

I MONDI DI ZENO

La *coscienza* di Svevo un secolo dopo

A cura di
Olmo Andrea Calzolari e Giulia Perosa



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SASKIA ELIZABETH ZIOLKOWSKI

ITALO SVEVO AND WOMEN'S WRITING

Italo Svevo drew on multiple linguistic traditions and fits awkwardly into any singular national tradition, largely because of Trieste's complexity¹. Scholars have shown the significance of different national traditions for understanding him, most prominently Italian, German, and Austrian, but also French, since it was a dominant cultural tradition. Svevo's English experiences and influences have, meanwhile, been less noted, although he spent a substantial amount of time in London between 1901 and 1926, read English literature, and attended Anglophone plays, from ones by his beloved William Shakespeare to George Bernard Shaw, whom he met². Last century the city's role in Svevo's development was ignored because of the complexity of his background and dismissals of England being just a place of work, but Brian Moloney and John Gatt-Rutter's 2003 collection of Svevo's London writings underscored the formative importance of England for Svevo³. In addition, his early reception features important British mediators, who have also been of less critical interest than his French and Italian ones⁴. Whereas his French and Italian receptions highlight male writers, Svevo's English one underscores the important role women and their relationships played in fostering inter-

¹ Cfr. SALVATORE PAPPALARDO, *Modernism in Trieste: The Habsburg Mediterranean and the Literary Invention of Europe, 1870-1945*, London-New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021 and ELIZABETH SCHÄCHTER, *Origin and Identity: Essays on Svevo and Trieste*, Leeds, Northern Universities Press, 2000.

² On England and Svevo see EAD., *Italo Svevo and England*, in «Notes and Queries», LV (2008), 4, pp. 501-505 and SASKIA ELIZABETH ZIOLKOWSKI, *Italo Svevo e Virginia Woolf a Londra. Fama, modernismo e malattia*, trans. by FRANCESCA MAGARIO, SERGIA ADAMO, in «Aghios. Quaderni di studi sveviani», 2022, 4, pp. 35-60.

³ ITALO SVEVO, "This England Is So Different...": *Italo Svevo's London Writings*, edited and trans. by JOHN GATT-RUTTER, BRIAN MOLONEY, Leicester, Troubador, 2003.

⁴ For more on Svevo's early English-language reception see GIULIA PEROSA, *Le prime traduzioni inglesi dell'opera di Svevo: nuove considerazioni alla luce delle carte d'archivio*, in «Lingue antiche e moderne», XI (2022), pp. 113-137.

national modernism⁵. Virginia Woolf, Beryl de Zoete, and Vita Sackville-West, all associated with Bloomsbury, were crucial in the circulation of Svevo's first English-language works.

Sackville-West was famous in her time and Woolf is now, whereas Svevo's status in Anglophone circles has remained limited. He lacks the name recognition of many of the modernist authors with whom he is associated. There are, however, a notable number of twenty-first-century Anglophone women writers, including Rachel Cusk, Nicole Krauss, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sigrid Nunez, and Adelle Waldman, who have found Svevo a productive reference point and inspiration. These authors are key in current debates about gender and writing, especially about how writing can probe gender boundaries, give voice to diverse experiences, and constitute a form of identity itself. This chapter discusses Svevo and women authors to consider how Italian and English traditions intersect for both Svevo and his reception, as well as shed light on Svevo's relationship to women's writing. I first investigate elements of Svevo's writing that contemporary women authors find appealing, then discuss the women intellectuals of Svevo's time, and finally consider his female characters and potential precursors.

1. Svevo and Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century: Challenging National and Gender Boundaries

In a piece for *The Guardian*, first published in English, Elena Ferrante considers if it would be possible to change Zeno Cosini's sex: «Certe volte faccio un gioco tra me e me: prendo racconti con protagonisti maschili – racconti famosi che mi sono piaciuti moltissimo – e mi chiedo: se la protagonista fosse una donna, funzionerebbero ugualmente? Il Bartleby di Melville, per esempio, potrebbe essere al femminile? E il Jekyll di Stevenson? E Zeno di Italo Svevo?»⁶. Ferrante dedicates more attention to Svevo in *La pena e a la penna*, which reflects on her writing process and what it means to be an author. Ferrante opens by discussing her own early writing, Svevo, Gaspara Stampa, and Virginia Woolf. Ferrante quotes a passage from *La coscienza di Zeno* that reflects on the complicated relationship between body and thought:

⁵ On women and modernism see MARIA BUCUR, *Gendering Modernism: A Historical Reappraisal of the Canon*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017. On Svevo, women, and modernism see GIULIANA MINGHELLI, *In the Shadow of the Mammoth: Italo Svevo and the Emergence of Modernism*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002.

