

# Who's Afraid of Italo Svevo? Routes of European Modernism between Trieste and Virginia Woolf's London

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*Abstract* The Triestine author Italo Svevo spent a considerable amount of time in London and its environs between 1901 and 1926. His experiences there influenced his modernist writing, including *Zeno's Conscience*, his most famous novel. Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press was the first to publish Svevo's work in English. His story "The Hoax" marked their first translation from Italian and his short story collection *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl and Other Stories* their second, helping shape the press's international modernist program. Despite residing in the same quickly changing city in the same period and despite their literary connections, Svevo and Virginia Woolf have rarely been compared. They have been difficult to envision together in part because their gender, backgrounds, and nationalities separate them. By exploring Woolf's and Svevo's shared modernist networks, including London's influence and Hogarth Press, this article reveals Svevo's significance as an author who has not easily fit Anglophone paradigms of modernist fiction and whose associations with Woolf contribute to the growing challenges to nation-based literary histories.

*Keywords* Italo Svevo, Virginia Woolf, modernism, Italian literature

In "Pain and Pen," a reflection on her writing practices and the authors that inspire her, Elena Ferrante considers Italo Svevo and Virginia Woolf together, united by shared concepts of truth, the authorial self, and the writing process. For Ferrante (2022: 21–34), Svevo reveals the difficulty of an author transforming his thought-vision into writing

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separate from the self, and Woolf shows that an author can surpass her biographical self to write from a space of pure sensibility. Svevo and Woolf have rarely been compared, but their relationship goes beyond Ferrante's associative kinship. Because Svevo spent a considerable amount of time in London between 1901 and 1926, the two authors resided in the same quickly changing city in the same period and shared acquaintances, including T. S. Eliot.<sup>1</sup> Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press was the first house to publish Svevo's work in English. His time in modern London influenced his writing; his literature in turn helped shape the international modernist program of the Woolfs' press.

In English-language criticism, Svevo is best known for his friendship with his English tutor, James Joyce, who memorized portions of Svevo's second novel, *Senilità* (1898), first translated in English under the title *As a Man Grows Older* (1932), per Joyce's suggestion. When Svevo explained to Joyce in 1924 that the public was again ignoring his latest (and now most famous) novel, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), published in English first as *Confessions of Zeno*, then as *Zeno's Conscience*, Joyce advised him to write Valery Larbaud and Benjamin Crémieux, among others (Svevo 1965: 29–30). This contact prompted a lively exchange of letters, Svevo's translation into French, and a 1928 dinner held in Paris in his honor. This reception history supports Pascale Casanova's (2007) argument in *The World Republic of Letters* about the central role Paris played in international literary fortunes, but considering Joyce and Paris as Svevo's only major points of contact with European modernism elides the distinctiveness of Trieste's modernist culture. Italian accounts of Svevo's reception have balanced the emphasis on Joyce and France by highlighting the role of the Triestine intellectual Roberto Bazlen and the poet Eugenio Montale in Svevo's fortunes (De Savorgnani 1998; Minghelli 2002: 10–14). The dominant narratives of international modernism, meanwhile, have largely ignored Svevo's publications with Hogarth Press and his time in London.

Svevo and Woolf have been difficult to envision together in part because their gender, backgrounds, and nationalities separate them. As Andreas Huyssen (2007: 194) points out, the disciplinary structure of academic institutions tends to reify the association of modernist literature

<sup>1</sup> For more on the relationship between Woolf and Eliot, see McIntire 2008.

with national traditions. While Svevo is reflexively aligned with male, Italian figures, such as Luigi Pirandello, Woolf is similarly connected to modernists writing in English, especially female authors such as Katherine Mansfield. A growing number of scholars now explore the movements and liminality of modernist authors whom disciplinarily entrenched groupings previously obscured (Kalliney 2019; Vadde 2017). As has been long recognized, the modernist canon is in part a backward projection. Although its geographic contours have increasingly expanded, from Hugh Kenner's (1984) emphasis on Joyce, Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Samuel Beckett in "The Making of the Modernist Canon"; to Rebecca L. Walkowitz's (2006) on Joseph Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, and W. G. Sebald in *Cosmopolitan Style*; to Aarthi Vadde's (2017) on Rabindranath Tagore, Joyce, Claude McKay, George Lamming, Michael Ondaatje, and Zadie Smith in *Chimeras of Form*, English-language connections and authors consistently play a dominant role in critical constructions of modernism. Several of its foremost figures—Joyce, Eliot, and Pound—knew Italian and were Svevo's correspondents, but most narratives of modernism ignore Svevo himself, as they do several authors whose works have required translation before acquiring a wide readership. Svevo's time in London is therefore also less noted, which stands in contrast to the considerable critical attention given Joyce's experiences in Trieste.<sup>2</sup> In Anglo-American criticism, the focus on Italy as a physical location for inspiring non-Italians can overshadow the contributions of Italians themselves.

