IN THE ROME of the late 1950s, if you lived—as I did—in the area around Piazza del Popolo, and if—also like me—you spent a lot of your time idly strolling the endlessly fascinating streets or staring into inaccessibly costly shops’ windows, it was almost certain you would run into Alberto Moravia, whose apartment was in the nearby Via dell’Oca. For a long period then the famous Italian novelist suffered from a persistent form of sciatica, and his doctor advised him to take daily walks. Dutifully, he walked, alone, without destination, but with the grim decision of a man who is taking an unpleasant medicine. His was no stroll, no saunter. He proceeded at a fairly brisk pace, while his unmistakable, uneven gait—a grave form of tuberculosis of the bone had left him lame since childhood—gave his movements a rollicking, even jaunty quality.

He did not seek company, but, if you offered it, he amiably accepted; and as I seldom had compelling appointments or urgent errands in those days and as I loved walking in Rome, I would often fall in beside him and spend an hour or two with
him, trading literary or political gossip. In those still-postwar years, before the great boom of mass tourism and the economic (and hence automobilistic) explosion, Rome was a great city for walking and Moravia was a great friend to walk with: a born Roman, he knew every brick of the city; even the most drab apartment block or the scruffiest little church could set off a sparkling train of associations and memories.

But, on encountering him, I would first, automatically, ask him how he was.

“Mi annoio,” he would usually reply, in his clipped, telegraphic way. Moravia sometimes seemed not to talk but to blurt. “I’m bored. Mi annoio. Voglio morire.”

I never believed Moravia really wanted to die (and he would express the wish in an offhand tone, as if saying “I could use a cigarette”); but I did believe he was bored, and boredom—like idleness, its sister vice—was something he disliked, even feared. Talk dispelled that fear, and for the rest of our afternoon there would be no mention of dying, not of his dying, at least.

I knew Moravia before I knew his works. My knowledge of them developed as my friendship with him developed, and I read many of his works as they appeared, enjoying each one with the special zest of novelty and revelation.

Other Italian acquaintances of that time—especially older ones—tended to be critical, or rather, hostile. Moravia scrive male. How many times I heard this accusation!—Moravia writes badly—from dim literary hangers-on, marginal gentlemen and ladies of letters, some of them smudged with the ash of a Fascist past. Then and there, I was mystified. Though I was not really in a position to judge, Moravia’s prose seemed fine to me. It took me a while to realize that these critics were intellectual as well as political nostalgics, looking back with a certain yearning to the heyday of sumptuous, d’Annunzian prose (and perhaps also to the Duce’s own inimitable, orotund rhetoric). I soon learned that to accuse a writer of writing Italian
badly is a literary cliché, and I have heard the same charge laid against a whole Olympus of modern writers: Svevo scrive male, Silone scrive male, Eco scrive male.

Male or not, Moravia wrote, and—after the gagging Fascist regime—he wrote copiously. The end of the war coincided with the publication of Agostino, a novella that has deservedly become a classic; then came The Woman of Rome, which brought him international fame, and some much-needed income; and then a dazzling series of novels—Conjugal Love, The Conformist, Contempt, Two Women—not to mention a steady, impressive production of shorter fiction and a wide variety of occasional pieces: reviews, travel articles, film scripts. The immensely fertile decade and a half, after the end of the war and the regime, accounts for the major portion of his finest work. Before the war, following his successful debut with The Time of Indifference in 1929, he had struggled for seven long years to produce his flawed second novel, Mistaken Ambitions; now, in the free, exhilarating air of the new Italy, he was irrepressible.

In 1960, he published this novel, La noia, in which he and his old enemy, boredom, came boldly to grips. In his work, and also in his conversation, Moravia was fond of analyzing; his novels sometimes read like explications. He had a habit of asking his interlocutors—and himself—a rhetorical question, then answering it. Years later, speaking at a Yale conference about Pasolini, Moravia referred to his late friend as Italy’s great modern “civil poet.” Then, typically, he asked: “What is a civil poet?” And then, equally typically, he answered his own question with acute and arresting originality.

Similarly, in La noia, before getting into the complexity of the story, he defines his (or his stand-in protagonist’s) concept of noia, boredom. “The feeling of boredom originates for me in a sense of the absurdity of a reality which is insufficient, or anyhow unable, to convince me of its own effective existence. . . . For me, therefore, boredom is not only the
inability to escape from myself but is also the consciousness that theoretically I might be able to disengage myself from it, thanks to a miracle of some sort."

Dino, the bored narrator of Moravia’s novel, is a direct descendant of Michele, the adolescent antihero of *The Time of Indifference*; but with the added emotional baggage of his greater experience (and the author’s). Michele’s clumsy, botched murder attempt is reflected in the anticlimactic violence of Dino’s conclusion.

Similarly, Cecilia—Dino’s rather sullen but patient mistress—is related to Adriana, the woman of Rome, and to many other female characters in Moravia: rationally immoral, strange compounds of honesty, resignation, and independence, anomalous products of the working class, without bourgeois hypocrisy or ambition, women of frank sensuality but also clear-eyed and, in their way, courageous.

In defining the moral and intellectual boundaries of Cecilia, Moravia exploits—as he did with the protagonists of *The Woman of Rome* and *Two Women* and of many stories—his gift for portraying a typically Roman caste, a step or two above poverty, but not yet middle-class: people who can use money, and have a practical attitude toward the transactional possibilities of sex, and yet who can also exhibit an absence of envy that would seem to make their situation the more lamentable.

In real life, in conversation, Moravia evinced a wonderful sense of humor. As he told stories, his own infectious laughter often interrupted him. His fiction is not generally considered humorous, but there are times, in *La noia*, when it is hard to suppress a smile, especially when the curious Dino subjects Cecilia to one of his interrogations, questioning her implacably about her family, her home, her friends, her past lovemaking. For all his desperation, Dino is, finally, a great comic creation. At times, the reader may wish that Moravia had written a sequel to this novel, telling the same story but from the point of
view of Cecilia, seeing her lover as a weird, middle-class eccentric, a compulsive asker of, to her, pointless questions.

British and American publishers, having acquired the rights to La noia, must have balked at the idea of publishing a book entitled Boredom. Wouldn’t that be begging for trouble? So they, or perhaps the translator Angus Davidson, came up with a more alluring title: The Empty Canvas. But make no mistake: this is not a book about painting, or even about not painting; it is about noia. Many people who are not translators—and they include some editors—are convinced that every word in a given language has an exact, or nearly exact, equivalent in a second language. Alas, the word “boredom,” which the expert Davidson has had to use in the body of the text, seems pale compared with the brief, blunt Italian noun. In any case, this seems to me an opportune occasion to express gratitude for Davidson’s loyal and influential work as Moravia’s translator, in a time when translators received small recompense and almost no recognition. Davidson gave Moravia an appropriate, coherent voice in English, as other translators of the time—Frances Frenaye and Archibald Colquhoun among them—brought the other great writers of Italy’s postwar years to an English-language audience that rediscovered, with enthusiasm, a country whose literary culture had been practically silenced for a generation.

In recent years, too, a silence has surrounded the work of Moravia and his finest contemporaries—at least in the English-speaking world—but there are signs (and this reprint of La noia is one) of a rekindled interest. And new readers will now be able to discover that, whether in the original or in Davidson’s translations, Moravia scrive benissimo!

—William Weaver