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A Novel by Ahmed Ali

It was in 1940 or 1941 that Ahmed Ali's English novel *Twilight in Delhi* was published.[1] Most of the current Urdu writers were then still studying for their bachelor's or master's degrees. The Progressive Writers' Movement was then young.[2] Enthusiasm still prevailed and literary efforts were looked at with admiration and respect. Islamic religious sanctions had not yet been applied to literature. Ahmed Ali had not yet

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Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī, "Aḥmad 'Alī kā ēk Nāvil," *Makhzan* (Lahore; May 1949), [pp. ?]. Footnotes to this translation have been added by the translator.

[1]London: Hogarth Press, 1940; reprints: Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1966, 1984; Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1973; New York: New Directions, 1994. This novel has been translated into French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Urdu. [For details, see Ahmed Ali's curriculum vitae, pp. 9–14, above. —*Eds.*]

[2]This Movement dominated Urdu from the early 1930s. It gradually took on very specific Marxist aspects such that by the '40s it was almost exclusively socialist in orientation. For an overview of this important phase of Urdu literature, see Hafeez Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies,* XXVI: 4 (August 1967): 649–64 and Carlo Coppola, "Indian and Pakistani Marxist Literature: The Case of Urdu, 1935–1970," *Oakland Symposium on Socialist Realism in Literature,* ed. Renate Gerulaitis (Rochester, Michigan: Oakland University, 1975), pp. 52–65.

Of considerable interest from a first-person point of view, see Ahmed Ali, "The Progressive Writers' Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu," in Carlo Coppola, ed., *Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature*, I, Occasional Paper No. 23, South Asia Series (Michigan State University: Asian Studies Center, 1974), pp. 35–43.

For a comprehensive study of the Movement, see Carlo Coppola, *Urdu Poetry, 1935–1970: The Progressive Episode,* 2 vols, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975.

been discarded by the Progressives; in fact, he was counted among the pioneers of the new literature.[3] A new book by him could only cause a great stir. People bought it at double the publisher's price, and even then there was such a rush that for every person reading it, there were four others waiting to do so. This done, a round of discussion started, as the laudatory opinions of E.M. Forster and Edwin Muir were included on the cover of the book, a fact which added further zest to the various arguments.[4] As Lucknow was the center of the semi-political and pseudo-literary Association, it was decided there that because the author's attitude towards a decadent class was sympathetic, the novel was, therefore, not good.[5] But Allahabad was not so hidebound and people hesitated about making political assessments of literature. Thus, while opinionated persons assumed an envious though furtive silence at Allahabad, others

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[3]Ahmed Ali was one of the four contributors to *Aṅgārē* (Burning Coals), a highly controversial anthology of short stories published in 1932, which is considered by most critics as the first example of progressive writing in Urdu. Other contributors were Sajjad Zaheer (1905–1973), Rashid Jahan (1905–1950), and Mahmuduzzafar (1908–1956). Ahmed Ali broke with this group in 1938. [*For the reasons see Zeno, "Professor Ahmed Ali and the Progressive Writers' Movement" elsewhere in this issue. —Eds.*]

[4]E.M. Forster said of *Twilight in Delhi*: "It is beautifully written and very moving. The detail was almost all of it new to me, and fascinating. It is a sort of poetical chronicle. At the end one has a poignant feeling that poetry and daily life have got parted, and will never come together again."

Edwin Muir stated in his review of the novel in *The Listener* (London): "The atmosphere in which the story passes . . . has a striking resemblance to that of the French Romantics: there is the same exaltation of feeling, the same resignation to the impulses of the heart, especially in love, and the same readiness to embrace death, at least in contemplation, when the heart's impulses are frustrated. . . . But if we accept the sentiment, we become aware that Mr. Ahmed Ali expresses it with a distinction and purity of which a western writer would be quite incapable. Every accident of life, pleasant or horrible, is touched by it. The description of a horrible influenza epidemic in Delhi after the Great War is so deeply moving because of this union of horror and tenderness and something resembling romantic pity . . . the relations between the various characters are exquisitely felt; the detail of life, wonderfully clear and yet quite strange. The writing produces a curiously pictorial effect, yet is itself as clear as water. The end, where innocence is drowned by experience, is intensely moving."

