

TRUTH, FACT, FICTION, LIES: ITALO SVEVO'S SEARCH FOR THE SUBJECT¹

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Sommario

Cogliendo lo spunto di Altieri, che cerca di superare la decostruzione postmoderna del soggetto, si vuol suggerire che la crisi del soggetto è già decisamente attraversata dallo Svevo nell'arco degli anni a cavallo della Grande Guerra e segnatamente nella Coscienza di Zeno. È proprio la guerra che rende imprescindibile per lo scrittore il quesito autobiografico sulle proprie responsabilità e sulla sua autonomia come individuo, come anche il quesito antropologico sul come e perché della guerra. Si cerca qui, soppesando recenti contributi critici su Svevo, di tracciare le linee del tentativo di Svevo di "ricostituire" l'io attraverso lo scrivere tramite il rapporto instaurato tra la saltuaria "coscienza" del protagonista, gli altri personaggi, l'autore implicito e il lettore.

This is how Charles Altieri opens his chapter on 'Reconstituting Subjects':

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the conference on 'The importance of Italy' held on 21-23 September 2001 by the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies and the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, Canberra. Translations of quotations in this paper are mine.

The project of undoing humanist self-congratulation required transforming intentionality into textuality. Then, rather than concentrate on the nobility of writers' aspirations to mean, critics could force readers to confront the contingencies and the slippages in the objects actually produced: and rather than dream of taking personal responsibility for history, we would have to face history's awesome power over us, even in shaping the very terms by which we imagined ourselves to be shaping it. But having disseminated meanings into textual operations, theory still needs some category by which to explain what calls us to modes of response and responsibility within this new freedom. And having developed powerful tools for cultural critique, theory finds itself without strong accounts of how it might serve social ends or to whom those accounts are responsible.²

This formulation is an extremely helpful prop in approaching the problematic posed by subjectivity in Svevo, as I shall try to show. Altieri is taking as read the deconstruction of the subject as autonomous moral agent resulting from Wittgenstein's renegotiation of "I" from its pronominal status as an effect of language on the one hand and on the other hand Althusser's equation of the subject with subjection within societal processes – a deconstruction further pursued by Barthes and Derrida. Hence his quest to reconstitute subjects. "Barthes and Derrida set the stage superbly," writes Altieri, summing up his discussion of their critique of the subject, "by calling into question the traditional equation of subjective identity with self-reflexive consciousness." This is still very relevant to the Svevian

² Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*. Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1990, Ch. 7 "Reconstituting Subjects": 193-223 (193).

problematic. Approaching the conclusion of his chapter, Altieri draws on Foucault to get beyond this impasse, but affirms the need to go “well beyond” Foucault as well:

We need versions of first-person singularities that will sustain much richer third-person forms of judgement binding individuals to collective norms, at least in those arenas like economics and politics where rights and obligations remain inescapable concerns. An ethics that cannot address those concerns ultimately cannot even speak adequately about the beauty of an individual life ... The more we stress singularity, the more we also need terms for mutual intelligibility and mutual trust. The more we fear the tyranny of subjection, the more we must develop a dialectical sense of how agents can use cultural grammars without being entirely subsumed within the parameters of those grammars; otherwise we risk fleeing one tyranny by cultivating the even more destructive confines of solipsism and a micropolitics that is unable to postulate terms for negotiating life in large nation-states.³

³ *Ibid.*: 222-3.

Positing the nation-state as the polar opposite to the micropolitics of the self has a peculiar ring in a world in which the term “globalisation” hides a long-standing reality under the guise of a forward agenda, but this point too is teasingly relevant to the Svevian problematic.⁴ In fact, it provides a convenient cue to get closer to my subject. Shortly after the outbreak of the Great War, in August 1914, Ettore Schmitz, alias Italo Svevo, travelled on behalf of his in-laws’ firm of manufacturers of ship’s paint, going from Trieste, then part of Austria-Hungary, to Cologne in Germany, which was Austria-Hungary’s ally. His job was to supervise the commencement of paint production in a local factory. At such a moment, it is hard to imagine that the customer in Germany could be any other than the German Imperial Navy. The world-famous Veneziani underwater paint had greater strategic importance than one might think. It retarded the fouling of ships’ hulls by marine growths, thus enabling the vessels treated with it to maintain higher speeds and go for longer periods without overhauls: two considerable advantages in the naval war which was developing between Britain and Germany (as well as between other belligerent navies). The Veneziani firm had been supplying the British and other navies from as far back as 1901. Ettore Schmitz, writing to his wife in German on open postcards, told her on 3 September: “You know how I’ve always pursued the interests of the firm but this time I cannot persuade myself to desire its interests.”⁵ This lack of enthusiasm overrides Svevo’s affection for the country where he received his education between 1874 and 1878 and his admiration for the efficiency

⁴ This essay was first drafted before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. That event forces a re-conceptualisation in terms that go beyond the nation state (the USA) to embrace transnational systems such as the potentially totalising claims of global capital on the one hand and monotheism on the other and the “subject” status of investors and “martyrs.”

⁵ “Du weisst wie ich am Interesse des Hauses halte aber ich kann mich dieses Mal nicht entschliessen sein Interesse zu wünschen.” Italo Svevo, *Epistolario*, Milan: Dall’Oglio, 1960: 701.

and unity of purpose of the German people as they went into war, although Germany and Austria were still nominal allies of Italy, to which he avowed loyalty. Yet he complies with his firm's business imperative.