This essay investigates Svevo's significance as a modernist author who, despite his English connections, has not easily fit Anglophone paradigms of modernist fiction and whose associations with Woolf merits discussion in a reconsideration of the modernist landscape. The first section establishes a baseline for understanding Svevo's time in London and the modernist networks he shared with Woolf. The second section explores Hogarth Press and Svevo's translator Beryl de Zoete, whose central role in bringing Italian fiction to Hogarth Press highlights

<sup>2</sup> On Joyce in Trieste, see McCourt 2000. On Joyce and Svevo, see also Livorni 2018 and Moloney 2018. For two significant works that discuss Svevo and England, see Schächter 2008 and the essays and explanatory notes of John Gatt-Rutter and Brian Moloney in Svevo 2003a, which brought Svevo's England writings together, an important moment in Svevo studies.

women's importance in shaping international modernism. The third section investigates productive analogies between the two modernist authors' works, particularly in their sustained interrogations of the fluid contours of the self.

### In Woolf's London: Svevo's Routes

Eliot's modernist magazine the *New Criterion* published an article, "Italian Chronicle," that examined the limitations of Svevo's writing. Its author, G. B. Angioletti (1926: 579–80), offered a common complaint of the time, that Svevo had "for many years been a businessman in London" and therefore had "not had the opportunity for developing and refining his undeniable gifts of observation and narration." Ilya Ehrenburg (1964: 135), remembering the Paris PEN Club dinner honoring Svevo, Isaac Babel, and Ehrenburg himself, emphasized Svevo's importance as a modernist notwithstanding the criticisms of his vocation: "Svevo was often called a dilettante: he was an industrialist and he wrote very few books in his lifetime. But the part he played in the destruction of the old forms of the novel is unquestionable: his name must be set by the side of Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Andrey Bely." Ehrenburg's comments show the limitations of seeing a split between the author Italo Svevo (a pen name) and the businessman Aron Hector Schmitz (his birth name). In addition, though Svevo spent time in England because of his work in the family paint business, he also gained much as an author there.<sup>3</sup> He frequently attended the theater; despite claiming that it was "not out of love of literature, naturally, but to get used to the sound of the language" (Svevo 2003a: 258), he saw plays he was fond of, from Shakespeare to Shaw, whom he later met. Svevo reported on London's cinema and theater for Trieste's *La nazione* and noted having seen the popular musical *Chu Chin Chow*, with music by David Stamper, whose song Eliot famously rendered "O O O that Shakespeherian Rag" in *The Wasteland* (221–63).

When Svevo asked Joyce for help circulating *La coscienza di Zeno* in 1924, Joyce recommended that Svevo contact Eliot as editor of the *New*

<sup>3</sup> In 1901 Svevo writes about visiting Hyde Park, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's, Covent Garden, the London Zoo, and the British Museum. He lived in Russell Square in Bloomsbury and then Charlton (Svevo 2003a).

*Criterion* (Svevo 1965: 29). Svevo went to Eliot's apartment to give him the novel in person. Eliot was not at home but wrote Svevo to thank him for the book and invite him to lunch, initiating the authors' in-person acquaintance (Svevo 1973: 101–2). Svevo and Woolf most likely read about each other in Eliot's magazine. In 1926 the *New Criterion* published E. M. Forster's essay "The Novels of Virginia Woolf," Woolf's "On Being Ill," and the already mentioned article by Angioletti.<sup>4</sup> Svevo (1965: 195) called the *New Criterion* a "magnificent magazine," though he disliked "Italian Chronicle." In it Angioletti (1926: 580) hypothesized why Italians were so critical of writers like Svevo: "Neglected by Europe and indifferent ourselves up to a few years ago, we have at last come to wish that our art, whether it be great or small, should be regarded with sympathy by foreigners, just as we, with a renewed and intense curiosity, regard theirs. For that very reason, we wish to be the severest judges of ourselves." Angioletti suggested that Italian intellectuals were protective of their literature and reluctant to promote it abroad. When they did, it had to be literature and authors of a certain kind, which excluded Svevo because of his writing style, birthplace, schooling, and religious background.

Svevo attended a Jewish elementary school in Trieste and then boarding school in Germany.<sup>5</sup> His pen name gestures at his Italian (Italo) and German (Svevo-Swabian) background, and his Italian and Austro-Hungarian influences have been a focus of critical attention because of how they reflect his complicated roots.<sup>6</sup> Montale (1982: 115), an important champion of Svevo, emphasized his Italianness to argue for his place in the national literary tradition: "There is no more Italian writer than this Triestine educated in Germany who ignored our classics. And we have no modern novelist who has enlarged the knowledge of the

<sup>4</sup> In a December 1927 letter to Svevo, Montale discusses his first publication in English, "Arsenio," for the *New Criterion*. It had been translated by Mario Praz, whom he describes to Svevo as Eliot's friend and the artist responsible for eight drawings for Svevo's novel *Senilità* (Svevo 1965: 226).

<sup>5</sup> For biographical information about Svevo in English, see Furbank 1966, Gatt-Rutter 1988, and Lebowitz 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Although critics have demonstrated the significance of *Mitteleuropa* for Svevo, he is often excluded from criticism that focuses on German-language works, since he writes in Italian. For a range of approaches to Svevo's identity and contexts, see Camerino 1996, Leone de Castris 1989, Moloney 1973, Pappalardo 2021, Schächter 2000, and Stellardi and Tandello Cooper 2014.

human spirit more than he.” Montale was concerned that Svevo’s European qualities might prevent him from being accepted as great Italian literature. If, as Simon Gikandi (2019: 495) argues, “the earliest histories of many literatures are motivated by the need to mark out boundaries of language and culture that differentiate nations from one another,” then Italy’s later development as a nation, and the even later acquisition of Trieste, complicated Svevo’s uptake.