[5]The All-India Progressive Writers' Association, the organizational arm of the Progressive Writers' Movement.

raised some objections about unimportant matters. For example, some said that Ahmed Ali was bent on using all the English words he knew, others stated that his English was no better than that of a high school boy. Some found the details of the novel unnecessary. One critic discovered that the novel had not been written by Ahmed Ali at all, but by so-and-so. In the end the story assumed a melodramatic turn when those who were better informed and could sound unfathomed depths declared that the real author of the book was E.M. Forster himself.

Personally, I was greatly relieved by reading the book, for I realized that the semi-political and sentimental pieces such as "The Land of Twilight" which Ahmed Ali had published prior to this novel had represented only a temporary phase, and that he had not given up the significant realism whose foundations he had laid in stories such as "Hamārī Galī" (Our Lane) and "Ustād Shammū Khān" (Master Shammu Khan)[6]. What impressed me most then was the character of Mir Nihal and the symbolic significance of the date-palm tree, the sense of a great fundamental sadness which deepens as the plot develops—the cruel vagaries and ravages of time, the gradual decay of the spring of life into autumn and man's helplessness in the face of this change, the pain of the transience of life and doubts about the purpose of life itself. All these qualities were then in the overall impression I had of the book. I liked the book immensely.

Eight years later when I came upon the book again and started reading it just to revive memories of Delhi, I was assailed by doubts and feared that I might be disappointed in it.[7] After all, a man changes considerably in eight long years and his mental and emotional needs do not remain the same. He may or may not have acquired maturity through new literary experiences during the interim; it was likely that his literary sensibility and sense of appreciation may have taken a new direction.

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[6]"The Land of Twilight" is a one-act play written in English in 1929; it was published in Lucknow in 1937 by R.R. Sreshta and eventually translated and published in Urdu. A second one-act play by Ahmed Ali is entitled "Break the Chains." The plays were produced and directed by Ahmed Ali at Lucknow University in 1931–1932. "Hamārī Galī" is the title piece from his second collection of short stories in 1936 and has been translated into English and French. "Ustād Shammū Khān" appears in Ahmed Ali's first collection of stories, *Sho'lē* (Flames), published in 1934.

[7]Partition of the subcontinent took place in 1947; at the time this article was written (1949), both Ahmed Ali and the author were Pakistani citizens.

Whereas some of his sensibilities increase with time, some also decline. Thus, when I started Ahmed Ali's novel again, I was in a sense reading it for the first time. I had no mental reservations about holding to my former opinion and was fully prepared for a new reaction. On the whole, I was not disappointed. My earlier impression remained intact and, as a matter of fact, a second reading supplied me with an opportunity to study other aspects of the work. I could now appreciate the book's purpose, aim, and method more fully.

However, what weighs heavily even on the sympathetic reader are the novel's details. It describes such familiar and ordinary customs, festivals and everyday aspects of life with so much detail that we tire of it. But then this objection holds good only if one reads the book as an ordinary novel. If one keeps in mind the audience for which it was written and the author's purpose in writing it, then even the details which had been boring do not remain meaningless. Details are secondary; the main point here is the artist's purpose, his intention. If the details are subordinate to this purpose, this intention, then we cannot justifiably object to them. In any event, objecting to anything is our democratic right which no one can deny or take away.

This novel has two main purposes: one literary, creative, artistic; the other essentially non-literary. This does not mean that there is any inner contradiction in the book or its purpose. If the writer's grip on his art is strong, the non-creative purpose does no harm to the work. In fact, the non-artistic intention becomes an excuse for creation. So the primary—that is, non-literary—purpose of Ahmed Ali's novel is to write a guide to Delhi for Englishmen. I am calling it a "guide" because I deliberately wish to make fun of this aspect of the novel and to see if, after giving it this label and demolishing it by ridicule, the novel still holds and remains intact. When, however, I study my impressions even after this mockery, my original impression of the book prevails and remains unaffected. I can, as a result, repeat without any fear that the book has been written for Englishmen who are unfamiliar with life in Delhi and that the author wishes to acquaint them with this way of living.[8] Thus,

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[8]When asked about this point, Ahmed Ali stated that the thought had never entered his mind. His purpose was to depict life, a culture, a mode of living and thought, all of which were passing away. He did this in his own realistic manner, which considers the minutest details essential and part of its method. He further noted that the details have already become historical, as even the descendants of

herein lies one use of detail. But when we consider the book further, we find that this fact apart, the details are not only *not* purposeless, but unavoidable. They have an artistic intent, which is discussed below.