The Great War thus brought to a head two moral issues which had been looming on the horizon for Schmitz-Svevo since the beginning of the century – indeed, since he had thrown in his lot with the Veneziani business in 1899. One was his pacifism, which was heightened by the horrific scale and technological intensity of the war; and the other his knowledge that he and the firm he worked for were enriching themselves out of that war. In a diaristic jotting dated April 1905 and recording his return from his fourth trip to London, involving as it did a train journey across Italy, France and England, he notes: “Attraversando tanta vita che non amo pur mi commossi e a tutti i campi vicini e lontani augurai di cuore di dare doppia messe affinché i popoli sieno ricchi e buoni.” [Traversing so much life towards which I bear no love I was nevertheless moved and I wished all the fields both close and distant a bumper harvest so that the peoples may be rich and good.]⁶ This ties up with Svevo's lifelong preoccupation with *lotta* — strife or struggle. This provides the title of the short story which was his first published literary work, and is the structuring concept of *Una vita*, extrapolated from Darwin and intertwined with the Schopenhauerian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It passes through the para-scientific speculation of the unpublished essay “La corruzione dell'anima”⁷ and several war-time literary fragments of a humanitarian pacifist bent and finally culminates in the drafts for a pacifist programme posthumously published under the title “Sulla teoria della pace”.⁸

⁶ Italo Svevo, *Racconti - Saggi - Pagine Sparse*, ed. B. Maier, Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1968: 821.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 641-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 649-62. The thematic of strife and its avoidance and the presence of the Great War in

That philanthropical motif of the 1905 diaristic note recurs in another jotting dated 13 June 1917 – the period that we could call the prehistory of *La coscienza di Zeno*:

Svevo's work is discussed in J. Gatt-Rutter, "Non-commitment in Italo Svevo," *Journal of European Studies*, 3 (1973): 123-146, and taken up again in B. Moloney, "La coscienza di Zeno come romanzo di guerra," *Problemi*, May-August, 1995: 159-78, repr. in B. Moloney, *Italo Svevo narratore: lezioni triestine*, Gorizia: Editrice Goriziana, 1988: 95-113. A broader discussion of *lotta* in Svevo is E. Saccone, "Struggles, war, revolution and literature in some stories by Italo Svevo," in David Bevan (ed.), *Literature and Revolution*, Amsterdam, Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1989: 63-79.

Quattro anni or sono, poco prima della guerra mondiale, intrapresi un grande viaggio che mi fece attraversare l'intera Europa. Ricordo che, passando, augurai che tutti i campi dessero buoni frutti e che i contadini vestiti nelle più varie fogge avessero il premio dovuto al loro lavoro. E mi parve di aver fatto una grande cosa e che Napoleone avrebbe potuto invidiarmi. Poi, quando scoppiò la guerra mondiale, io ebbi dolore per ogni disfatta perché io, certamente, per liberarmi dall'odio non avevo avuto bisogno della guerra.⁹

[Four years ago, shortly before the world war, I undertook a major journey which took me across the whole of Europe. I recollect that, as I passed by, I wished fruitful yields upon all the fields and upon the country people dressed in the most varied costumes the due reward for their toil. And it seemed to me that I had done a great deed, one which Napoelon might have envied me. Then, when the world war broke out, I was grieved by every defeat for I, for sure, had not needed to be freed from hatred by war.]

⁹ *Racconti, cit.:* 828.

Here we have the close connection between the Great War and the autobiographical urge. This urge appears not to have surfaced in Svevo for over ten years. There had been the well-known “Noto questo diario...” of December 1902. This he abandoned after half a page in disgust at the imagery of aggression and strife which surfaced in it and within himself.¹⁰ There is the already quoted passage from April 1905 about travelling across Europe, and the note of 10-1-1906 about the years passing without leaving a trace.¹¹ Now, in 1917, Svevo’s widow recorded, “he began to collect his ideas on numerous scraps of paper for a book of memoirs which was never completed,”¹² and she quotes from the same passage from which I have just quoted. Yet the only other surviving reflective passage with an autobiographical implication securely attributable to this period is that of 25 October 1917, which concludes:

Con le persone che “non conosciamo” c’è una sola difficoltà: siamo ancora meno sinceri del solito. Forse quando usciremo dallo spazio e dal tempo ci conosceremo tanto intimamente tutti che sarà quella la via alla sincerità. Ci daremo subito del “tu” e c’irriteremo tutti come meritiamo. Morirà finalmente la letteratura che fa purtroppo tanta intima parte del nostro animo e ci vedremo tutti fino in fondo. Prospettiva macabra.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 818.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 822.

¹² Livia Veneziani Svevo, *Vita di mio marito*, text by Lina Galli, 2nd ed. with notes by Anita Pittoni, Trieste: Lo Zibaldone, 1958: 92.

¹³ “With people whom we don’t ‘know’ there’s just one difficulty: we are even less sincere than usual. Perhaps when we go outside time and space we shall all know one another so intimately that that will be the path towards sincerity. We will all ‘thou’ one another and laugh at one another as we deserve. That will be the final death of literature which is all too intimate a part of our spirit and we will see right into each other. Macabre prospect.”

This in effect displaces the possibility of knowledge of another self to a dimension beyond time and space, a metaphysical dimension that sounds like an afterlife, but is also the afterlife of literature. Literature is thus posited as the problematical attempt to achieve this “sincerity,” this transparency of one’s own self and that of others. In default of a true metaphysical dimension outside time and space, literature provides a quasi-metaphysical dimension, a hypothetical sphere in which we can explore and investigate human motivation and the workings of the mind, and approximate to the desired “sincerity,” to human truths.

But Svevo abandons autobiography proper (which he implicitly includes in “literature”)¹⁴ for its fictive analogue, centred on the figure of Zeno in *La coscienza di Zeno*.¹⁵ Since he never divulged his reasons for doing this, we can only speculatively explore the issues involved. And since the figure of Zeno only in some salient respects (his lifelong resolve to give up smoking, the moral lineaments of his wife) resembles his creator, we can also only speculatively explore the connections between the two. However, the reflective passage by Svevo whose conclusion I have just discussed suggestively fits the narrative framework of the autobiographical fiction which is *La coscienza di Zeno*, and in which Zeno’s voice (and, to lesser extents, those of his psychoanalyst and of the people in Zeno’s life as recalled by him) is suspended “outside time and space” in the quasi-metaphysical dimension vouchsafed by writing.