Svevo’s multiple identities and modernist fiction prompt rethinking national identity (see Pappalardo 2021). The Triestine author is central to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s (2018: 104) examination of national belonging, where he stands as a figurehead for a beleaguered modernity: “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 confessors of ambivalence will always seem at a disadvantage amid the fervent partisans of nativism.” Tracing Svevo’s connections to London emphasizes his “routes” rather than “roots,” to quote Stuart Hall (1996: 4), and offer one method of overcoming the strictures of national identity that authors like Svevo challenge.

Like Woolf, Svevo was struck by London’s changes, and the observed transformations of modern life became a central feature in his writing and thinking.<sup>7</sup> He wrote his wife, Livia Veneziani, in English: “London externally has changed very much. I fear that some of her changed features will not agree with you. You liked especially to see such a big traffic well regulated; in such a noise and movement you felt your life sure protected by the police and by every driver himself. That is quite changed. The traffic—it appears to me—has been increased still. It was on a Sunday, the day of rest. What a rest dear me!” (Svevo 2003a: 163). Svevo’s letter appears a more conservative reaction to the changes in life rhythms that Woolf (2006: 86) extols in her story “The Mark on the Wall”: “How shocking, yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom.” Svevo’s lifestyle was not revolutionary like that of

<sup>7</sup> Lisbeth Larsson (2017), Helen Southworth (2021), and Susan M. Squier (1985) have examined London and Woolf.

the members of the Bloomsbury group or futurists, but in *Zeno's Conscience* he repeatedly shows how new views of the world and more traditional ones could coexist. Reflecting on his father's death, Zeno embraces conflicting explanations for his demeanor: "Certainly, in the last lucid moment of his life, my father's feeling of intelligence originated in his sudden religious inspiration. . . . Now, however, I know also that this feeling of his was the first symptom of a cerebral hemorrhage" (Svevo 2003b: 43). The friction between religion and science for Svevo embodied the ambiguous freedom that accompanied the modernization of the world and the growing uncertainty of life in the twentieth century.

London offered an important point of contrast to Trieste. In *Zeno's Conscience* the narrator's love interest, Ada, visited England and admired the range of roles available to women there: "She said that English women were quite different from ours. They formed charitable organizations, and religious, even economic groups. Ada was urged to speak by her sisters, eager to hear again those things that seemed wondrous to young ladies of our city at that time" (Svevo 2003b: 75–76). *Zeno's Conscience* suggests that Triestine women desired the freedom they saw elsewhere. When Svevo wrote *Zeno's Conscience*, women in England could vote, while they still could not in Italy. Svevo saw how the barriers for women were shifting. He was attentive to London's politics, once remarking that "if it were not for my continual absentmindedness, that makes me think of Italy when I am in England and of England when I am in Italy, I should become an English politician or at least a *canvasser*" (Svevo 2003a: 255). With characteristic self-deprecation, Svevo reveals that England was a significant point of reference for him, as it was for others: "In Trieste during the war, we lived reading German newspapers and dreaming English ideas" (214).

Svevo (2003a: 50) noted the differences between himself and the English: "If you did but know of my agitation over all the other divergences in character between myself and the English. It seems that in this country I am quite ridiculous on account of my mode of gesticulation." In *Zeno's Conscience* Zeno ruminates on how the people of London had a "dislike of all who are not English" (Svevo 2003b: 76). He describes at length how a cat who scratches him represents the British aversion to foreigners: "The bookseller himself was amazed at the cat's reaction: it

behaved well with everyone else. The misadventure fell to my lot because I was who I was, or perhaps because I was Italian” (77). Svevo’s comments on his personal experiences as a foreigner in England reflect his protagonist’s sense of English xenophobia. Svevo (2003a: 235) noted the nationalism of London, for example, despite its cosmopolitanism. In a 1920 article for Trieste’s *La nazione*, he offered an analysis of hatred in contemporary London: “Collective hatred is something fairly alien to the English character. It does however include contempt for foreigners, inherited really from the Romans . . . and it show[s] itself with incomparable naivety. In order to pay me a compliment, an English workman told me he would never regard me as a foreigner. I didn’t know whether to be grateful or angry” (227). Especially because he came from a port city whose national identity was a matter of debate, Svevo held concepts of belonging that at times conflicted with what he experienced in England.

In his journalism Svevo lingered over similar experiences of German Jews or instances of anti-Jewish prejudice, though without discussing Jewishness directly: in the same 1920 article he criticized the refusal to let the German Jewish politician Walter Rathenau into England; he reflected on the vexed case of Richard Wagner; and he discussed G. K. Chesterton’s *New Jerusalem*, well known for its antisemitism. Svevo’s observations of nationalism align with some of the Woolfs’ preoccupations in their stories about Jews in England. Leena Kore Schroder (2003: 314) shows that Leonard Woolf’s “Three Jews” (1917), an exploration of Jewish assimilation in London, and Virginia Woolf’s “Duchess and the Jeweller” (1938) “appeared at a time when the idea of the foreigner as enemy merged with the idea of the German, and in this ideology the figure of ‘the Jew’ occupies a special place.” That the Woolfs published *Two Stories*, comprising “The Mark on the Wall” and “Three Jews,” as Hogarth Press’s first title points to the prominence of such considerations in their work at the time.