⁶ ELENA FERRANTE, *I like to rewrite stories – swapping men for women. It doesn't always work*, trans. by ANN GOLDSTEIN, in *The Guardian*, 8 December 2018 (www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/dec/08/elena-ferrante-rewrite-other-peoples-stories). This can also be found in EAD., *L'invenzione occasionale*, Roma, E/O, 2019, p. 99.

Dopo pranzato, sdraiato comodamente su una poltrona Club, ho la matita e un pezzo di carta in mano. La mia fronte è spianata perché dalla mia mente elimino ogni sforzo. Il mio pensiero mi appare isolato da me. Io lo vedo. S'alza, s'abbassa... Ma è la sua sola attività. Per ricordargli ch'esso è il pensiero e che sarebbe suo compito di manifestarsi, afferro la matita. Ecco che la mia fronte si corruga perché ogni parola è composta di tante lettere e il presente imperioso risorge ed offusca il passato⁷.

This quotation contains Zeno's combination of aiming for wholeness, but being unable to avoid examining the parts, as well as the novel's in-depth investigation of memory. Ferrante identifies with Zeno's struggles: «E questo brano di Svevo mi ha sempre suggestionata, fin da ragazza. Scrivevo di continuo, anche se mi risultava faticoso e quasi sempre deludente. Quando lessi quel passo, mi convinsi che Zeno Cosini avesse problemi simili ai miei, ma ne sapesse molto di più»⁸.

It may not be surprising that Ferrante, an Italian author with related obsessions, such as smoking and jealousy, finds productive models for the creation of literature in Svevo, but she is one of many contemporary women authors who not only discuss his importance but have, like Ferrante, also prompted debate about the relationship between gender and fiction, particularly the portrayal of women by men and vice versa. Nicole Krauss highlights Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* as one of five works she thought about while writing *Great House* (2010): «[Zeno's] confessions are fantastic, hugely entertaining, and totally unreliable»⁹. Krauss is also the author of *To Be a Man* (2020) and subject of pieces like *The idea of manhood is so beleaguered*¹⁰. Along with Eugenio Montale, Sigrid Nunez, a German-Chinese-Panamanian-American author born in 1951, provided one of the two blurbs for *A Very Old Man*, Frederika Randall's 2022 translation of Svevo's *Il vegliardo*¹¹. Among other works, Nunez wrote *Mitz* (1998), about Virginia and Leonard Woolf's marmoset, and *The Friend* (2018), about a dog. She has been compared to Rachel Cusk, who explores the boundaries between literature and reality, parenthood, and female modes of artistic creation. Cusk's *The Last Supper* (2009), which has been situated among works that describes finding oneself in Italy, includes a reference to *Una vita* that highlights the significance of family in Svevo's novel: «When they speak like this they remind me of the characters in Italo

⁷ EAD., *I margini e il dettato*, Roma, E/O, 2021, p. 18.

⁸ Ivi, p. 19.

⁹ NICOLE KRAUSS, *Nicole Krauss's Five Riveting Confessions*, in *New York Magazine*, 2010 (nymag.com/includes/3/daily/entertainment/recommends/recommends-nicolekrauss.html).

¹⁰ EAD., *The Idea of Manhood is so Beleaguered*, in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2020 (www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/24/nicole-krauss-the-idea-of-manhood-is-so-beleaguered).

¹¹ ITALO SVEVO, *A Very Old Man*, trans. by FREDERIKA RANDALL, New York, New York Review of Books, 2022.

Svevo's *A Life*, of the hero Alfonso, whose experience of love and belonging could not be disentangled from his mother and the valley where he grew up»¹².