The non-literary purpose has imposed another restriction on the writer—that life in Delhi had to be depicted in English. But the English language was not cut out for this depiction. The problem the author faced in this context was to create a style which, being English, was not English and at the same time adequate to transfer the atmosphere and harmony of life in Delhi into a foreign language, even though he had to twist and turn it to suit his purpose. Ahmed Ali has been most successful in this endeavor and has made a foreign language subservient to his artistic will. This is no mean achievement. Perhaps it was Edwin Muir who said that one could smell the jasmine flowers in the book, which, in turn, means that Ahmed Ali has achieved the impossible.[9]

Let us now consider the artistic purpose of the novel. Ahmed Ali has not written the story of a few individuals alone, but of a people, a city, a particular culture, a period of history. His theme is not confined to a few characters and their biographies, but to an entire city. This is, in reality, a collective [*ijtimā'ī*] novel whose hero is the city of Delhi. One can object here that Muslims alone did not live in Delhi—why, therefore, were they alone identified with the city and, further, why even among them was only one particular section treated? This may be considered a psychological shortcoming, for man is constrained to see reality through his own eyes. Otherwise, there must have been as many Delhis as there were inhabitants. But Ahmed Ali could present only one Delhi—his

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Mir Nihal's generation have lost and forgotten them and they have now passed into history.

[9]It was actually Bonamy Dobree, who said of *Twilight in Delhi:* "Taking us as it does, very skillfully, very intimately, into the details of Moslem life in Delhi during the earlier part of this century, it releases us into a different and quite complete world. Mr. Ahmed Ali writes delicately, with here and there perhaps too nostalgic a sigh; but he makes us hear and smell Delhi—hear in the flutter of pigeons' wings, the cries of itinerant vendors, the calls to prayer, the howls of mourners, the chants of qawwals; smell of jasmine and sewage, frying ghee and burning wood. And amid the smells and sounds a family has its domestic being sustained by religion and superstition, a being faintly clouded with the memory of Mogul glories, and the sense of being a conquered people. The detail, as Mr. E.M. Forster says, is 'new and fascinating'; it is poetical and brutal, delightful and callous" (*The Spectator,* 8 November 1940).

Delhi—which he had not only known, but felt in his bones and arteries. But it is also true that what Ahmed Ali knew as Delhi was also the Delhi of millions of Muslims. Whether a class society or a classless one, there is always a section of society, large or small, which occupies a central place and is the source and fountainhead of cultural values. Thus Delhi is representative of a particular set of values and the atmosphere and temper born of these values. The subject of Ahmed Ali's novel is this cultural order and that period of its life when its center of gravity had shifted long before its components had begun to come apart. In spite of analyzing this sense of defeat and decay with great courage and honesty, Ahmed Ali could not conceal the fact that he loved these dying values and is sorry for their decay.[10] Yet he does not express this sense of loss at the expense of artistic balance and dignity.

I have called this book a collective [*ijtimā'ī*] novel. Such works are being written today. The advantage of this form is that the collective life of a whole society can be presented through the ideas and actions of a group against the background of a revolutionary movement or war, as is generally the case in such works. But to present a social whole in the mirror of everyday life where no extraordinary or exciting events take place, and yet produce a novel that is successful from the points of view of art and technique, is most difficult indeed. But Ahmed Ali has done it.