Like Svevo’s marriage, Virginia Woolf’s has been a matter of debate in terms of what it reveals about the non-Jewish partner’s evolving relationship to her spouse’s Jewishness. Scholars have observed that Woolf’s views on her husband’s background were complex (Schroder 2003; Wilson 1995). Before the publication of “The Duchess and the Jeweller” in *Harper’s Bazaar*, Woolf was encouraged to consider the story’s possible



antisemitism and make changes (Henderson 2008; Trubowitz 2008). For Woolf, as for Svevo, travel abroad seems to have prompted a deeper appreciation of how the nation puts pressure on aspects of identity: Leigh Coral Harris (2001: 76) shows that Woolf's time in fascist Italy, for example, contributed to her ideas in *Three Guineas* of how patriarchy encourages fascism and war. Both Svevo's and Woolf's fiction expanded against a background of growing nationalism and fascist investment in cultural programs in Europe.

Though born and raised Jewish, Svevo converted to Catholicism for the sake of his wife, a cousin with Jewish heritage she did not publicly discuss, although she experienced persecution because of it.<sup>8</sup> While Veneziani was devoutly Catholic, Svevo had an ironic relationship to religion, including his own conversion. In a 1903 letter to his wife, Svevo (2003a: 85–86) comments on England's gray weather and says that when he finally saw the sun, it wondered how someone of his background (Jewish, Eastern) could live in a place with so little light. Svevo responded with a joke about his conversion. His multiple identities—often concealed, compelled, or buffered with irony—fed into his fiction. In a version of a later preface to *Senilità*, Svevo (2004a: 1347) noted that the protagonist Emilio Brentani's senility relates not just to his immediate circumstances but also to his Jewish *razza* (race), which is never mentioned in the novel itself. The book's complex narrative affords multiple ironic critiques of Emilio or from his point of view, as a sign of his dedication to his imagined construction of the world.

Svevo scholars have analyzed in detail Trieste's role in forming Svevo's identity (see Moloney 1973; Schächter 2000), but his overlooked English experiences are also central in these dynamics. John Gatt-Rutter, who with Brian Moloney edited and translated Svevo's London writings, even suggests that Svevo's decision to work in England rather than in France was due in part to French antisemitism following the Dreyfus affair (Svevo 2003a: 8). Several of Svevo's rare public observations about Jewishness appear in his discussions of English-language literature, including his first published article, "Shylock" (1880), which analyzed the problems of the portrayal of Jews in *The Merchant of Venice* and argued for

<sup>8</sup> Veneziani Svevo (1990) does not mention Svevo's Jewishness in her memoir of him.

the play's importance (Svevo 2004b: 969–71).<sup>9</sup> Toward the end of his life, Svevo gave a lecture on Joyce in which he refuted the suggestion that Joyce was antisemitic, discussed Leopold Bloom's Jewishness, and described Hebrew's similarities to Gaelic (911–65). Literature in English offered Svevo a fertile point of intersecting considerations in which he could reflect on religious, ethnic, and national identity. The modernization of London, English modernist magazines, and changing ideas of British identity contributed to the development of Svevo's modernist work.

### **De Zoete: Women, Jews, and Rising Nationalism**

London and its modernist circles played a crucial role in the early reception of Svevo's fiction. In 1929 Hogarth Press published its first translation from Italian, Svevo's story "The Hoax." The Woolfs printed one thousand copies of the story in de Zoete's translation, twice as many as of Virginia Woolf's *Voyage Out*, released the same year.<sup>10</sup> In 1930 they published Svevo's collection *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl and Other Stories* with Montale's introductory note.<sup>11</sup> Livia remarked how meaningful these translations, coming soon after Svevo's death in 1928, would have been to her husband (Veneziani Svevo 1990: 142; see also Schächter 2008: 152). Hogarth Press scholars John H. Willis (1992) and John K. Young (2010a) have characterized Svevo's works as a gateway to Continental modernism for English readers, though the significance of these translations is seldom discussed.

Through her translations de Zoete "discovered Svevo for the Woolfs" (Willis 1992: 161). While she was not central to the Bloomsbury group, she had intellectual and social interactions with its more famous members. In 1907 Virginia Woolf reviewed de Zoete's *Venice* in the *Times*

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this publication, see Moloney 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Gordon (2009: xi) argues: "The press is its list; it was comprised not only of Virginia Woolf, but also Eliot, Freud, Tolstoy, and Rilke. The press published 488 titles between 1917 and 1941; to be chosen for that list was an accomplishment for authors as well as a signal of quality to readers."

<sup>11</sup> The collection contained translations of "La novella del buon vecchio e della bella fanciulla," "Vino Generoso," "La madre," and "Il vecchione" ("The Tale of the Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl," "Generous Wine," "The Mother," and "The Old Man"), which had been published together in Italian in 1929.

