

post-Gang-of-Four period, a tragic vision of China's recent past becomes so strong that the somewhat hopeful ending of the book is not wholly convincing. Always in the background is Liang's father, an intellectual who eventually loses his wife, his health, and the greater part of his seemingly indestructible faith in Mao and the Party. He, more than any other figure in the book, represents the human cost of the omnipresent political campaigns that have had such devastating effect on the country and its citizens.

There is little in *Son of the Revolution* that has not been revealed or alluded to in other works about contemporary China, whether published in China or abroad: the state of virtual anarchy that existed for years, the erosion and near-paralysis of normal, civilized human relations, the true state of the rural economy, class antagonisms, and a growing skepticism that has its most profound effects on youth. But in this book the victims are given names and faces, and there is a unifying element that humanizes the drama: the author's family and the people he came to know so well during his adventures. *Son of the Revolution* is a very personal account of Mao's China, and a sobering one. WV

1934

by **Alberto Moravia**

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 297 pp.; \$14.50)

Edward J. Curtin, Jr.

This is a pretentiously muddled novel, similar in many ways to John Fowles's *The Magus*. It is the pathetic and farcical story of Lucio, an aspiring and despairing young Italian writer, who, in that portentous year when Hitler is consolidating his power, comes to the enchanting isle of Capri to learn whether it is "possible to live in despair and not wish for death." Perturbed though he is by the Fascist ascendancy, it is not the cause of his despair, which is, "so to speak, metaphysical." The novel, indeed, evokes a bizarre world that is implicitly godless, totally lacking in transcendence or its possibility. Lucio is one of the living-dead, as are all the characters in this book. Vaguely wishing to come to life, he is doomed to fail; his absurd efforts are pervaded by a dispirited, premature sense of exhaustion. The action, if it may be called action, approximates a disturbed dream: "I had only dreamed; I had dreamed I was dreaming and then waking, and then dreaming again."

On the boat to Capri, Lucio contemplates Dürer's engraving "Melancholia" and considers the possibility of living with despair. Seated opposite him, a young German woman, Beate, returns his despairing yet lustful stare, seeming to say, "No, have no illusions; it's not possible, absolutely not." He feels he has found his twin, an equal in despondency. They exchange no words; she is accompanied by her husband, fat and much older. Of course the husband poses a problem, but Lucio's lust is obsessive and determined. "For you I'd do anything," he tells her. He exchanges the Fascist salute with Beate's husband, betraying his convictions for a mimed kiss. His love is a lust to betray and lose himself, a merging of love and death.

Being a writer, however, an expert on Kleist, Lucio has come to Capri to write a novel. He intends to have his protagonist kill himself for political reasons, hoping that "the self-destructive violence of despair would be released on the page instead of in life." And so writing—"nothing but a game"—would be his salvation. Of course he writes nothing: he is too obsessed with his passion for his mute angel of death.

Still, determined to act, to jerk himself out of his slough of despond, Lucio gives himself, in typical Moravian fashion, to sex. Death, love, and literature are ambiguously addled as he pursues his sexual obsession. He is not disappointed. Beate in her own despair offers him a bargain: In return for a night of sexual love he must agree to double suicide, Kleist-style. This runs counter to his original wish to stabilize despair—"transform it, that is, into a normal condition of life and thus never arrive at the logical and equally inevitable conclusion of suicide." Lucio, however, belying his name, is powerfully attracted to death. "Thus, the same vital instinct that should have made me reject double suicide, that same instinct drove me, instead, through desire, to accept it."

And so a bewitching game of mystification unfolds in which the political and the sexual are commingled. "My husband horrifies me," Beate tells Lucio, "his hands are stained with blood." Executioner and victim, master and slave, husband and wife are bound by a tie of cryptic, reciprocal corruption. Lucio is fascinated. Beate proves to be an actress: a twin sister appears: the mystification grows thicker. Still, it would be unfair to reveal the plot. Suffice it to say that Moravia's typical themes are here: the link between irrational passion and violent death, the effort to explain political fanaticism in sexual terms (with the disturbing suggestion that homosexuality is one of its

causes), characters who are despairingly indifferent and hopelessly detached, the unfulfilled desire to pass from living death to the feeling of life.

Admirable in intent, *1934* develops into a morass of confusion. By book's end, one is given to suppose, Lucio has seen some sort of light. Himself? The truth of fascism? The devil? Whatever it is, it escapes me. Perhaps it escapes Moravia as well. "After a very long moment, I thought: It's all bad literature....How literary it all is!—but without irony, almost as if certifying a real fact: I stretched out my arms....But my arms clasped the void."

Though Lucio never writes his novel, Moravia has. One assumes it has helped him to endure, to stabilize his lucid despair.

GROWING YOUNG

by **Ashley Montagu**

(McGraw-Hill Book Co.; xii + 306 pp.; \$6.95 [paper])

THE HUMAN CYCLE

by **Collin M. Turnbull**

(Simon & Schuster; 283 pp.; \$14.95)

Albert L. Huebner

Neoteny is hardly a household word: relatively few people outside the biological and behavioral sciences know it, and even within those disciplines the concept that it represents is often not clearly understood. That obscurity is slowly disappearing, however, and Ashley Montagu's thought-provoking essay on the subject is likely to hasten the process.

Neoteny refers to the retention into adult life of those human traits associated with childhood, with the fetus, and even with the juvenile and fetal traits of our primitive ancestors. There is striking evidence, for example, that many physical characteristics of the young chimpanzee's skull are closer to those of the human child *and* the human adult than to the adult chimp.

In a more modern form, neoteny refers to the slowing down of the rate of human development and the prolonging of the phases of development. In other species early specialization is the path to extinction. But human beings live through a lengthy period of plasticity, flexibility, and educability that confers the characteristics needed for a successful response to changes in their environment. Outstanding scientists, including Julian Huxley, Konrad Lorenz, and Stephen Jay Gould, have viewed neoteny as supremely important to past human evolution.