

One Last Austrian Cigarette: Italo Svevo and Habsburg Trieste

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*D*ebates concerning the Svevo affair (“il caso Svevo”) have traditionally been conducted against the background of a *Risorgimento*-flavored literary historiography, which was invested in representing the modern history of Habsburg Trieste as a teleological struggle towards unification with the Italian Kingdom. This approach has left the question of Svevo’s complex network of cultural identifications largely unexplored. More recent scholarship has started to investigate Svevo within the contexts of Trieste’s loyalty to the Habsburg monarchy and, more generally, of the city’s multiple cultural and political allegiances¹. Building on these contributions, I argue that in *La Coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno’s Conscience*) Svevo purposefully inscribes himself within a Habsburg literary tradition through Zeno’s association between writing and smoking Austrian cigarettes. By emphasizing Zeno’s indifference to national identification and his allegiance to the metropolitan identity of Habsburg Trieste, the text calls attention to Svevo’s liminal status as a Habsburg subject writing in Italian, rather than placing him in an exclusively Italian national tradition. I also contend that Zeno challenges the Italian cultural nationalism of Irredentist Trieste by means of an epistemology of the vernacular. The protagonist’s famous statement, according to which one can only lie in Italian, introduces an epistemological instability within the narration and exposes the contingent nature of his linguistic choice. Zeno’s refusal to fully commit to the concept of nation obliquely mirrors Svevo’s own urban patrio-

tism, which was based on two fundamental considerations. First, as a shrewd businessman, Svevo was well aware of the fact that Trieste's prosperity depended upon Habsburg economic policy. In addition, like many other intellectuals of his generation sharing the supranational mentality of a thriving mercantile bourgeoisie, he attributed to Habsburg Trieste the unique role of mediator between German, Italian and Slavic cultures. While Svevo certainly welcomed an increased cultural autonomy for Italians in the city, he was at the same time very distrustful of the rising nationalism. This approach to the cultural politics of Svevo's novel suggests the author's proximity to the positions of Austro-Marxism and its Adriatic offshoot, namely Triestine Socialism, whose goal was not a dismantling of the empire, but a constitutional reform that would turn the state into a federation of all the peoples under Habsburg rule.

In the course of this paper, I shall first discuss the tension between Italian standard and dialect in Svevo's earlier novels. I will then continue with Svevo's *La Coscienza*, where the protagonist's autobiographical account springs from a seminal Ur-memory: the clandestine smoking of an Austrian brand of cigarettes that displayed the Habsburg coat of arms. Subsequently, I will consider how in the novel the confessions are presented to the reader as a diary that the narrator is asked to write by his psychoanalyst. While the genre would suggest a personal and intimate tone for Zeno's confessions, the narrator is keenly aware of the fact that his therapeutic autobiography is also a public document. Not only will the doctor read it, but he also publishes it to punish Zeno's disbelief in psychoanalysis. In this tangle of conceit and lies, Zeno constantly reassures his readership of his Italian loyalty. A closer reading, I suggest, reveals a set of rhetorical strategies that aim instead at undermining the very cultural politics of Italian nationalists to which Zeno allegedly subscribes. Zeno's mimicry is a stratagem of resistance aimed at destabilizing Italian cultural hegemony.

The literary pseudonym that the Triestine businessman and industrialist Aaron Hector Schmitz adopted when he chose to sign his novels with "Italo Svevo" was an open challenge to the logic of monolithic national identifications. The choice of publishing under a culturally hybrid name corresponded to a gesture of ostentatious performance exhibiting the author's dual cultural citizenship. By emphasizing his double identification with Italian and German-speaking communities, Svevo's literary pseudonym testified to the syncretic dynamic of the multicultural

Habsburg state. The author perceived the bond between his Italian and German background not as a hierarchical relationship, but rather as a dialogic exchange, a meeting point of the two literary traditions².