*Literary Supplement*.<sup>12</sup> De Zoete and her long-term companion, Arthur Waley, also socialized with the Woolfs in London. Noting her bravery for traveling to Southeast Asia and India, the Indian author Mulk Raj Anand (1981: 153), who worked for Hogarth Press and the *New Criterion*, reflects on his time with de Zoete, Woolf, Eliot, and others in *Conversations in Bloomsbury*. Following de Zoete shows the significance of the peripheries of Bloomsbury, its international elements, and the porousness of its boundaries (Southworth 2021: 234).

After Svevo's death, de Zoete visited Veneziani in Trieste as the widow began to dedicate much of her time to curating her late husband's literary fame. The "Svevomania" of the author's household irritated many of Svevo's early proponents, including Joyce and Montale, who are often mentioned in critics' discussions of Svevo's reception. De Zoete, more sympathetic to the Svevos, wrote at one point that "the family is really angelic" (Ury 1986: 45). While the early French and Italian receptions of Svevo (the accounts scholars usually highlight) draw attention to male writers, examining Svevo's early British reception underscores the important role women and their relationships played in fostering international modernism (Bucur 2017: 61).

On October 31, 1929, Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West discussed de Zoete's translation of "The Hoax" and Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* on a BBC radio program. Sackville-West's consideration of these two works, which Hogarth Press had just released, prompted Woolf (1975: 105) to reflect on their book sales: "Isn't it surprising—your praise at once sells 100 of my book—not a copy of Svevo." In this period the difference between Sackville-West's and Svevo's popular success was starker than the gap between Woolf's and Svevo's. In 1930 Hogarth Press published Sackville-West's *Edwardians*, selling at first eighteen thousand copies, then ultimately thirty thousand, whereas in the same year it printed one thousand copies of Svevo's collection *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl and Other Stories*, as it had of his earlier work (Willis 1992: 162). After "The Hoax" de Zoete translated *La coscienza di Zeno* and *Senilità* as *Confessions of Zeno* (1930) and *As a Man Grows Older* (1932) for Putnam. Sackville-West chose the first of these as one of the six works that merited comment in a review for the *Spectator*. Sackville-West (1930:

<sup>12</sup> *Venice*, coauthored with May Sturge Henderson, appeared under de Zoete's married name, Beryl de Sélincourt.

1056) began by stating that “I have been forced to the conclusion that there is nothing worth saying about ninety-nine novels out of a hundred. . . . Looking back over the last half-year, for instance, in which I have read—or at any rate examined—at least six novels a week, what can I pick out? What books left some deposit upon the floor of my mind?” *Confessions of Zeno*, in contrast, she regarded as a “classic,” whose translation “enriched our store of fiction” and “made severe demands on the reader” (1056).

Better known as *Zeno’s Conscience*, this novel plays with the instability of perspective: in an introductory section Zeno’s psychoanalyst describes that he is publishing his patient’s writings out of revenge and that Zeno lies. The reader then confronts unreliable narratives that were never meant for a public. The novel also emphasizes societal changes, with a variety of reactions to them. Zeno’s open disposition leads Alberta, to whom he proposes, to praise him: “I know you’re a good sort and you know many things, without knowing it, whereas my professors know exactly what they know. I don’t want to marry. Maybe I’ll change my mind, but for the moment I have only one ambition: I’d like to become a writer” (Svevo 2003b: 134). Alberta then tells Zeno that he is the first person to whom she has admitted her plans. Sandwiched between his proposal to her sisters, Ada, whom Zeno long desired, and Augusta, whom he ultimately marries, Alberta’s rejection marks an important feminist moment that is easy to overlook but that is part of the novel’s broader interrogation of gender. The connection, made by Crémieux and then Svevo, between Zeno and Charlie Chaplin (Svevo and Cèsari 2015: 107) indicates the more positive counterpart to Svevo’s contemporaries, who criticized his male characters for their effeminacy: they embody, like Chaplin’s characters, “a new type of man, whose masculinity was no longer identified with harsh virility or physical prowess” (Bucur 2017: 48).

In the *Nation and Athenaeum* de Zoete (1929: 521) described Svevo as having been “Italy’s greatest living novelist.” Many readers would contest this characterization, seeing as the still-living authors Gabriele D’Annunzio and Luigi Pirandello enjoyed greater popularity and institutional—including fascist—support. Treves, Pirandello’s publisher, had rejected Svevo’s novels. Svevo himself had inscribed a copy of *La coscienza di Zeno* for Pirandello, with whom he visited the Postumia

caves near Trieste, but to Svevo's dismay, Pirandello did not promote his work. In her article de Zoete commented that Svevo's case illustrates "the mistake of being original at the wrong moment" (521). Svevo's fluid, open characters contrasted with the masculine ideals upheld under fascism. In addition to his subject matter and style, Svevo's Triestine and Jewish background presented barriers to Italians' appreciation of him. When de Zoete's article was published, Mussolini had been leading Italy for seven years. Svevo's poor timing would be even more apparent a decade later: in 1931 a bust of Svevo was erected in Trieste's public gardens to honor him, but it was removed in 1938 after the proclamation of the antisemitic racial laws. His novels are now canonical in Italy, but the wide acknowledgment of Svevo as a foundational author took years, in part due to the decades of fascism's cultural impact.