Jhumpa Lahiri chose Svevo's *Vino generoso* for the *Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories* that has broadened English readers' perception of the Italian literary landscape¹³. His writing provides the epigraph for her novel *Dove mi trovo* (2018): «Ad ogni mutamento di posto io provo una grande enorme tristezza. Non maggiore quando lascio un luogo cui si connettono dei ricordi o dei dolori e piacere. E il mutamento stesso che m'agita come il liquido in un vaso che scosso s'intorbida»¹⁴. He was a touchstone for her nomination of Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* for the 2023 Strega Prize: «La lingua italiana è sempre un personaggio cruciale nella narrativa di Igiaba Scego. Come Primo Levi, Italo Svevo, e altri scrittori di confine che hanno indagato e arricchito l'italiano per via della loro condizione ibrida»¹⁵. The hybridity Lahiri refers to has been discussed in terms of Svevo and Levi's occupations, Jewish identities, and cities. Also focusing on *confine* and language, Ferrante describes the author's language rather than birthplace as the determining factor for literary belonging: «Preferisco la nazionalità linguistica in quanto punto di partenza per dialogare, in quanto sforzo di passare il limite, guardare oltre il confine, oltre tutti i confini, innanzitutto quelli di genere»¹⁶. Her definition more easily accommodates Lahiri's and Svevo's writing than one based on national identity determined by geopolitical location. Ferrante associates the crossing of national *confine*, with the crossing of other borders, including gender. Pseudonyms, such as Elena Ferrante, Curren Bell, and Italo Svevo, can reveal complicated relationships between authors and their national or gender identity, which Ferrante associates together.

Kwame Anthony Appiah chose Svevo as an author that disrupts concepts of national identity: «And yet, in the canons of our culture, Italo Svevo is still with us. The tolerant, pluralist, self-questioning, and cosmopolitan modernity he embodied is, to be sure, under attack. The confessions of ambivalence will always seem at a disadvantage amid the fervent partisans of nativism»¹⁷. A hallmark of *La coscienza di Zeno* is how it represents the subjectivity of time, which at the end of the novel relates to both the fluidity of national borders and gender. In *Women's Time*, Julia Kristeva disassociates women and the time of history and national identity: «fe-

¹² RACHEL CUSK, *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, p. 192.

¹³ ITALO SVEVO, *Generous Wine*, trans. by JOHN PENUEL, in *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, edited by JHUMPA LAHIRI, London, Penguin, 2019, pp. 57-72.

¹⁴ JHUMPA LAHIRI, *Dove mi trovo*, Milano, Guanda, 2018, p. 5.

¹⁵ EAD., *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, in premiostrega.it/PS/libro/cassandra-a-mogadiscio/.

¹⁶ ELENA FERRANTE, *L'invenzione occasionale*, cit., p. 192.

¹⁷ KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity, Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture*, New York, Liveright, 2018, p. 104.

male subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival – in other words, the time of history»¹⁸. Zeno's wife Augusta has a firmer belief in rules, marriage, progress, law, and national authority, suggesting another way that men's "time" is undercut in *La coscienza di Zeno*, with a narrator who frequently finds time cyclical and relative. Svevo challenges divisions and the solidity of any identity. Many of the vacillations of Svevo's characters can be contextualized by Judith Butler's arguments about the performativity of identity, including gender. In *Una vita*, Alfonso's boss chastises him for not expressing his masculinity properly in a letter meant for his mother: «Capisco, capisco! ma via, siamo uomini! – e ripeté più volte questa frase»¹⁹. In *La coscienza di Zeno*, Zeno's masculinity, as so many of his qualities, turns out to be contingent on circumstance: «Il mio contegno virile sparve subito»²⁰. Svevo tends to be fit into frameworks, including Freudian, desiring heroes²¹, or anti-heroes²², that include certain assumptions about the gender roles that his works also at times contest.

How Svevo can both represent and undermine masculine writing is revealed by his place in *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* by Adelle Waldman. The novel prompted debate about a woman author who described the superiority of a male perspective, especially regarding women's intelligence, with penetrating detail. In the work, Svevo stands for niche, smart fiction, belonging primarily to the realm of men: «And if [the women on the subway] hadn't read Svevo or Bernhard – and let's face it, most hadn't – at least they knew who they were. ("Zeno's Conscience, right? Doesn't James Wood, like, love that book?")»²³. Nathaniel-Nate analyzes his girlfriend's literary preferences, remarking that she was led to Svevo by men:

Her taste, for example, was great – inasmuch as it was received, inasmuch as she absorbed what was fashionably highbrow. She really liked, say, Svevo – was able to see myriad virtues in Svevo – once she was primed to like Svevo, once she knew that Svevo was someone she was supposed to like. Once her father, the professor, or her boss, the Very Important Editor, had sung the praises of Svevo. But other times, railing against the 'male literary establishment,' she'd

¹⁸ JULIA KRISTEVA, *Women's Time*, trans. by ALICE JARDINE, HARRY BLAKE, in «Signs», VII (1981), 1, p. 17.