The author has taken one family and shown what its members experience in their day-to-day life. All these are simple, insignificant things, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, festivals and fairs, marriage, birth, death, naïve love affairs, quarrels and arguments. Hence, the plot of the novel is similar to one we find in the works of women novelists, and the incidents are more or less alike. The difference, however, is that the arrangement and selection of these incidents in the novel are different and they have been given a fundamental and universal significance. Since the purpose of the novel is the depiction of collective life, the significance of

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[10]When asked about this point, Ahmed Ali stated that, though in the course of writing he has shown sympathy for this culture, and that in so doing this sympathy shows itself as a personal catharsis, his emphasis in the book is on something larger—life itself which, in spite of the decay of an order, goes on unmindful of social changes, continues and never dies. Thus Ahmed Ali's attitude did not change from its original progressivism. This definition of progress was not understood or appreciated by many readers, especially members of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association, who were, according to Ahmed Ali, "carried away by the panorama of passing things."

details does not merely remain one of presenting information. Within these details are embedded the spirit of collective life and the values of collective unity. It is through these insignificant details that we come to know collective life and the soul of society, which is its subject. These details, therefore, are as essential for the artistic purpose of the book as they are for the non-artistic ones.

The other method of depicting collective life, apart from incidents, is through characters. In a collective-life novel, individuals cannot be emphasized to the extent they are in other novels. Their action lasts only so long as need demands. But authors of such novels do not often lay any emphasis on characters and use them only as types standing for certain characteristics. In contrast to this, Ahmed Ali allows each and every character to live a full life in his own right. In fact, each character assumes such stature in himself that we identify ourselves completely with him and become oblivious of the corporate body of which this character is only a part.

Ahmed Ali has given two characters the dimensions of development and growth—Asghar to a certain extent, and much more than him, Mir Nihal. Asghar falls in love three times and these are the three basic kinds of love which an average person is likely to experience. First, he visits a courtesan out of a desire to flirt. The courtesan falls in love with him, but he turns her down. Then he falls in love with Bilqueece, and after a little struggle, he marries her. It is, thus, successful love. But on the pattern of the saying "Familiarity breeds contempt," he becomes indifferent to her. When she becomes ill, his love surfaces again. Yet his reaction really is not so much love as it is pity. After Bilqueece's death, Asghar falls in love with her younger sister, but finds he cannot marry her. Thus this love remains unsuccessful. Ahmed Ali has thus depicted the emotional ups and downs of an ordinary man's life. Asghar has another role in the novel. The balanced and inwardly harmonious whole which Delhi's culture had produced is presented in the character of Mir Nihal; but that balance has now been upset. Prevailing conditions had produced a new man whose life had neither depth nor expanse, nor balance nor uniformity, who is culturally a mongrel and, in fact, a hybrid and somewhat contemptible, whose finest emotions are devoid of beauty and dignity, the qualities which spring from the traditions of that harmonious culture. Asghar is the representative of this new man. But then once this balance achieves stability, it becomes static and turns to death. Mir Nihal's story, therefore, ends with the novel. Baseness and lack of balance after all signify a compromise with life; therefore, Asghar's story does not end with the

novel. At the end of the book he does not appear defeated—he has not met his final defeat. He still has the heart to love again. This failure does not leave him [Asghar] broken, though Mir Nihal's grief has intensified.

The most remarkable character of this book is Mir Nihal. There is something unique about him which one will perhaps not find anywhere else. Generally the characters of novels are formed or make their appearance right before our eyes. Mir Nihal's character had formed even before the book begins; thus, there is no further scope for any fundamental change in it. The nature of his character is passive. He has only two interests in life: his pigeons and his mistress, Babban Jan. When Babban Jan dies, he gives up flying pigeons and even gives up his job and gathers around himself old people like himself and takes shelter behind alchemy and mysticism. His intention is to escape the changes taking place in life and to withdraw from the world. He thus assumes the position of an observer. Asghar marries against Mir Nihal's wishes; nor does Mir Nihal's will prevail at the time of Mehro's marriage.