De Zoete's presentation of Svevo suggests the ambiguous role Jewishness played in his early international reception as well. Stanislaus Joyce (1977: viii) commented in the introduction to de Zoete's *As a Man Grows Older* that "my brother had been talking so much about Jews that Svevo wished to get even with him by holding forth on Ireland." De Zoete, meanwhile, does not mention Svevo's Jewishness in her introduction to "The Hoax," though she does discuss his Italian and Austrian origins, as well as his German schooling and the significant amount of time he spent in London. The reason for de Zoete's silence about this part of Svevo's identity is unclear. De Zoete herself had a complicated relationship with her background. As Marian Ury (1986: 12) explains: "Beryl was thought to look Jewish by Gerald Brenan, but when asked about it she replied with vehemence that her family were high-church Anglicans. . . . To Celia Goodman, to whom she did not look at all Jewish, she mentioned that she had one Jewish forebear."

A comparison of de Zoete's 1930 and William Weaver's 2001 translations of *La coscienza di Zeno* reveals that de Zoete did reflect on Svevo's Jewishness. In the novel's last section, "Psychoanalysis," Zeno remembers a conflict with his younger brother, when he withheld sugar from him. The episode renders the fleeting power of memory as an "abyss." Weaver's translation reads: "I held up the spoon to underscore its value. But Catina's voice immediately resounded in the room: 'Shame on you! Little shark!' Fright and shame plunged me again into the present. I would have liked to argue with Catina, but she, my brother, and I—as I was then, small, innocent, and a usurer—disappeared into the abyss"

(Svevo 2003b: 407). The Italian repeats the same word, *strozzino* (Svevo 2004a: 1053), that Weaver renders first as “little shark,” then as “usurer,” and that could also be translated as “moneylender,” “thief,” or “cheat.” De Zoete instead chose “Jew.” Zeno is not described as Jewish anywhere in the Italian novel (Svevo 1989).

Svevo’s Jewishness is in fact a debated topic in terms of both his biography and its applicability to analysis of his literature. One of the earliest Svevo critics, Giacomo Debenedetti (1990: 68), proposes that Svevo would have been a better writer had he clearly represented his Jewishness, while Neil Davison (1998: 173) points to Svevo’s characters’ gender fluidity, alienation, and habits of overanalysis as evidence of their Jewishness. De Zoete’s use of the word *Jew* in her translation can be interpreted in various ways: it could be Catina’s antisemitic use of the term to mean a cheat or Catina’s calling attention to Zeno’s behavior as a Jew, viewed negatively. Regardless, the usage reverberates in de Zoete’s version of the work, which remained the only English-language translation of the novel until this century.<sup>13</sup>

The Woolfs had de Zoete’s *Confessions of Zeno* in their library. The critical works that introduced Svevo to Anglophone audiences in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s did not highlight his publications with Hogarth Press or his connections with Virginia Woolf, in part because he had not reached the level of fame she has today.<sup>14</sup> Svevo’s English-language circulation, meanwhile, plateaued in the 1960s and 1970s. Adelle Waldman’s (2014: 34–35) novel *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* refers to Svevo as a rarely read author: “They’d never met anyone like Noah, not in a romantic context anyway, not at Wesleyan or Oberlin or Barnard. And if they 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?’).” Remarkably, Svevo has never appeared in the title of an article in such major journals as *MLQ*, *PMLA*, and *Modernism/modernity*. He is absent from *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Levenson 1999) and *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*

<sup>13</sup> For more on the translation, see Guida 2014.

<sup>14</sup> In “The Anglo-American Critical Reception of Italo Svevo’s Fiction,” from *Essays on Italo Svevo* (Staley 1969), “the first collection of critical essays to appear on Italo Svevo in English,” the second Hogarth Press publication of Svevo is not discussed. De Zoete is not linked to the Bloomsbury group, and the Woolfs are not mentioned (1).

(Kern 2011). In these works Italian modernism is most often exemplified by F. T. Marinetti and the futurists, whose associations with fascism are also subjects of much debate. The history of Hogarth Press offers an alternate cultural mapping of Europe in which Svevo, not the futurists or Pirandello (1934 Nobel Prize winner), represents Italian modernism.<sup>15</sup>

Svevo's negligible role in debates on modernism illustrates the complex friction in literary history between national traditions and outside currents, since twentieth-century Italianists rarely used the term *modernism* to discuss Italian literature.<sup>16</sup> Svevo's relative absence in Anglophone discourse is not necessarily a reflection on his writing but a sign of how he does not fit into disciplinary formations undergirded by modern power dynamics. Because ambiguous Jewish Austro-Italian literature does not fit into the same narratives that Jewish American or Jewish German literature does, Svevo's work has generally been left out of non-Italian literary histories and debates on Jewish modernism. In contrast, his last literary love, Franz Kafka, is central to discussions of Jewish literature, although his works also rarely discuss Jewishness directly. Were Svevo's works more famous outside Italy, or had he written in English or German—two related issues—he would have a different stature. Recent works in modernist studies have focused on authors overlooked in the twentieth century largely due to power dynamics shaped by racism, sexism, and nationalism. Svevo's position as a Triestine author of Jewish heritage in southern Europe who wrote in Italian merits reintroduction into the modernist networks he helped shape, contributing to current work on the multidirectional networks of modernism.<sup>17</sup>

### Reading Woolf and Svevo

Given that Woolf and Svevo share multiple modernist networks, experiences, and influences, such as Dostoevsky and Freud, it is not surprising that their writings also form a productive pairing. Speaking broadly,

<sup>15</sup> Svevo wrote the first and second Italian works on Hogarth Press's list. The third was Benito Mussolini's *Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism* (1933).