¹⁹ ITALO SVEVO, *Una vita*, Roma, Newton Compton, 2003, p. 47.

²⁰ ID., *La coscienza di Zeno*, a cura di BEATRICE STASI, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008, p. 43.

²¹ TERESA DE LAURETIS, *La sintassi del desiderio. Struttura e forme del romanzo sveviano*, Ravenna, Longo, 1976.

²² VICTOR BROMBERT, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830-1980*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

²³ ADELLE WALDMAN, *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, New York, Picador, 2014, p. 35.

assert (to Nate, never to her coworkers) the value of some schmaltzy if well-meaning piece of middlebrow fiction about a girl and her mother, or a girl and her best friend, or a girl and the black woman who helped to raise her, who together combatted predatory males and social injustice and ultimately learned the redemptive power of love. Those were the books she really liked, Nate realized after a while. The Svevo, the aging intellectuals of the *New York Review of Books* – all that, it turned out, was for show, even if she was putting on the show for herself as much as for anyone else²⁴.

The narrator represents a certain kind of judgmental male perspective, which Svevo epitomizes for Nate, but Svevo's presence in the novel also suggests Nate's understandings of gender and literature are misplaced. The Svevo of the «male literary establishment» and «middlebrow fiction» (of the “female literary establishment”?) do not belong to as different worlds as Nate believes, evidenced not only by writers such as Ferrante but also Svevo's own work.

2. Writers of Svevo's Time, Beyond the Wife Role

Nate's understanding of his girlfriend and the depiction of Annetta in *Una vita* both reveal the potential performativity of literary taste. In Annetta's salon, composed of men, most or perhaps all of whom desire her, literary opinions are a mode of expressing social status. Annetta directs Alfonso's writing and prompts them to create, together, a terrible novel. *Una vita* describes Annetta as becoming a man through literary criticism: «Non era una donna quando parlava di letteratura. Era un uomo nella lotta per la vita, moralmente un essere muscoloso»²⁵. Annetta here is characterized as a man or occupying a masculine role because of her engagement with literature.

At the same time, according to Macario (whom she later marries), her interests began because of the number of women writers of her time: «È bellissima così. Passa mezza giornata a tavolino. Ecco almeno una vocazione che non inquieta nessuno; fra qualche mese non ne parlerà più. Credo le abbia turbata la mente la fama conquistata in Italia da altre donne. Queste donne! Una comincia e le altre seguono come le oche. L'esempio degli uomini non conta per esse»²⁶. While Macario's comments certainly do not necessarily reflect Svevo's thoughts, they prompt a consideration of the women authors who gained substantial recognition in Svevo's time. Matilde Serao's first novel *Fantasia* was published in 1883, Annie Vivanti's debut poetry collection *Lirica* in 1890, and Grazia Deledda's *Fior di Sardegna* in

²⁴ Ivi, p. 128.

²⁵ ITALO SVEVO, *Una vita*, cit., p. 135.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 113.

1892. The Triestine author Ida Finzi published under the name Haydée starting in 1885. Svevo wrote about interacting with her in his *Diario per la fidanzata*: «Intanto Haydée mi parlava di letteratura e l'altra signorina mi sussurrava nelle orecchie ch'ella aveva letto Paul de Kock»²⁷. Later, in 1906, Sibilla Aleramo published *Una Donna* and in 1926 Deledda won the Nobel Prize.

While not always intellectuals, there are many women writing in Svevo's works, from Alfonso's less educated mother to Francesca's manipulative missives to Annetta with her literary aspirations to Angiolina's crafted letters to Alberta in *La coscienza di Zeno*, who reveals her aspirations to Zeno: «So che siete un buon diavolo eppoi, senza saperlo, sapete molte cose, mentre i miei professori sanno esattamente quello che fanno. Io non voglio sposarmi. Forse mi ricrederò, ma per il momento non ho che una metà: vorrei diventare una scrittrice»²⁸. Zeno's attempt to assert that learning is a masculine space humourously fails:

Si lamentò che il latino le riusciva molto difficile. Dissi di non meravigliarmene perché era una lingua che non faceva per le donne, tanto ch'io pensavo che già dagli antichi romani le donne avessero parlato l'italiano. Invece per me – asserii – il latino aveva rappresentata la materia prediletta. Poco dopo però commisi la leggerezza di fare una citazione latina che Alberta dovette correggermi²⁹.