Whether the world or the affairs of the family, his wishes are of no consequence. Formerly he wished to cry over the ups and downs of life, but in the end he does not even have the desire to do that. Asghar comes to him wearing English clothes, but Mir Nihal does not even object. His body has already become paralyzed; his heart and the mind are atrophied as well. The spring of life has departed; the time of farewell is nigh. Babban Jan has departed this life. His young daughter-in-law and son have died—even the fifteen-year-old bride he had brought for his favorite servant did not survive. The marriage of his daughter has brought with it either death all around, or alienation, failure, unfulfilment and regret. Mir Nihal lies on his bed and watches with open eyes, and cannot heave a sigh. Calamities befall others and Mir Nihal suffers—more than they. People such as Asghar may forget their sorrows, but Mir Nihal cannot forget. All his physical and mental strengths have waned; but his memory is alive and he has become Memory personified; the griefs of others crowd in on his mind and all the tragic incidents, coalescing, leave their poison spread through his veins and arteries. His last and only purpose and responsibility are to cry for others. Throughout the book his position is that of a passive agent, but towards the end, the passivity of his consciousness becomes so deep that it absorbs the sorrows of all the others in itself, feeling at the same time the effects of all the changes wrought by time. The grief of the most minor character of the novel becomes the grief of Mir Nihal, and it is this consciousness that permeates others. Thus, we can call Mir Nihal's consciousness the consciousness of Delhi,

which suffers and pines for the sorrows of all the inhabitants, and we see it slowly dying away, yet with what dignity! At the end of the book the intensity becomes so strong that, Mir Nihal apart, life itself begins to grieve for its unfulfillment, haplessness, transience, and seems to cast basic doubts on its own reality.

The creation of this character is Ahmed Ali's great achievement, his master stroke. Yet we cannot separate this character from the body of the book, because the whole book has its life in him. The description of Mir Nihal's illness is a masterpiece in itself. One finds nothing comparable to it either among Urdu novels—which have no serious standing—or in Western fiction as well. In at least two places this novel acquires the effect of Flaubert; the only difference being that Ahmed Ali is most sympathetic to his characters and Flaubert's attitude at such moments becomes critical. That is how even the comic elements in Ahmed Ali produce an effect of pity. One of these moments is when the pelican, having been procured with such difficulty, is being killed and not only the children but even the old maidservant Dilchin comes to watch it. The other is the moment when one of Mir Nihal's arms regains sufficient strength and, to while away his time, he traps mongooses. One day a mongoose and its mate are busy at love-play and the female saunters into the trap. At this moment Mir Nihal suddenly remembers Babban Jan and does not pull the trap shut, and from that day has the trap removed.

Illness and death are moments where a writer can be judged. At such moments one either becomes emotional or ineffective. But Ahmed Ali escapes being either. At two places in the book one finds death treated in detail—that of Bilqueece, then of Habibuddin. Both have been treated with great restraint and subtlety. In the description of the plague after World War I, Ahmed Ali has shown [narrative] mastery. The way he has described the heartless plunder by grave-diggers, washers of dead bodies, shroud thieves and sellers of shrouds is simply matchless. Only Ahmed Ali could create the horrific atmosphere of universal death and all-around dishonesty. I am using these conventional terms of praise because I too have written a few stories, however poor they may be.[11] Reading his

[11]Muhammad Hasan Askari (d. 1978) was and is, in fact, ranked among the foremost Urdu short story writers; he is, however, better known as a leading critic. He taught English; he also knew French and translated Flaubert's novel *Madam Bouvary.* Toward the end of his life he became interested in Sufism and wrote many perceptive essays on Islamic spirituality.

masterly artistic techniques, one cannot refrain from expressing praise and esteem. The truth, in fact, is that I learned a little also about the art of story-telling from a second reading of Ahmed Ali's novel.

From this point of view the first chapter of the novel occupies a very prominent place. Ahmed Ali has done two things with great artistry. On the one hand he has presented with great artistic subtlety the atmosphere of an average Muslim household, and on the other has commenced his story. Reading this chapter one realizes what mastery Ahmed Ali has over the selection and use of detail and how he makes details significant and meaningful. There is such flow and simplicity in Ahmed Ali's study that the average reader does not realize that to say so much about a whole culture within a few pages is extremely difficult. I do not mean to make Ahmed Ali the equal of the greatest novelists of Europe, but even in every good European novel one does not come across such successful descriptive passages. Two examples are very famous for their descriptions of family life. One is the description of the house of the woman where people rent rooms or come to eat in Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*. The second is the description of a worker's family in Zola's *Germinal*. I would like to repeat again that I do not wish to place Ahmed Ali as an equal of Balzac. But this too is a fact: the things Balzac and Zola have written about were extraordinarily interesting in themselves. In contrast to this, the picture of the family which Ahmed Ali has drawn was ordinary and colorless to look at. From this point of view Ahmed Ali's task was the more difficult, for he has created color from colorlessness.