<sup>16</sup> "Modernismo is rarely employed in Italy" (Duncan 2002: 287). See Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni's (2004) foundational collection.

<sup>17</sup> On Hogarth Press and international modernism, see Young 2010b. On Hogarth and networks of modernism, see Southworth 2010. On how magazines created networks of modernism, see Bulson 2017.

Svevo and Woolf both examine the relationship between literary inspiration and life, use irony to portray social interactions, illuminate distance within marriages, formulate the impossibility of knowing another, analyze how illness changes perception, and depict the subjectivity of time. I conclude by briefly analyzing important conjunctions between the two authors' modernist representations of illness and the body, starting with two works already mentioned because of their publication history, Svevo's story "The Hoax," first published by Hogarth Press, and Woolf's essay "On Being Ill," first published in the *New Criterion*.

"The Hoax" describes the lives of two brothers living in Trieste at the end of World War I. The younger, Mario Samigli, is a writer who longs for literary success. Like Woolf in her letter to Sackville-West, Mario wonders about the vagaries of publishing and fame. A supposed friend, Gaia, tricks him into believing that a publisher, Westermann, wants to buy his work. A discussion about the invented publisher's background indicates the general confusion regarding identity in and around Trieste: "Now he [Gaia] came to think of it, he remembered that Westermann's representative had actually been born in Istria, though of German parents. So that he would be of Italian nationality and could not be expelled" (Svevo 1967: 33). Here national identity is a product of happenstance and historical flux (in addition to being imaginary). War and national boundaries shape what can be published and by whom.

At several moments the story reflects on the dynamic relationship between literary production and material well-being. The work depicts being an author as making one more susceptible to being misled, financially and otherwise: "The author's habit of scratching out a sentence that displeases him makes it easy for him to accept that others should cancel things too. He describes reality, but eliminates whatever does not conform to his reality" (Svevo 1967: 43). "The Hoax" reflects on the unpredictability of the literary market, inspiration, and becoming a writer at an older age: "And although he now believed himself certain of success, poor Mario discovered, by sad experience, that it is a mistake to occupy oneself with literature after sixty, because it may be very damaging to the health" (48). The relationship between the physical and intellectual, life and literature, is fraught. The passage points to the significance of illness. Because the older brother, Giulio, is frequently bedridden, Mario eventually reads and rereads his own novel to him.



The story describes how one brother's illness affects his outlook and his relationship with the other, since Giulio depends on Mario for entertainment and sympathy. Malady also shapes Giulio's literary taste: "Among other things, he needed a restful book read to him, which would call up pleasant images and soothe his tortured body. Why couldn't they go back to their old favourites, De Amicis and Fogazzaro?" (51). Literature here functions as a form of medicine.

In "On Being Ill" Woolf highlights the importance of illness to perception, including how bedridden reading differs from other types of reading in its intensity. The beginning of Woolf's long opening sentence argues for how disease changes one's outlook: "Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view . . ." (Woolf 2002: 3). She calls attention to the odd paucity of literature on illness: "It becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (3-4). Since illness is a guiding theme in Svevo's oeuvre, the comment provides one suggestion of what the Woolfs saw in him, which led to his Hogarth Press publications.<sup>18</sup>

Within the broader landscape of modernist reflections on illness, Svevo and Woolf both insist on the importance of illness for understanding how much one's body shapes perspective. Woolf (2002: 4) argues that most literature "does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent." The same relationship between mind and body informs many of Zeno's observations in *Zeno's Conscience*. The novel documents Zeno's fruitless efforts to stop smoking and his search to convince others that smoking makes him ill, be it an emotional, a physical, or an imaginary illness. Zeno repeatedly highlights the connections between his mental and physical states, which others often dismissed: "They all laughed very much, indeed too much. I was deeply grieved by the highly successful attempt to ridicule me. And it

<sup>18</sup> Emma Bond (2012: 37) summarizes the significance of illness in Svevo. For another comparative view of Svevo and illness, see Amberson 2012.

was then that, for the first time, I was seized by a sharp pain. That evening it was my right forearm and hip that hurt. An intense burning pain, a numbness of the nerves as if they were threatening to snap” (Svevo 2003b: 138). Zeno expresses surprise at how affected he was by this physical pain, which had emotional beginnings but has recurred throughout his life. *La coscienza di Zeno* ends with the word *malattie*, “sickness” or “illness,” when Zeno describes his idea of what might lead to health: “There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness” (437). The only way to eradicate illness is to destroy everything. Zeno’s apocalyptic theorizing can be read within a modernist framework in which illness, metaphorically and actually, drives the modern world.

