scopo, e per questo s'affrettu, si tormenta, è triste, allegra, vive, io...io invece nulla...nessuno scopo...se non cammino sto seduto: fa lo stesso.*"³ Michele does not know how to choose himself. He is aware of his indifference but being aware does not provide him with the ability to choose a direction along this road. He is instead left to wander aimlessly in streets and corridors. Michele is always passing through, moving between the poles of consciousness, yet remains unable to unite the concrete and abstract within a fully functional self. Luca and Dino, however, choose themselves. Even Luca's indifference or disobedience is a conscious choice. Likewise, Dino's voyeurism, or deliberate spying on Cecilia, and his attempt to possess her, are examples of his ability to act in instances where Michele has proved himself to be completely indifferent and inactive.

The mirroring of images then plays a significant role in spatially representing the dialectical principles necessary to forming the self. In *The*

Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard explains the relationship between image and self where “even in looking at one’s self in a mirror it is requisite to know oneself; for, if not, one does not behold one’s *self* but merely a man.”⁴ The mirror, reflective only of a space opposite its surface, removes the subject from its contextual relationship with its environs. The image in the mirror then originates as a false representation and for this reason, an incorrectly interpreted image misdirects the observer away from the possibility of becoming a self. The mirror mocks the individual by reflecting the raunting images of alienation that have yet to be decoded through a willed effort by the observer. For the abstract and concrete to become one the mirror image must be observed and understood by the object of reflection. Merely being reflected in the mirror is then a spatial equivalent to the statement *know thyself*, where seeing the mirror image requires only a passive, indifferent glance. It is when one chooses not only to examine the image in the mirror, but additionally to comprehend its significance, that one can be said to *choose* oneself. Therefore, the reflection alone is the individual trapped within a landscape of meaningless material objects. When this finite image is juxtaposed with the abstract quality of the gaze, one begins to forge a relationship between these two spheres. However, the self can only be formed in the moment that this image is understood as belonging to both of these realms. Without such awareness, mere knowledge or consciousness is meaningless because it lacks the very element that must propel it toward becoming a self. The passivity of seeing is knowing, but to choose is to have the capability of utilizing this knowledge in a way that allows the self to surface as a willful, conscious combination, and not merely a reflection of images.

The mirrors in *Gli indifferenti* are mirrors that allow those reflected to see without gaining access to becoming a self through the image. As Carla mechanically looks in the mirror she observes: “I loro sguardi profondi pieni di speranze e di illusioni la turbavano come se fossero parriri da un’altra persona.”⁵ Carla consciously looks at her image in the mirror but she is unable to recognize herself. It is as if she is gazing at an image that is completely separate and alien. Though her spatial positioning, changes in relationship to the image in the mirror, her movement is between poles. She is unable to extract knowledge from

either of these extremes nor to unite the diverse images within herself. Recognition allows her to move in search of her self, but this movement is futile without comprehension of what in fact constitutes her goal.

As Luca regains access to reality in *La disubbidienza*, the nurse hands him a mirror. Luca is able to look in the mirror and recognize an image that is realistic. More significantly, the gaze is returned by the mirror image and comprehended by Luca. In this way, Luca's image and his being are united in the mirror. The finite is reflected in the infinite space of the mirror and returns back to the finite, allowing Luca to move from existence into being.

The mirrors of *La noia* are significant on yet another level as they take on human attributes. Dino explains that Cecilia's "occhi fossero stati due scuri specchi che riflettevano la realtà senza capirla e, forse, anche senza vederla."⁶ However, more significant is that Dino is able to comprehend the vacuous quality of her gaze as indicative of her inability to understand the meaning of these images. In contrast, Dino's eyes are therefore not merely reflective, they are penetrative. His voyeuristic tendencies and his obsessive desire to watch Cecilia and possess her with his eyes, demonstrate his ability to see and consciously select his field of vision. For Dino, voyeurism is the vehicle he utilizes in order to *choose himself*. By watching others, he is able to choose those characteristics that must either be incorporated or rejected in order to realize his goal of forming the self.

The image in the mirror then gains significance not merely from the objects or persons reflected, but from the relationship between the image and its point of origin. The mirror image is of use to Dino in a way that Carla could never realize. Dino recognizes himself in Balestieri and is able to utilize this image in a way that enables him to form a self. The mirror in the guise of a human image introduces, however, the possibility of misinterpreting the image. Dino's perception of himself in Balestieri is a construct of his imagination such as described by Merleau-Ponty: "la ressemblance de la chose et de son image spéculaire n'est pour elles qu'une dénomination extérieure, elle appartient à la pensée."⁷ It is an image that Dino creates as a guide to *forming the self*. Though Balestieri did in fact exist, his relationship to Dino is one that Dino invents in order to locate a point of origin around which he can maneuver in his attempt to gain access to reality. It would not be sufficient for Dino to recognize himself

in the material object of the mirror, because these objects are the root of his alienation. The human mirror must instead serve as his catalyst in forming the self.

The way in which the self comes into being can be delineated not only by physical but by psychic space as well. Carla and Michele know themselves but they lack the ability to choose a path that will allow for the finite and the infinite to meet and assimilate with one another. They are trapped in the mirror, unable to find meaning in a false image, emerging only as a delusory guide to nothingness. Being is when the image is recognized and understood. The false image in the mirror is not reality but rather a means of orienting oneself within a landscape of dialectical opposition and misapprehended ideals. Luca and Dino choose their paths and in this way are ultimately able to differentiate and assimilate these material and abstract spheres. The culmination of this activity is not to merely reach the other end, but to recognize this opposition and choose to return.

By examining the formation of being in terms of its spatial representations, it is clear that the formation of the self cannot be understood irrespective of the environment in which it is formed. The indifference of Michele and Carla requires the restrictive surroundings of the dark and confined rooms that harbor the material root of their existence. Luca and Dino also have such material points of origin as represented by their childhood homes, however, they are also provided with a landscape that exists beyond the boundaries existent in these structures. They can wander about an outside world looking, wandering not only with passive eyes, but with active bodies as well. Carla and Michele only have freedom of gaze but apart from this flexibility they are unable to move in a direction that will be of profit to forming the self. Luca and Dino extend their gaze outside of the safety of the concrete world that has served as both the safe haven of youth and the domain of maturation through alienation. It is this movement away from the knowable realm of home that will eventually allow for their return following the experiences and activities that serve to juxtapose their external and internal realities and define being.

NOTES

- ¹ S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1946) 17.
- ² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 291-2.
- ³ Alberto Moravia, *Gli indifferenti* (Torino: Bompiani, 1990) 122.
- ⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 56.
- ⁵ Moravia, *Gli indifferenti*, 43.
- ⁶ Moravia, *La noia* (Milano: Bompiani, 1997) 86.
- ⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* (Paris, Gallimard, 1964) 38.

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