¹⁴ The hazards, difficulties and limits of autobiography have been widely explored. One vindication of the genre in the face of deconstructive critiques is Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. From a different angle, the subterfuges employed in articulating some female autobiographies are illuminatingly discussed in Paola Splendore, “La difficoltà di dire ‘io’: l’autobiografia come scrittura del limite.” In A. Arne and M. T. Chialant (eds.) *Al racconto delle donne: voci – autobiografie – figurezioni*. Naples: Liguori, 1990: 71-87. I am indebted to Mirna Cicioni for this reference.

¹⁵ Many of the stories printed in *Racconti...* have greater or lesser autobiographical elements and may be said to constitute, along with the three novels and some of the plays, Svevo’s “autobiography of the possible.” A few unfinished stories were drafted before the war, most after, especially the more ambitious and complete ones. Some may have been started towards the end of the war and may have been included among Svevo’s autobiographical efforts mentioned by his widow (see below). The most closely autobiographical narrative piece is the one published under the title “L’avvenire dei ricordi” [Memories and their afterlife, *Racconti*: 297-304], which appears to be a very slightly fictionalised reconstruction of the first arrival of the two elder Schmitz brothers at the boarding school in Segnitz, Germany, where they were to spend four years. The existing draft was written after the war, and is different in its epistemology from *La coscienza di Zeno*, the various fragments of its sequel, and some of Svevo’s other late stories, which all develop a critical model of knowledge and judgement of the self following on from Svevo’s first two novels, published in the 1890s. *La coscienza* is clearly the culminating point and the turning point in this critique of the self.

Svevo did of course put his name to the *Profilo autobiografico* – an autobiography of sorts, written in the third person from a first draft by his friend, the journalist Giulio Césari, and then much revised by Svevo himself.¹⁶ This conceals as much as, or more than, it reveals, and fulfils the “autobiographical pact” in the sense of presenting the author’s desired public image.¹⁷ It starts off by trying to explain away the unpatriotic-sounding pseudonym “che sembra voler affratellare la razza italiana e quella germanica” [which seems to imply a brotherhood between the Italian and the Germanic races] to an officially ultra-nationalist Fascist Italy who had ten years earlier won a horrendous war against the Germanic powers. And it devotes much space also to explaining away what Svevo’s critics saw as his dilettantism, his failure ever to devote himself entirely to literature. In doing so, it is a systematically deceitful public relations exercise, making out, first, that Ettore took up employment as a clerk at the Unionbank in 1880 because of his father’s financial collapse, which in fact did not come until 1882; second, that he joined the Veneziani paint-manufacturing firm in 1899 because of the failure of *Senilità*, whereas in fact he was already actively seeking an entry into the firm before *Senilità* was published in 1898; and third, that his pen was idle for virtually the entire period from 1899 to the last years of the war, whereas in fact scarcely a year went by without at least some modest (though unpublished) literary output on his part.¹⁸

¹⁶ This was first published in the posthumous publicity volume *Italo Svevo scrittore - Italo Svevo nella sua nobile vita* distributed free by the new publisher of Svevo’s novels, Giuseppe Morreale (Milan, 1929) and reproduced with notes and a “Postfazione” by Paolo Briganti (Parma: Edizioni Zara, 1985). The *Profilo autobiografico* is also contained in Italo Svevo, *Racconti...* cit.: 799-810, to which I refer. The typescript copy of Césari’s draft was reproduced by Bruno Maier in the volume edited by Marco Marchi, *Italo Svevo oggi*, Florence: Vallecchi, 1980: 231-51.

¹⁷ See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975; *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary, foreword by Paul John Eakin, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

¹⁸ For the relevant statements in *Profilo autobiografico*, see *Racconti ...*, cit.: 799, 800, 805;

for the contrary evidence see John Gatt-Rutter, *Italo Svevo: A Double Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988: 48-51, 155, 161-2, 167-9, 202, etc (or *idem*, *Alias Italo Svevo: vita dello scrittore triestino Ettore Schmitz*, Siena: Nuova Immagine, 1991: 83-5, 239-40, 249, 259-66, 269-70.

The “autobiographical pact” here is certainly not situated beyond time and space in a dimension of transparent truth and sincerity. The investments of the public self are very much in evidence. But Paolo Briganti has also ably shown how apparently inconsequential remarks in the *Profilo* are traces of more hidden investments by that self which do not lend themselves so readily to the distinction between public and private.¹⁹ One of these traces Briganti accounts for as a trace of a narrative previously outlined in a letter to Prezzolini, but does not explain.²⁰ This is Svevo’s reference, in the *Profilo autobiografico*, to his pacifist treatise:

E lo Svevo s’accese ad un’opera quasi letteraria, un progetto di pace universale suggerito dalle opere dello Schücking e del Fried. Naturalmente a questo mondo non si può mai pensare niente senza arrivare al padre d’ogni letteratura, l’Alighieri. Con un certo ribrezzo lo Svevo si adattò. L’opera che ne risultò non esiste più.²¹

¹⁹ Paolo Briganti, “Postfazione” to the reproduced volume *Italo Svevo scrittore - Italo Svevo nella sua nobile vita*, 1985 (see note 11 above): xli-lii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: xlix-l.

²¹ Svevo, *Racconti...*: 808. (“And Svevo undertook a quasi-literary work, a project for universal peace suggested by the works of Schücking and Fried. Naturally one cannot in this world follow any idea without getting back to the father of all literature, Dante Alighieri. With a slight shudder, Svevo resigned himself. The resulting work no longer exists.” The reference to Dante probably involves the *De Monarchia*, a utopian tract which urges the pacification of Christendom under imperial rule.)