Svevo's first language was the local dialect of Habsburg Trieste, a variation of Venetian with a Friulian substratum. During the turn of the century, the Italian ethnic group in the Adriatic city was largely dialectophone, to the extent that the local vernacular functioned both as a *lingua franca* in the international merchant community, and as a linguistic repository of loan words coming from the many languages spoken in the empire. Consequently, the Tuscan-based Italian standard was perceived as a closely related, but different and even somewhat alien linguistic system. Italian was known as the language of the *regnicoli*³, a term with which locals identified subjects of the Kingdom of Italy. Svevo's secondary education took place in the German town of Segnitz, close to Würzburg, where he acquired a near-native command of German and studied Italian as a foreign language⁴. Like many other Triestine intellectuals of his generation, Svevo later decided to undertake a literary pilgrimage to Florence where he hoped to finally learn proper Italian. What prompted this supplementary effort of Tuscan enculturation was the wish to acquire those linguistic means that could satisfy Svevo's literary ambitions. In his novels, the result of this linguistic variety is a prose rife with semantic and syntactic calques from German and the Triestine dialect, occasional gallinisms of literary origin, an awkwardly employed business Italian, as well as archaic Tuscan expressions fished out from a dictionary that reveal Svevo's tendency to overcompensate his uneasiness with Italian. Epitomizing the multifaceted system of cultural allegiances in Trieste, Svevo positions himself in the literary limbo of a Habsburg novelist writing in Italian.

In Svevo's *La Coscienza*, the main character Zeno Cosini, a heavy smoker and an incorrigible hypochondriac, embarks upon a project of psychoanalytic self-scrutiny. The narration is presented in the form of a diary that Zeno writes by order of his psychoanalyst. The doctor recommends his patient to recount the crucial events in his life so that Zeno can recover a lost sense of integrity: "Scriva! Scriva! Vedrà come arriverà a vedersi intero" (*Romanzi*, 628) [Write it down! And you'll see yourself whole! Try it! (*Conscience*, 7)]. Since Zeno is doubtful of the doctor's effectiveness and threatens to quit the sessions, the fictional psychoanalyst takes revenge on his patient by publishing Zeno's diary.

In his own search of lost time Zeno tries to recover long-forgotten memories. At the very inception of the novel, the narrator claims:

Oggi scopro subito qualche cosa che più non ricordavo. Le prime sigarette ch'io fumai non esistono più in commercio. Intorno al '70 se ne avevano in Austria di quelle che venivano vendute in scatoline di cartone munite del marchio dell'aquila bicipite (628).

[Today, I discover immediately something I had forgotten. The cigarettes I first smoked are no longer on the market. Around 1870 in Austria there was a brand that came in cardboard boxes stamped with the two-headed eagle (7)].

Zeno's memories crystallize around the heraldic image of the double-headed Habsburg bird of prey. By emphasizing the Austrian cigarettes, Svevo reminds his reader that the cultural politics of the Habsburgs was largely informed by their political economy. He is smoking the cigarettes produced by the Imperial Austrian Tobacco Monopoly (*Kaiserlich-Königliche Tabakregie*), founded in 1784 by Emperor Joseph II. The monopoly established that only the Austrian state was entitled to raise, manufacture and sell tobacco⁵. Joseph II is the same monarch who promulgated the Edict of Tolerance, promoting the integration of ethnic minorities in the empire, allowing the demographic and economic expansion of Trieste and ultimately the prosperity of Habsburg Jews like Svevo himself⁶.

The coat of arms of the Austrian Empire on Zeno's beloved pack of cigarettes initiates the flow of memories and thus the narration itself. The doctor forbids him to smoke and the protagonist remembers how as a young man he already smoked against the wishes of his father. Zeno comments on his clandestine activity: "Ricordo di aver fumato molto, celato in tutti i luoghi possibili" (631) [I remember I smoked a great deal, hiding in every possible corner (10)]. Zeno acknowledges the unhealthy habit, and pledges not to smoke ever again, except for one last, endlessly deferred, cigarette: "Giacché mi fa male non fumerò mai più, ma prima voglio farlo per l'ultima volta" (632) [It's bad for me, so I will never smoke again. But first, I want to have one last smoke (10)]. Enjoying the intensity of the one final cigarette, Zeno will smoke countless last cigarettes in the course of the novel. The doctor attempts to break Zeno's smoking habit with unconventional methods. One of these techniques consists in putting Zeno in a prison-like clinic. His prison ward Giovanna, however, is swayed to offer

him alcoholic beverages and cigarettes. He likes her because she offers him company during his therapeutic prison stay, while she appreciates that Zeno listens to her complaints. After they have drunk heavily, Zeno has difficulties understanding her slurred speech:

Non saprei ripetere esattamente quello ch'essa mi disse, dopo aver ingoiati vari bicchierini, nel suo puro dialetto triestino, ma ebbi tutta l'impressione di trovarmi da canto una persona che, se non fossi stato stornato dalle mie preoccupazioni, avrei potuto stare a sentire con diletto (647).

[I couldn't repeat exactly everything she said to me, in her pure Triestine dialect, after she had drained all those glasses, but I had the profound impression of being with a person to whom, if I hadn't been distracted by my own concerns, I could have listened with pleasure (25)].

The pleasure comes from her pure Triestine dialect, not contaminated by Italian. She also offers cigarettes, but instead of his beloved Austrian cigarettes, she offers “Sigarette ordinarie, ungheresi” (650) [Ordinary cigarettes, Hungarian (28)] which Zeno dislikes because they are nauseating. Preferring Austrian cigarettes to the cheap Hungarian ones carries obvious political overtones in a novel set in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Zeno's secret smoking habit bears a striking resemblance to the clandestine writing that accompanied Svevo's life. This becomes evident when in the novel Zeno associates smoking with writing. Commenting on another therapeutic method suggested by the doctor, Zeno says: “Impose quel libretto anche a me, ma io non vi registrai che qualche ultima sigaretta” (657) [He imposed that notebook method on me, but in mine I jotted down nothing except a few last cigarettes (35)]. By the same token, Svevo's early literary aspirations were kept a secret from his strict father: “Ettore had already developed a clandestine taste for reading fiction, in the face of his father's disapproval. His psychological independence was gradually to be transferred from reading to writing” (Gatt-Rutter 26). Especially after the bitter failure of *Senilità* and his commitment to devote his energies fully to business activities, Svevo thought of giving up writing, which in a diary entry of 1902 he defined as “quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura” (*Opera Omnia*, 818) [that ridiculous and unhealthy thing they call literature (my translation)]. Svevo is clearly associating writing with the unhealthy activity of smoking. Zeno's cigarette thus

becomes a “degeneration of the pen” (Vittorini, 91), a symbolic manifestation of Svevo’s literature⁷. In the way he is forever smoking one “last” cigarette, he is forever writing a “last” page of literature.

As a result, the act of smoking Austrian cigarettes assumes a crucial importance not only because it functions as a seminal episode in the narration, but also because it signals the liminality of the novel within the literary landscape of European modernism. Let me suggest that among Zeno’s multiple confessions, the admission to his clandestine smoking of Austrian cigarettes stands out as Svevo’s own meta-narrative “confession” of being an Austrian-Italian novelist. As a “confession”, Svevo’s subscription to a Habsburg literary tradition is not a particularly secretive or coded message. With the heraldic image of the Austrian double-headed eagle, he offers his readership an unmistakable key of interpretation.