La coscienza di Zeno both proposes and then undercuts the idea of masculine dominance.

Svevo witnessed a growth in women's power, culturally and politically. Svevo's audience for his Joyce lecture was composed mostly of women: «A Milano ove fui tutta la settimana scorsa lessi al *Convegno* su James Joyce. Mia moglie dice che lessi bene. Era un pubblico di donne»³⁰. He wrote Silvio Benco about England's shifting political landscape with a focus on political couples: «Il *Daily Telegraph* si meraviglia che accanto a Snowden non sia posta anche sua moglie al Ministero, una donna letterariamente attiva e che sempre vivamente partecipò alla vita e alle opere del marito. La simpatia di tutta la Nazione va specialmente alle donne che coi mariti o padri salirono tanto in alto»³¹. Ada's comments in *La coscienza di Zeno* reflect Svevo's attention to England's more progressive landscape for women:

raccontò che le donne in Inghilterra erano tutt'altra cosa che da noi. S'associaivano per scopi di beneficenza, religiosi o anche economici. Ada veniva spinta a parlare dalle sorelle che volevano riudire quelle cose che apparivano

²⁷ L, p. 471.

²⁸ Id., *La coscienza di Zeno*, cit., pp. 129-130.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 74.

³⁰ L, p. 1100.

³¹ Ivi, p. 958.

meravigliose a fanciulle della nostra città in quell'epoca. E, per compiacerle, Ada raccontò di quelle donne presidentesse, giornaliste, segretarie e propagandiste politiche che salivano il pulpito per parlare a centinaia di persone senz'arrossire³².

Her sisters listen attentively to the range of roles women take on in England, reflecting the shifting interests of women in Trieste as well.

As Svevo's own fame grew, his correspondence increased with not only the often-discussed men of his time but also with women who helped shaped modernism. In 1926 Svevo responded to Sylvia Beach, agreeing to be a signatory on a letter of support, along with Pirandello, Mann, Eliot, and others, for the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*:

I received your kind letter and am simply charmed to be admitted – if only for once – amongst the finest fellows of the literary world.

[...]

I thank you for your amiable wishes. I present you mine and those of Mrs. Schmitz. We both remember always with the greatest pleasure Rue de l'Odéon with the two shops of happiness (I think it is an expression of Mr. Larbaud). Would you be so kind to remember us most kindly to your dear French neighbor Miss Monnier?³³

While part of this letter highlights the great «fellows of the literary world», Svevo here also shares his best wishes from him and his wife to Beach and her romantic partner, Adrienne Monnier, suggesting the importance of these connections.

Many of Svevo's intellectual interactions with women involve couples, indicating the significance of these social networks for the development of literature. Svevo wrote Marie-Anne Comnène as an intellectual involved in the Parisian literary scene, but also as Benjamin Crémieux's wife. His correspondence with her grew in part because she responded more frequently than her husband. Svevo shared his laments and joys as his work began to find more readers: «Non Le nascondo le mia soddisfazione per la lettera di Prezzolini. È il primo Italiano di fama che appone la sua firma al giudizio dei miei grandi amici francesi»³⁴. A translator of Pirandello, novelist, and intellectual, Comnène was attentive to connections between Italy's and France's cultural scenes. Svevo complains to her of Pirandello's silence, but also expresses his gratitude for her attention: «Quell' indimenticabile Suo salotto funestato solo dalla fotografia di Pirandello (cui mandai il mio romanzo e scrissi quattro mesi fa senza che si degnasse di rispondermi e perciò non lo posso soffrire

³² Id., *La coscienza di Zenò*, cit., p. 74.