Three draft pieces of Svevo's pacifist project have in fact survived,²² though Svevo appears never to have tried to publish them. To call attention to something as no longer existing seems a highly idiosyncratic speech act. It highlights a significant absence, a silence, it plants a clue to something in the literary creation that is being heralded, the novel *La coscienza di Zeno*, born out of the war and published not long after, and – perhaps – prompted in part by a thwarted pacifist urge: “Nel diciannove .. [Svevo] s'era messo a scrivere *La coscienza di Zeno*. Fu un attimo di forte travolgente ispirazione. Non c'era possibilità di salvarsi. Bisognava fare quel romanzo. Certo, si poteva fare a meno di pubblicarlo, diceva.”²³

The *Profilo* highlights the Great War as the catalyst of Svevo's grand return to novel-writing (“Lo Svevo continuò a vivere fra violino e fabbrica fino all' scoppio della guerra.” 806. “Allo scoppio della guerra italiana lo Svevo si trovò chiuso a Trieste.” 808), largely, it is true, by the leisure it enforced on him. This leisure was filled with four main elements: psychoanalytical pursuits and reflections on war and peace (signalled in the *Profilo*) and literary and autobiographical interests (mentioned in his widow's *Vita di mio marito*.) Of these, the pacifist investment is the least self-evident and has been the least investigated.

²² These are in *Racconti ...*, *cit.*: 649-62, collectively headed *Sulla teoria della pace*.

²³ *Racconti*: 808. (“In 1919 ... [Svevo] had started writing *La coscienza di Zeno*. It was a moment of powerful, overwhelming inspiration. There was no escape. That novel had to be written. Of course, it didn't have to be published, he used to say.” (The reference to Dante probably involves the *De Monarchia*, a utopian tract which urges the pacification of Christendom under imperial rule.)

Svevo criticism has in fact not given much weight to the entry of the war into the narrative of *La coscienza di Zeno*.²⁴ It is almost taken for granted as an empirical given that war is the *deus ex machina* that supplies the novel's resolution. There has been little or no examination of how it constitutes an epiphany directed at the reader over the heads of the characters who are "writers" within the novel – Zeno himself, and his piratical editor, the psychoanalyst Dr S. Little attention has been given to the structuring and abrupt restructuring of the novel's chronotope. Why does Svevo have Zeno meet Dr S. and embark on recording his experiences early in 1914, just a few months before the outbreak of war? And why does Zeno's relationship with the Doctor run for nearly a year, including first the writing of his recollections and then the actual treatment dating from roughly a month or two before the outbreak of the Great War in early August 1914 until about a month before the Italian intervention of May 1915 which catches Zeno and his family on opposite sides of the Austrian-Italian frontier? And why, after that again, does Zeno's diary extend, with long gaps, almost another year? From a narrative conducted, in chapters 2 to 7, seemingly outside historical time, or unrelated to it, and centred always in Trieste, the eighth chapter suddenly takes the form of dated diary entries (with the presence of war rapidly but nonchalantly invoked: "In questa città, dopo lo scoppio della guerra, ci si annoia più di prima" [Life in this town, since war broke out, is more boring than before]) and moves the narrative scene, for the epiphany of war itself, on a deceptively idyllic spring day, to a rural area along the frontier, on the other side of the Carso plateau from Trieste.

²⁴ The main exceptions are those mentioned in footnote 7 above. The biographical and thematic importance of the war for Svevo, but only to a lesser extent the structuring role of war in his third novel, are illuminatingly discussed in Gabriella Contini, *Il romanzo inevitabile: temi e tecniche narrative nella "Coscienza di Zeno,"* Milan: Arnaldo Mondadori, 1983: 25-30 and 114-116.

History, from being parodied in Zeno's date fetishism over "last cigarettes," now comes into its own in deadly earnest, overtaking Zeno in a new scansion of narrative time in which the narrator is no longer the redactor or manipulator of his past but is carried on by an ever-moving present and subject to the onrush of an unknown future (the sequel to *La coscienza di Zeno*, "Un contratto," overturning the novel's ending in which Zeno has achieved financial success and imagined health). This is what, with regard to the teasingly parallel narrative of Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Bernshtein, developing the ideas of Bakhtin and Likhachev, called "epic time" or "open time," but could simply be called "historical time."²⁵ It is the time of patent collective responsibility, affording a scale against which to measure individual responsibility or irresponsibility, even while facing "history's awesome power over us." The war is a major, and structuring, signifier in the narrative of *La coscienza di Zeno*.

As he moves out of the Schopenhauerian cognitive dimension of memory,²⁶ and is enmeshed in the present tense of action, Zeno loses what *coscienza* he may have achieved and exults in his apparent triumph in the struggle for life and his success in war-time commerce: "Ammetto che per avere la persuasione della salute il mio destino dovette mutare e scaldare il mio organismo con la lotta e soprattutto col trionfo. Fu il mio commercio che mi guarì e voglio che il dottor S. lo sappia." (477) [I do admit that in order for me to be persuaded of my

²⁵ "One may say that in the novel [Sašek's *Švejk*] 'epic time' rules; that is, time defined by the movement of the action [*syuzhet*] and indispensable for this movement." Bernshtein later remarks of the same novel: "Quite often we are dealing, in Hašek, with 'open time,' as defined by G. S. Likhachev, that is with a time defined by the pace of historical events." I. Bernshtein, "*Pokhozhdeniya bravogo soldata Švejka*" Jaroslava Hašeka [Jaroslav Hašek's *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk*], Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1971: 23-24. Cf. John Gatt-Rutter, "Macrohistories and microhistories: Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za sv_tové války*," *Journal of European Studies*, xxi (1991): 1-17.

²⁶ Cf. Luca Curti, "Zeno guarisce dell'ottimismo: Schopenhauer e Freud nella *Coscienza*," *Rivista di Letteratura Italiana* XII: 2-3 (1994): 401-27 (see 415).

own health my destiny had to change and warm me up with struggle and above all with triumph. It was my business that cured me and I want Dr S. to know that.] Zeno's words "lotta" and "trionfo" refer to business competition, but given the immediate historical context they cannot but evoke the struggle of nations and the triumph hoped for out of the slaughter then going on.