Zeno proposes that the ill have the power to see the connection between the mind and the body and therefore to better understand themselves: “Health doesn’t analyze itself, nor does it look at itself in the mirror. Only we sick people know something about ourselves” (Svevo 2003b: 163). Woolf (2002: 4) makes a similar point about perception and the body in more lyrical language: “All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February.” As in so many of her works, Woolf in “On Being Ill” draws attention to the significance of interior experiences, both in a room and in oneself: “Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected” (5). She highlights the confusion between the mental and the physical, arguing that literature too often ignores how the two cannot be neatly separated: “But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record” (5).

The extensive descriptions of illness in Svevo’s *As a Man Grows Older*, also translated as *Emilio’s Carnival*, explore some of these daily dramas of the body. In the 1898 novel Amalia’s alcoholism and then death are due to emotional and physical factors, which the novel makes clear are intertwined. The reactions of her brother Emilio, her friend Balli, and her neighbor to her illness reveal how difficult it is to respond to disease without aestheticizing it or focusing on one’s own feelings: “Emilio kept looking at Amalia in the hope of reviving his tears. He analyzed her, scrutinized her, so as to feel all of her suffering and to suffer with her.

Then he turned his glance away in shame. He realized that in his search for emotion he had been hunting for images and metaphors” (Svevo 2001: 216). Amalia’s physical experiences are quickly transformed into art by her writer brother and his sculptor friend. Emilio reflects precisely on a topic explored at length in Woolf’s “On Being Ill”: how hard it is for art to resist making a metaphor out of the bodily experiences of illness.

Svevo’s and Woolf’s attention to the body’s influence on worldview led them to write unusual, modernist animal stories. Svevo’s “Argo and His Master,” which presents the dog Argo’s monologues as translated by his master, and Woolf’s *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog, highlight how dogs’ acute sense of smell determine their perspective. Argo believes that his master’s smell is “recognizable to everyone, so there is no need to speak about it” (Svevo 1967: 169). He views his master as the world’s center but would destroy him if he were interested in Tití, the dog Argo pursues: “Heaven help us if such were not the case and master cared for Tití; he would no longer be my master but someone to tear to bits” (170). In Woolf’s (1983: 12) work, the intensity of smell causes the dog Flush to forget momentarily his beloved mistress: “But suddenly down the wind came tearing a smell sharper, stronger, more lacerating than any—a smell that ripped across his brain stirring a thousand instincts, releasing a million memories—the smell of hare, the smell of fox. Off he flashed like a fish drawn in a rush through water further and further. He forgot his mistress; he forgot all humankind.” The narrator of *Flush* moves back and forth between human and dog perspectives, calling attention to the often humorous difficulty of representing others’ consciousness. Both narratives suggest the essential relationship between embodiment and perspective: humans cannot fully understand dogs’ perspectives, because bodies help determine points of view.

The master’s translation of Argo’s monologues indicates that he at times misunderstands or misrepresents Argo. The master cannot make sense of Argo’s distinct vision of the world, reflected by his use of numbers: “When I induced him to philosophize (unquestionably Argo was the first philosopher of his species), he came out with this futuristic phrase: ‘Odours three equals life’” (Svevo 1967: 167; translation modified). In Woolf’s work, the biographer calls attention to how Barrett Browning deems her dog a philosopher because she does not understand him. Flush considers himself in the mirror because he has observed

that there is an aristocratic type of dog and a more common one, and he wants to figure out which he is: “When about this time Miss Barrett observed him staring in the glass, she was mistaken. He was a philosopher, she thought, meditating the difference between appearance and reality. On the contrary he was an aristocrat considering his points” (Woolf 1983: 32). Dogs’ distinctive perspectives emphasize not only the vastness of human ignorance but also literature’s ability to open spaces for reflection about the body’s boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

Svevo is, in Montale’s (1982: 107) words, “a writer who is always open.” This openness was in part formed by Trieste’s history and cultures, Svevo’s background and friendships, and his time in England. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Dove mi trovo* (2018), which Lahiri translated into English as *Whereabouts*, begins with an epigraph from Svevo: “Every time my surroundings change I feel enormous sadness. It’s not greater when I leave a place tied to memories, grief, or happiness. It’s the change itself that unsettles me, just as liquid in a jar turns cloudy when you shake it” (Lahiri 2021). Svevo’s sense of the instability of place comes in part from the incredible transitions Trieste and its environs underwent but also from his experiences in a changing London. Lahiri’s *Whereabouts*, with a nameless narrator whose identities are ambiguous, follows Svevo from a space in between nations and histories. Sketching an account of Svevo and Woolf together offers one approach to literary history “after the nation” (Kalliney 2019: 359) that could then encompass Lahiri’s Italian writing. The connections between Svevo and Woolf highlight movements that engage multiple places and languages, emphasizing choices of location that are not permanent but become part of authors’ literary worlds and should be included in accounts of literary history.

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<sup>19</sup> On the mixing of boundaries, see Marcus 2004: 145.

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