³³ L., p. 1080.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 768.

perché non basta scrivere dei capolavori, ma saper intendere *La Coscienza*), quel salotto ha la più massima importanza nella mia fortuna»³⁵. Comnène put in motion the Paris Pen Club dinner honoring Svevo: «Ma io al 'Penclub' voglio andarci protetto da Lei»³⁶. Svevo later wrote of his and Livia Veneziani's nostalgia for Paris, Comnène, and Crémieux³⁷. By the end of their exchanges, Comnène and Svevo are closer («Non siamo più degli stranieri e sappiamo la vostra vita»), with Svevo frequently inviting her to Trieste: «Io ci ho tante cose belle qui da farvi vedere e di cui sono fiero»³⁸. Svevo wanted Comnène and Crémieux to come to Trieste, Joyce to write of Trieste, and his own literature to help put Trieste on the literary map. The letters between Svevo and Comnène are part of a larger picture of Svevo's modernist participation.

In 1926, Svevo wrote Comnène about receiving and reading «Commerce» and «Nouvelle Revue Française»³⁹. Some of Svevo's reading of modernist journals may also have been due to self-interest. Joyce wrote him: «Caro amico: Buone notizie. Larbaud ha letto il Suo romanzo. Gli piace molto. Ne scriverà una recensione nella *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Ne ha scritto anche ad una sua amica la signora Sibilla Aleramo della *Tribuna*». «Commerce», meanwhile, owed a great deal to Marguerite Caetani, whom Svevo, like many others referred to as «principessa» and «Gentildonna», and from whom he sought aid in circulation⁴⁰. Massimiliano Tortora points out that Caetani's presence was larger than what the journal's official materials reveal: «I direttori erano Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue e Valery Larbaud, mentre ideatrice e mecenate dell'impresa fu Marguerite Caetani»⁴¹. Women like Comnène, Caetani, and Aleramo were among the shapers and gatekeepers of new literary styles in Svevo's time.

In 1926 «Commerce» published a translated section from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, preceding the novel's publication in 1927⁴². Some of the connections between Woolf and Svevo can be traced through their reading of and inclusion in modernist journals⁴³. Also in 1926, Woolf and Svevo appeared in Thomas Stearns

³⁵ Ivi, p. 770.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 1156.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 1165.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 887.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 832.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 970, 985 and 1084.

⁴¹ MASSIMILIANO TORTORA, *Ungaretti e «Commerce»*, in *La rivista «Commerce» e Marguerite Caetani*, direzione di SOPHIE LEVIE, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2012, II. *Giuseppe Ungaretti. Lettere a Marguerite Caetani*, p. XXXV.

⁴² VIRGINIA WOOLF, *Le Temps Passe* [a section of *To the Lighthouse*], trans. by CHARLES MAURON, in «Commerce», 1926, 10, pp. 295-311.

⁴³ On Woolf and Svevo see also SASKIA ELIZABETH ZIOLKOWSKI, *Who's Afraid of Italo Svevo? Routes of Modernism between Trieste and Virginia Woolf's London*, in «Modern Language Quarterly», LXXXV (2024), 1, pp. 29-52.

Eliot's *The New Criterion*, a journal they both read. Woolf is discussed by Edward Morgan Forster, she published her *On Being Ill*, and Svevo is discussed by Giovanni Battista Angioletti, albeit mostly negatively⁴⁴. While Svevo most likely both read Woolf's writing and about Woolf in the modernist journals, Woolf certainly read Svevo. She owned his *Confessions of Zeno* and Hogarth Press, directed by Woolf and her husband, was the first to publish Svevo in English⁴⁵. The press printed 1,000 copies of Svevo's *The Hoax*, twice as many as Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, also released in 1929⁴⁶. Svevo-Woolf associations add to the picture of modernism, in which his connections with Joyce, Kafka, Pirandello, or Proust are better known.

Woolf's friend and lover Sackville-West discussed Hogarth's *The Hoax* on a B.B.C. radio program in 1929 and praised *The Confessions of Zeno* in a 1930 review for *The Spectator*⁴⁷. *The Hoax*, *The Confessions of Zeno*, and *As a Man Grows Older* were translated by Beryl de Zoete, who also promoted Svevo in articles. The first and second translations from Italian published by Hogarth Press were both by Svevo. While Pirandello and futurism are the most prominent examples of modernist work from Italy in Anglophone criticism, following Hogarth Press presents a view of modernism that instead centers Svevo.