Here is part of the performativity of Svevo's text, a speech act and an intervention in history calculated to outrage the ultra-nationalism of a Trieste and of the new Fascist Italy for whom that war had been a heroic struggle and a hard-won triumph, with the "redemption" of Trieste itself for Italy as one of the dearest prizes. The hostile silence that the novel encountered in Italy, and especially in Trieste, is testimony to its *over*-performativity, its excessive success in demystifying war.

The pacifist investment can be related to something as far back in Svevo's life as his school days in Segnitz, Germany (1874-78), and the influence of his headmaster Samuel Spier, who demonstrated in 1870 against the German invasion of France and suffered imprisonment and ruin as a result.²⁷ That Spier had not been forgotten appears from a jotting of Svevo's of the end of 1925: "Povero Spier! Adesso che a lui penso egli giace sottoterra tranquillo. E io, quassù, anche tranquillo. Egli fece quello che poté ed è quello che faccio anch'io ora." [Poor Spier! Now as I think of him he lies tranquil beneath ground. And I, above ground, tranquil too. He did what he could and that is what I am now doing also.]²⁸ Zeno's *incoscienza* or callousness as a war profiteer can be read as the sign of a further investment by the author – Ettore Schmitz's quite conscious unease at the wealth which the firm to which he belonged was making out of

²⁷ Cf. Hans-Michael Hensel, "Samuel Spier," in H.-M. Hensel and J. Gatt-Rutter, *Italo Svevo – Samuel Spiers Schuler*, Segnitz: Zeno's Verlag, 1996 (75-123).

²⁸ Svevo, *Racconti*: 831.

selling paint for Dreadnoughts and U-boats and other warships of Britain and Italy on one side and Austria-Hungary and Germany on the other side in the Great War.

I now return to the dialogue with Altieri with which I opened this paper, for in all of the foregoing we have been grappling with the elusive issue of authorial intention deduced from the text and supported by extra-textual evidence. We have also been grappling with the issue of self-knowledge and its limits, truth-telling and its limits, as projected by Svevo through the figure of Zeno. Altieri considers the centrality of questions of truth in the artwork within recent aesthetic theory: “While aesthetic theory has managed for the most part to turn away from questions of beauty it seems oddly bound to questions of truth.”²⁹

Whether or not we consider it “odd” that aesthetic theory should concern itself with issues of truth, we can accept with Altieri that “truth functions” inside or outside the artwork are highly problematic, undecidably so, in all probability. This problematical undecidability gives great appeal, I think, to the program which Altieri outlines for aesthetic analysis and criticism: “Therefore, I propose that we shift our attention from the relations between interpretive statements and their objects to the positions that works of art make available for reflecting on ourselves as interpreting subjects ...” a program that he defines as “a proleptic phenomenology that is intended to clarify the various powers cultivated for readers by the range of positions they are invited to occupy as interpreters ...” (291-2). In order to “reconstitute subjects” Altieri takes issue with Lyotard’s apparently investment-free “grammar of pronouns” (315) to replace it with “an affective grammar of pronominal functions” (294). In order to compensate for the limits of third-person objectivity and first-person subjectivity, he invokes the second person: “We need to understand the distinctive role the second

²⁹ Altieri, *op.cit.*: 291. Subsequent page-references will be given within the text.

person plays in giving the arts the personal and cultural force to impose pressures on our expressive lives and to cultivate modes of judgement not reducible to cognitive criteria” (293-4). This recuperation of the personal and the experiential through what is in effect a *non plus ultra* of pluralism is seen by Altieri as the condition of the reconstitution of the subject, the “I,” with its “singularities” and “contingencies”: “If the ‘I’ is to have significant force,” Altieri argues, “it must be the kind of entity that appeals to reasons without being determined by them: the ‘I’ must be a force we read through its investments and judgements, not an abstract measure to which we refer those activities” (295).

All this is very suggestive if related to *La coscienza di Zeno*. Zeno’s fictive “I” is problematically projected not merely as text and textual “content.” It is above all a speaking position, realised as a speech act, addressed to a specific second person, Dr S. (though we must note that Zeno’s text only refers to Dr S. in the third person), but addressed also to itself, Zeno’s “I” as “thou,” and also to the (fictive) paper Zeno is writing on, the *page blanche* which stands in for the blankness of being itself. But of course, *we* are the actual readers of the text, the overt addressees of Dr S.’s fictive publication and the real addressees of Italo Svevo’s publication. Svevo is ventriloquially and quizzically addressing us through his *alter egos*: we as readers are therefore faced with two distinct operations, to read Zeno’s “I,” and to read that different “I” that lies behind it, Svevo’s “I,” each of them as an “entity that appeals to reasons without being determined by them,” as “a force we read through its investments and judgements, not an abstract measure to which we refer those activities.”³⁰

³⁰ The “absent structure” of *La coscienza di Zeno*, and the “double reading” which it necessitates, positing an elusive authorial “I” behind or above the protagonist’s “I,” has been well analysed by Elisabetta Bacchereti, “La struttura assente della *Coscienza di Zeno*,” in *La formica e le rane: strategie della scrittura sveviana*, Florence: Le Lettere, 1995: 103-149.

We began with the issue of historic responsibility and the evasion of it, the one courting the risk of the “tyranny of subjection,” the other of a fall into solipsism (which is merely one version of the tyranny of subjection). If we take seriously Altieri’s agenda of “a proleptic phenomenology that is intended to clarify the various powers cultivated for readers by the range of positions they are invited to occupy as interpreters,” that means we do not rest in any one interpretive stance. Zeno is and is not “cured,” humanity is and is not terminally diseased, Svevo (and we) are and are not responsible for the crimes and catastrophes of history, ethical issues such as these are and are not central to the text, or to our lives. Rather, *all* interpretations, *all* readings that can be entertained and sustained need to be measured against one another, and conflicting interpretations, where they are undecidable, held in suspension. No text more than *La coscienza di Zeno* so encourages the proliferation and competition of meanings within such tight parameters – is there a self? what is it? how can it be known? (i.e., what truths is it capable of?) what control does it have over itself? what responsibility does it have for others? what responsibility does it have for a collective human history?