We also see the individuals of this novel. But there is another element on which Ahmed Ali lays the same emphasis as he does on men—that is, nature: the days and nights of Delhi, the sunsets and dawns, the summer, the rainy season and the changing shades of the sky, the breezes, the hot wind, the dust storms and sunshine. Ahmed Ali has given individual life to each. They have a separate existence in themselves in the novel. And then the lanes of the city, the gutters, dogs and cats, the flying pigeons, hawks and paper kites—all appear often in the novel. With these changing seasons, with the moods of nature and all the rest, Ahmed Ali has given the city an eternal and living identity and name. Among the seasons, Ahmed Ali is more conscious of summer—and even in that season, of days when the hot winds blow hard and the sky is overcast with dust and all signs of life are obliterated. This does not occur by chance in his book. He wants to depict the decay and the end of Delhi's culture. Hence the seasons have a symbolic value, and the atmosphere of the whole novel is imbued with them; the whole story takes place in this

atmosphere. So far as real appreciation of nature is concerned, Ahmed Ali is not sensitive. His attitude is not different from that of an average human being. In the Urdu novel the sensitive appreciation of Nature is extinct. This novel is in English certainly, but then Ahmed Ali is, after all, an Urdu writer. Hence a comparison with the Urdu writers will not be out of place. I cannot recall any novel or short story in Urdu where nature has thus come to life, or in which nature has played such a role in making the novel so meaningful. There may not be the same delicacy in Ahmed Ali's feeling for nature, but sweetness there is. In a novel of this collective type, finesse of feeling is not necessary either; and there is the possibility that such finesse may have detracted from the spirit of collectivity. But here Ahmed Ali's feelings are one with his characters', and this gives the effect that, in spite of decay, the feelings of the people of Delhi have not become blunt. Their life is still scented with the smell of jasmine; and when we finish the book we too realize, like E.M. Forster, that beauty has gone out of life.

There is another factor which creates in this novel a sense of unity and intensity: the awareness of the flight of time. This thought is so intense in Ahmed Ali that his imagination acquires momentum from it, and this becomes the source of his artistic vitality. Ahmed Ali has undoubtedly written a few emotional sentences about the vagaries of time, but this feeling in him is unsentimental and sound. One could form an idea of him from the character of Mir Nihal itself. Even here we cannot find his equal among Urdu authors. The reason for the depth and universality of this feeling is that this sense is not born in Ahmed Ali from personal experiences of life, but from attachment and love of a whole civilization. That is why the sense of time does not lead to more sadness or pessimism in him, but carries within it tragic elements.

Because the effect of time is not confined to Delhi alone, but applies to the whole of humanity, this novel does not remain the story of Delhi alone, but is simultaneously the story of the life of mankind. When we finish the book, the center of our tragic sense is not Delhi alone, but life itself. The cumulative effect of the book leads one to ask fundamental and knotty questions about life and the human condition. Why does beauty come to an end? Why does life rush involuntarily towards death? If death is the final goal of all things, why was life created in the first place? The difficulty in finding answers to these questions is clear from the fact that at the close of the book nature in all its wonder and awe overshadows man and engulfs him within itself.

This is the cumulative impression of the book. Yet there is another

aspect which remains. Mir Nihal becomes a paralytic himself, but asks his grandson to struggle for freedom when he comes of age. Mir Nihal's bones must be buried and decay, but his grandson must dream the dream of a new life, a new harmony, a new civilization and way of life. Mirza the milkseller had sacrificed his son in the path of independence. Hundreds of such brave heroes must still be alive. From the twilight of Delhi arose the dawn of Pakistan. Until Ahmed Ali writes the second part of the novel, his book remains incomplete.

—Translated by Carlo Coppola