Although Svevo's growing fame, related correspondence, and early reception call attention to his intellectual interactions with women later in life and their roles in fostering his international readership, Svevo's intellectual development involved women interlocutors and correspondence throughout his life. At school, Svevo received Shakespeare's works from Anna Herz, with a dedication about him being his favorite poet. In 1884, Svevo sent a copy of Shakespeare to Eleonora Duse, signed from Shakespeare⁴⁸. Most significantly, the largest number of letters he wrote are to his wife Livia Veneziani, who has increasingly been shown as significant both for Svevo's reception and to understand him⁴⁹. In the new edition of his letters, Simone Ticciati recognizes Veneziani as an individual, whereas in the previous edition, she is not named in the index, but merely «moglie»⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ GIOVANNI BATTISTA ANGIOLETTI, *Italian Chronicle*, in «The Criterion», IV (1926), 3, pp. 574-580.

⁴⁵ On Svevo's early English translations see GIULIA PEROSA, *Le prime traduzioni inglesi dell'opera di Svevo*, cit., and SASKIA ELIZABETH ZIOLKOWSKI, *Italo Svevo e Virginia Woolf a Londra*, cit.

⁴⁶ JOHN H. WILLIS, *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: the Hogarth Press, 1917-41*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1992.

⁴⁷ VITA SACKVILLE-WEST, *Six Months in Fiction*, in «The Spectator», 1930, 144, pp. 1055-1056.

⁴⁸ Posing as Shakespeare, Svevo expressed the hope that Duse would perform the play. This note is transcribed in ELIO SCHMITZ, *Diario*, a cura di LUCA DE ANGELIS, Palermo, Sellerio, 1997, p. 137.

⁴⁹ *Vita di mio marito: Livia Veneziani racconta Svevo*, Trieste, Museo Sveviano, 2001.

⁵⁰ ITALO SVEVO, *Carteggio con James Joyce, Valery Larbaud, Benjamin Cr nieux, Marie Anne Comn ne, Eugenio Montale, Vaerio Jabier*, a cura di BRUNO MAIER, Milano, Dall'Oglio, 1965.

While Svevo's earlier letters are often framed as less significant, historically and for literary history, than his later letters with Crémieux, Joyce, Larbaud, and Montale, his letters to Veneziani explore desire, smoking, self-fashioning, jealousy, and marital misunderstandings, which are also central to *La coscienza di Zeno*. The letters at times also reflect on authors, such as Curren Bell, Charlotte Brönte's penname: «Di queste preoccupazioni non parlo con nessuno. Questa notte devo avverti chiamata ad alta voce perché dalla mia stessa voce fui destato. Curren Bell t'avrebbe fatto sentire il mio grido, la natura invece non annulla mai lo spazio»⁵¹. Svevo's literaturization of life takes shape here. His multilingual wife and most consistent reader (the majority of Svevo's letters are to her), offered him a counterpoint and contributed to his evolution as author. To draw on Ferrante's game, if the sexes were flipped, and Svevo were a female author writing these letters to her husband, they would most likely be considered more important to the author's development. Mary Beard's review of Peter Brown's autobiography *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History* questions the tendency to discount the home as intellectually productive: «But, even keeping the intellectual focus, did Brown's partners and children really have no influence whatsoever on how his ideas developed? Was nothing ever said over breakfast that set him off in a different direction?»⁵². Domestic experiences are much more likely to be included for a woman writer than a man.

In Svevo's literature, marriage is generative, *La coscienza di Zeno* is his most open work, with the continuation or *Il vegliardo* following it. *La coscienza di Zeno* has been distinguished from Svevo's first two novels for many reasons, including the move to the first person, psychoanalysis and Freud, Joyce's encouragement, reading Kierkegaard, and the war⁵³. Marriage could be added to this list, since without marriage there seems to be no path forward for Alfonso and Emilio, an end to narrative possibilities. *La coscienza di Zeno*, meanwhile, brings together a multiplicity of marriage plots and tropes. Zeno grasps at philosophies that will support how he is feeling at any given moment: «Ricordavo quel filosofo greco che prevedeva il pentimento tanto per chi si sposava quanto per chi rimaneva celibe»⁵⁴. Texts imprint and challenge Zeno's experience of reality. As often noted, Darwin, Schopenhauer, and Weininger contribute ideas that shape Zeno's understandings of marriage and procreation, but he claims to not see a reflection of his own experiences in any singular text:

⁵¹ L, p. 230.