Thus, we can consider two recent readings of the novel, partly overlapping and partly opposed. Giuliana Minghelli takes Zeno as Svevo’s “unfinished” man, the corrupt soul, cunningly sheltering in the shadow of first one “mammoth” and then another, knowing each of these two “mammoths” better than they know themselves, who is however finally caught out in the open acting as a war profiteer, whereas Ada and Carla are credited with realising ethical autonomy and an ethical alternative.³¹ Luca Curti, on the other hand, reads the novel through well-focussed Schopenhauerian glasses which suggest that the self is unchangeable and knowable only from within through

³¹ Giuliana Minghelli, “In the Shadow of the Mammoth: Narratives of Symbiosis in *La coscienza di Zeno*,” *MLN* 109) 1994: 49-72.

memory, and concludes that Zeno has achieved this self-knowledge by the end of the novel and has been cured of his original optimism in seeking a cure, i.e., happiness.³² Both these readings provide thoughtful insights, and both of them indirectly support the thrust of the present paper in adducing authorial investments in anthropological and metaphysical truth functions which are ultimately also autobiographical in their reach, allowing the inference that an autobiographical impulse on Svevo's part is expressed in the fictive analogue of Zeno's autobiography.

These two (and other readings) can be measured against each other, drawing out their further implications in terms of the constitution of subjects and the possibility of ethics. They differ in that Curti ascribes to Zeno within the novel the achievement of a self-awareness which Minghelli implicitly denies him. They concur in denying Zeno the capacity to be other than he is – in denying, that is, his freedom or autonomy as a subject. What cannot be determined from Minghelli's reading is whether Ada and Carla are, unlike Zeno, capable of being other than they are. Since they are fictional characters, discursive constructs, the question may appear senseless. But if we take them as analogues of living people, it may not be. The living people in this whole business which is *La coscienza di Zeno* once included the now dead author who assumed the virtual identity of "Italo Svevo" and continues a virtual existence as the authorial dimension of the text, and still include the now living readers who engage the text and may possibly be struggling to establish themselves as more than virtual subjects in reflecting on the pronominal relationships within the text, that is, the I-you relationships, as between Zeno Cosini on the one hand and, on the other hand, his protective mammoth-like father-figures and the female others such as Ada and Carla.

³² Curti, *op. cit.*

Such reflections cannot be straightforward. The “sick” Zeno’s desperation at not being able to prove his “innocence” with respect to his father at the end of Ch. 4 and with respect to Ada and Guido at the end of Ch. 7 supports the notion that Zeno recognises, but cannot fulfil, an unrealised ethical alternative that Ada (and perhaps Carla) come to subscribe to. But is their moral “health” subject to the same subversion as Augusta’s conformist “health,” which, when Zeno starts to analyse it (as he does at the beginning of Ch. 5, “La moglie e l’amante”), turns into its opposite and appears to be a form of sickness. The living reader has to presume not: Ada and Carla’s behaviours, their recognitions of, or commitment to, I-thou investments, are not predicated on the unthinking conformity that determines Augusta’s; nor does Zeno succeed in deconstructing them into a form of sickness, as he does Augusta’s. The virtual author and the living reader between them negotiate differential criteria in pronominal (I-thou) transactions.

This may encourage us to venture beyond the very challenging, indeed disturbing, perspective of indeterminacy and undecidability offered by Carla Benedetti³³ and Giulio Savelli.³⁴ Benedetti, exploring *La coscienza di Zeno* in terms of narrative perspective, argues that it is Zeno’s *voice*, rather than merely his point of view, that establishes that Zeno’s “self-awareness, in its mystificatory activity, is Svevo’s central theme.”³⁵ Already, in the opening of *Senilità*, she argues, Svevo was more interested in displaying his protagonist’s

³³ Carla Benedetti *La soggettività nel racconto - Proust e Svevo*, Naples: Liguori, 1984. See Ch. III “La piccola rivoluzione copernicana di Zeno”: 101-126; and “Nota conclusiva”: 127-131.

³⁴ Giulio Savelli *L’ambiguità necessaria: Zeno e il suo lettore*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1998.

³⁵ “La coscienza di sé come attività mistificante è il tema centrale dell’opera di Svevo ... ciò che gli interessava non era tanto il punto di vista del personaggio, ma proprio la sua voce, la possibilità di mettere in scena le menzogne di un soggetto attraverso il suo stesso discorso.” Benedetti, *op.cit.*: 25. “Svevo non mira al gioco verità/menzogna ... ciò che interessa è il meccanismo della menzogna sulla menzogna.” *Ibid.*: 104.

entanglement in his own untruths than in bringing out truths.³⁶ And she eloquently describes Zeno Cosini's entrapment in his own compulsive mystifications, his subjection to his own self-assertion as a subject.³⁷ We have here the ultimate, irreducible instance of what we might call fictive determinism – the canon whereby a character in a narrative or dramatic fiction cannot be other than he or she is.

If we see Svevo's textual artefact as a potential instrument for reconstituting subjects, we must now ask whether, and how, if at all, we, as readers, can escape Zeno's entrapment in his own discourse. Savelli is not the first to note that Zeno's self-parodying and self-ironising chatter works insidiously to captivate the reader and draw him into complicity.³⁸ (There is in any case a strong pressure in first-person narrative to set up an identification of narrator with author on the one hand and with reader on the other.) The reader is thus drawn into a "truth game" with "fake epiphanies" and is lost in Zeno's mystifications.³⁹ Savelli's argument, encapsulated in the title of his book, is that Zeno's discourse embodies the "necessary ambiguity" of our postmodern age, which is now "beyond narrative" ("non è piu`narrabile").⁴⁰ For Savelli:

³⁶ "Svevo non mira al gioco verità/menzogna ... ciò che interessa è il meccanismo della menzogna sulla menzogna." *Ibid.*: 104.

³⁷ "Egli può dire tutto e il contrario di tutto e di questo venir meno alle sue responsabilità di enunciatore si compiace... L'autorivelazione del personaggio, quasi per ironia dell'arte, si trasforma in autodeterminazione. La parola su di sé, che doveva liberarlo dalla coazione d'identità, è nella *Coscienza di Zeno* ciò che lo assoggetta maggiormente a un'identità coatta." *Ibid.*: 121-2.

³⁸ Savelli, *op. cit.*: 35-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 36-8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 116-18.

Il nuovo assetto narrativo non soltanto implica l'impossibilità sia pratica sia teorica di rilevare la verità nascosta dietro il discorso di Zeno. ... Implica, in definitiva, *una contraddittorietà nelle stesse norme interne al testo* ... l'autore implicito vuole Zeno inattendibile *e* attendibile ... Non è solo il discorso di Zeno a essere senza verità, è l'autore implicito a esserlo. ... le bugie di Zeno sono dei falsi inganni. [Original emphasis]⁴¹

[The new narrative system does not only imply both the practical and the theoretical impossibility of identifying the truth that lies hidden behind Zeno's discourse. ... It implies, in the end, *a contradiction in the text's own inner norms* ... the implied author presents Zeno as being both unreliable *and* reliable... It is not only Zeno's discourse which is devoid of truth, so is the implied author. ... Zeno's lies are phoney deceptions.]

For Savelli, then, the implied author Italo Svevo posts no objectively certifiable version of events, no "truth." We may accept this, and draw from it the implied corollary that neither does the implied author subscribe to any reliable criteria of ethical judgement. All that is left, Savelli says (and he appears to predicate this both of the character Zeno and of the implied author Svevo, tendentially implying their identity), is the guerrilla strategy whereby the character (and implied author?) struggles to establish an authentic identity, his own "truth," amid the shifting sands of modernity for which the Great War appears in the novel's finale as the universalising instance.⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 123.

Zeno's voice, however, is not the only one in the novel, even leaving aside Dr. S's, which frames Zeno's entire self-presentation. Other voices come through convincingly, even though relayed by Zeno himself: Ada's and Carla's, as has been mentioned, but also Augusta's, the elder Cosini's, and others. And the war itself, as the voice of that awesome power of history, is one which Zeno's certainly cannot drown out or domesticate, however much he sandwiches it between Chaplinesque farce and global catastrophe. The implied author, then, while not prescribing ethical criteria, delivers perspectives which admit no evasion of personal responsibility – that is, of defining oneself in ethical terms. Zeno, in so abysmally failing to reconstitute himself as a responsible subject, forces the reader to choose between complicity and critique.

However, Zeno himself provides such perspectives, only to cloud them in hilarious mystification. An instance of this occurs in “Il fumo,” where Zeno confesses to his doctor (“Fui sincero come in confessione”), as a symptom of his presumed malady, his indiscriminate desire for women not in their entirety but for their various parts. The doctor sees this as a sign of normality, but Zeno ostentatiously records his disagreement:

Dissi allora una parola importante:

– L'amore sano è quello che abbraccia una donna sola e intera, compreso il suo carattere e la sua intelligenza.

Fino ad allora non avevo certo conosciuto un tale amore e quando mi capitò non mi diede neppur esso la salute, ma è importante per me ricordare di aver rintracciata la malattia dove un dotto vedeva la salute e che la mia diagnosi si sia poi avverata.⁴³

⁴³ Italo Svevo, *Romanzi*, ed. P. Sarzana, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore (1985), 3rd ed., 1994: 662.

[I then pronounced an important statement:

“Healthy love is that which which embraces one woman, single and entire, including her character and her intelligence.”

I had of course not up to that point known such love and when it befell me to do so even that did not give me health, but it is important to me to recall having traced sickness where an expert saw health and that my diagnosis was to be confirmed.]

Whether or not we accept Zeno’s societally derived valuation of exclusive pair-bonding, romantic love, or what he elsewhere calls “santa monogamia,” it is clear that here he proclaims an ethical criterion. But mystification quickly sets in. He says nothing about the complete love he claims to have experienced at some later time, except that it did not give him health. If he is referring to his love for Ada, which purports to be of this kind, its authenticity is undercut by the very notion of using it as an avenue to health. But, whoever the woman concerned, if that experience did not bring Zeno health, it is impossible to tell how it confirmed his hypothesis, as he claims it does.

This loose thread that Zeno has characteristically let drop may perhaps be picked up again at the beginning of “La storia del mio matrimonio.” Just before Zeno meets Ada, he tells us: “Trascurai una fanciulla che per un momento avrei creduto facesse al caso mio e restai attaccato al mio futuro suocero. Mi verrebbe voglia anche di credere al destino.”⁴⁴ He then passes on to describe his relationship with his father-in-law, Malfenti, from their first meeting to the latter’s death, and then, apparently having forgotten mentioning the young lady he had been interested in, re-introduces her seven pages later:

⁴⁴ “I neglected a girl who I might momentarily have thought suited my need and remained attached to my future father-in-law. It might even make me feel inclined to believe in destiny.” *Ibid.*: 712.

Fu forse un caso che prima di presentarmi in casa Malfenti io mi fossi liberato da un legame abbastanza antico con una donna che forse avrebbe meritato un trattamento migliore. Ma un caso che dà da pensare. La decisione a tale distacco fu presa per ragione ben lieve. Alla poverina era parso un bel sistema di legarmi meglio a lei, quello di rendermi geloso. Il sospetto invece bastò per indurmi ad abbandonarla definitivamente. Essa non poteva sapere che io ero allora invaso dall'idea del matrimonio e che non potevo contrarlo con lei, solo perché con lei la novità non mi sarebbe sembrata abbastanza grande. Il sospetto ch'essa aveva fatto nascere in me ad arte era una dimostrazione della superiorità del matrimonio nel quale tali sospetti non devono sorgere. Quando quel sospetto di cui sentii presto l'inconsistenza dileguò, ricordai anche ch'essa spendeva troppo. Oggi, dopo ventiquattr'anni di onesto matrimonio, non sono più di quel parere.