⁵² MARY BEARD, *Travels with his Aunts*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 September 2023 (www.the-tls.co.uk/lives/autobiography/journeys-of-the-mind-peter-brown-book-review-mary-beard/).

⁵³ EMMA BOND, *Irony as a Way of Life: Svevo, Kierkegaard, and Psychoanalysis*, in «Philosophy and Literature», LX (2016), 2, pp. 431-445.

⁵⁴ ITALO SVEVO, *La coscienza di Zeno*, cit., p. 87.

Chi non l'ha ancora sperimentato crede il matrimonio più importante di quanto non sia. La compagna che si sceglie rinnoverà, peggiorando o migliorando la propria razza nei figli, ma madre natura che questo vuole e che per via diretta non saprebbe dirigerci, perché in allora ai figli non pensiamo affatto, ci dà a credere che dalla moglie risulterà anche un rinnovamento nostro, ciò ch'è un'illusione curiosa non autorizzata da alcun testo⁵⁵.

Zeno reflects on how he perhaps should have behaved as if he were a character in a novel about love: «Scelta la fanciulla, avrei anche potuto esaminarla un po' meglio e accettarmi almeno ch'essa sarebbe stata disposta di venirmi incontro a mezza strada come si usa nei romanzi d'amore a conclusione felice»⁵⁶. Almost all of the plot points of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are drawn on and subverted in the chapter of *La coscienza di Zeno* on marriage⁵⁷. In both novels, mothers attempt to orchestrate. Zeno, like Mr. Collins, plans on marrying a sister from a certain family. He proposes to multiple women, in a rush to marry rather than necessarily out of love for one person. Mr. Collins easily moves his sights from the eldest sister to the second eldest and then to her friend Charlotte, who at last accepts him, as Austen writes: «Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want»⁵⁸. Austen famously never portrays men alone, since it would not have been something she herself would have experienced. This scholarly observation is made overt and expanded upon in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Zeno comments that he will never hear his mother-in-law's side of his engagement and therefore he will never know the whole story: «È tanto ben educata che non può capitarle come al marito di bere troppo per rivelarmi i miei affari. Infatti mai le accadde nulla di simile e perciò io sto raccontando una storia che non conosco bene; non so cioè se sia dovuto alla sua furberia o alla mia bestialità ch'io abbia sposata quella delle sue figliuole ch'io non volevo»⁵⁹. Marriage draws attention to the ridiculousness of society, social constructs, and human behavior. Svevo in his modernist vein and Austen in her drawing rooms observe how changeable people are: «But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever»⁶⁰.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 61.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 78.

⁵⁷ On Augusta and Zeno as Elizabeth and Darcy see JAMES NIKOPOULOS, *Zeno Cosini's philosophy of humor*, in «Forum Italicum», XLVI (2012), 2, p. 362.

⁵⁸ JANE AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 94.

⁵⁹ ITALO SVEVO, *La coscienza di Zeno*, cit., p. 70.

⁶⁰ JANE AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 31.

Zeno first encounters Augusta reading. She is characterized, for instance by Victor Brombert, as the one who comprehends Zeno's relationship to fiction, perhaps better than he himself does: «Only Augusta, his maternally smiling wife, understands from the beginning that Zeno's habitual fiction or lies give away his deeper self precisely because they are invented by him»⁶¹. In contrast to Augusta, Zeno is surprised by the comforts of marriage: "Ma perché ti sorprendi? Non sapevi che il matrimonio è fatto così? Lo sapevo pur io che sono tanto più ignorante di te!"⁶². *La coscienza di Zeno* frequently puts on the same plane various kinds of knowledge, showing the value of different epistemologies. While Zeno's approach to the world is most often compared with his rivals and father figures, especially Guido, Giovanni, and his own father, Augusta and the women of the novel also offer potential contrasts, not just figures who are desired or loved, but also as subjects with different views of the world, who understand things that Zeno does not. Highlighting Svevo's influence on women writers and the role of women intellectuals in his reception puts him in a female genealogy that is too frequently kept separate. Even though early readers critiqued Svevo's male characters for being effeminate, Svevo and his works have largely been put in the company of male authors, such as Freud, Kafka, Nietzsche, Pirandello, Proust, and Schopenhauer. Svevo's intellectual connections with women have been somewhat underestimated because of disciplinary conventions that Svevo's own work quietly and ironically challenges.

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