Per essa fu una vera fortuna perché, pochi mesi dopo, fu sposata da persona molto abbiente ed ottenne l'ambito mutamento prima di me. Non appena sposato me la trovai in casa perché il marito era un amico di mio suocero. C'incontrammo spesso, ma, per molti anni, finché fummo giovani, fra noi regnò il massimo riserbo e mai si fece allusione al passato. L'altro giorno ella mi domandò a bruciapelo, con la sua faccia incorniciata da capelli grigi giovanilmente arrossata:

– Perché mi abbandonaste?

Io fui sincero perché non ebbi il tempo necessario per fabbricare una bugia:

– Non lo so più, ma ignoro anche tante altre cose della mia vita.

– A me dispiace, – ella disse e già m’inchinavo al complimento che così mi prometteva. – Nella vecchiaia mi sembrate un uomo molto divertente. – Mi rizzai con uno sforzo. Non era il caso di ringraziare.⁴⁵

[It was perhaps by chance that before I presented myself at the Malfentis’ I had freed myself from a fairly long attachment to a woman who should perhaps have deserved better treatment. But that chance circumstance gives food for thought. The rupture was decided on fairly trifling grounds. The poor girl had thought that a fine way of binding me fast to her would be to make me jealous. In fact the very suspicion was enough to make me drop her for good. She had no way of knowing that at that time I was obsessed with the idea of marriage and that I thought I could not undertake it with her simply because with her the novelty wouldn’t have seemed great enough. The suspicion that she had artfully roused in me was proof of the superiority of marriage in which such suspicions must not arise. When that suspicion, whose lack of substance I quickly sensed, faded, I recalled also that she spent too much. Today, after twenty-four years of honorable matrimony, I’m no longer of that opinion.

For her it was a real piece of luck because, a few months later, she became the wife of a very wealthy person and achieved the desired change of state before I did. No sooner was I myself married than I found her in my house as her husband was a friend of my father-in-law’s. We met frequently, but, for many years, while we were young, the height of discretion prevailed between us and no reference was ever made

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 719-20.

to the past. The other day she asked me point-blank, with a youthful blush on her face surrounded by grey hair: “Why did you leave me?”

I was sincere because I didn’t have time to make up a lie: “I no longer know, but I’m ignorant about plenty of other things in my life.”

“I regret it,” she said, and I was already bowing to receive the promised compliment. “In your old age you strike me as being most amusing.” I drew myself up with an effort. I had nothing to thank her for.]

This microcosmic instance of Zeno’s compulsive mystifications ushers in the central part of the novel, comprising its three longest chapters, and ties up the initial moment of the narrative (before the meeting with Malfenti) with the present in which Zeno is writing his recollections (“Oggidi, dopo ventiquattr’anni di onesto matrimonio,” “L’altro giorno”). He doesn’t have time to tell a lie, but what he so sincerely says conflicts with all the other reasons he gives for having left the girl.

Perhaps her question of a few days earlier has made him recall the until then forgotten circumstances, but the reasons he recalls still jostle with one another unconvincingly, and each of them is quickly undercut – jealousy, boredom, economy. The reader is left wondering whether any of them were genuine, or whether indeed there was any genuine reason, as the reader is left wondering about Zeno’s proclaimed amnesia and sincerity. Can Zeno lie even when he most earnestly protests his sincerity? And if he boasts of lying if given enough time, not only can we not confidently believe anything he puts down in writing, but we also have to reckon with the liar’s paradox (“I always tell lies”). But perhaps for once the liar is telling the truth, and really does not know himself. If Savelli is right, and reality – within or outside oneself – is unknowable, then any statement must be arbitrary, and the question of truth-value irrelevant.

This is the zero position. But it is Zeno’s position, and not, arguably, even demonstrably, that of the implied author. It is a

nihilist, corrosive, critical, ironic position, deadly in demolishing false positives. But though Zeno by his conscious and unconscious mystifications attempts to demolish all truth values and all ethical values that threaten his identity, he does not always succeed. He does not demolish all of even those positives which he himself enunciates. Not, for instance, the possibility of serious love between a man and a woman. This surfaces again when Zeno is equivocating between his wife and his mistress Carla, telling Carla that he bears esteem and affection towards his wife, though she was not his real choice. He reflects:

C'era qualche centro proibitivo che agiva ancora in me. Avevo detto di stimare mia moglie, ma non avevo mica ancora detto di non amarla. Non avevo detto che mi piacesse, ma neppure che non potesse piacermi. In quel momento mi pareva di essere molto sincero; ora so di aver tradito con quelle parole tutt'e due le donne e tutto l'amore, il mio e il loro.⁴⁶

[There was some centre of prohibition still at work within me. I had said I held my wife in esteem, but I hadn't yet said I didn't love her. I hadn't said I fancied her, but neither had I said that I couldn't fancy her. At that moment I felt I was being most sincere; now I know that with those words I betrayed both women and the whole of love, both mine and theirs.]

Even if Zeno is now being as disingenuous as he had been before, he is subscribing to an unrealised ethical alternative in I-thou relationships. Just as when he most loudly protests his innocence and thus voices his sense of guilt, he is subscribing to implicit criteria for discriminating between the two. The *coscienza* that from time to time breaks through

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 864.

Zeno's *incoscienza* is the desire for authentic living in authentic relationships, the desire adumbrated in Svevo's jotting of 25 October 1917 to "go outside time and space" so that "we shall all know each other so intimately that that will be the path towards sincerity. We will all 'thou' one another and laugh at one another as we deserve. That will be the final death of literature which is all too intimate a part of our spirit and we will see right into each other." This is the "macabre prospect" that Zeno, through Svevo, has given us of himself.

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