If we accept this scriptural transfiguration of the protagonist’s Austrian cigarette, Zeno’s combined smoking and writing becomes the signature of an *écriture habsbourgeoise*⁸, through which Svevo inscribes himself in a Habsburg literary tradition. This smoky identity, revealing a subject shrouded in mist, an intangible and impalpable self, is what makes Svevo a Habsburg novelist writing in Italian. Zeno’s smoking habit is an embedded commentary on Svevo’s literary activity. Smoking Austrian cigarettes corresponds to writing with a Habsburg pen. His hybrid Italian, in fact, is not seen as the language of the Kingdom of Italy, but as one of the many languages that constitute the Habsburg multilingual monarchy. This should not come as a surprise if we consider how Svevo constructs the identity of his protagonist. Zeno’s name not only evokes the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea, but is also one of Svevo’s etymological puns. Zeno comes from the Greek *xénos*, meaning ‘stranger’. The Italian-speaking Zeno is a stranger to himself. This description of Zeno resonates with Svevo’s own dialectophone experience. As already mentioned, the author’s first language was the local dialect that tended to absorb the many languages spoken in multilingual Habsburg Trieste. For Svevo, standard Italian almost assumed the features of a foreign language⁹.

This underlying tension between Italian standard and Triestine dialect is a veritable *Leitmotif* already in Svevo’s earlier works. In *Una Vita*, his first novel published in 1892, Svevo makes a mordant mockery of a pedantic Italian teacher. Alfonso Nitti, the protagonist, falls in love with his boss’s daughter Annetta, who is receiving private lessons from a certain Mr. Spalati, an elderly professor of Italian language and literature.

Alfonso describes him as follows: “Era un verista a credergli ma viceversa poi, quando si trovava alle prese con uno scrittore italiano, indagava pedantesamente se usava parole non legittimate dal Petrarca” (*Romanzi*, 110). [He was a realist, if you believed him, but then every time he read an Italian author, he would pedantically investigate if the writer had used words sanctioned by Petrarca (my translation)]. The irony here is that, if the professor were truly a follower of the Italian *verismo* (following the example of Giovanni Verga for instance) he would certainly not look for literary terms in the Petrarchan tradition, but for everyday expressions and a literary language that heavily borrows from the dialect. He evidently subscribes to the literary trends of his time only formally, emphasizing the need for a unified Tuscan-based Italian.

In the history of the Italian language, Pietro Bembo first codified the standard by maintaining in his *Prose della Volgar Lingua* (1525) that the linguistic model for prose and poetry should respectively be the 14th century Tuscan authors Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca. These rigid codifications established what terms were proper Italian and what was an unacceptable influence from the various regional dialects. This Tuscan linguistic model served as the main identity marker well before the political unification of Italy and was adopted as the standard when Italy became an independent and sovereign state in 1861, the year in which Svevo was born. Describing Spalati's pedantic corrections and his adhesion to a strict Petrarchan vocabulary, Svevo makes a clear statement about the politics of the professor. According to an engrained cultural nationalism, good and acceptable Italian should be devoid of influences from the dialect. Svevo's protagonists – Emilio, Alfonso and Zeno – perceive this emphasis on Tuscan purity as an imposition of cultural hegemony with a strong colonial flavor. Paradoxically, the Austrian empire is much more even-handed in its approach to linguistic matters. Italian is among the languages that were recognized as official languages of the empire after the reforms in the 1860s. No Austrian official would think of correcting a speaker of *triestino* if their speech did not meet requirements of Tuscan purity.

The conversations in Svevo's novels, rendered in Italian direct speech, in reality occur in dialect. Towards the end of *Una Vita*, Alfonso tries to console the wife of an English colleague who is desperately trying to find her husband. Although all direct and indirect speech is rendered in Italian (in which the novel is written), Alfonso remarks that this English

woman speaks the dialect perfectly (*Romanzi*, 324). This statement implies that this particular conversation, although rendered in Italian, has to be imagined as spoken in dialect. Svevo surprises the reader by destabilizing the linguistic frame of his novel, reminding his readers that the plot is set in dialectophone Trieste.

In 1898 Svevo publishes *Senilità*, a novel in which the opposition between Tuscan-based Italian and Triestine dialect is mentioned, even though marginally. The protagonist, Emilio Brentani, falls in love with the deceiving Angiolina, the daughter of a well-to-do businessman. She flirts with the protagonist but ends up eloping with a banker. Emilio falls for the young woman, but dislikes an affected mannerism in her speech:

Ella toscaneggiava con affettazione e ne risultava un accento piuttosto inglese che toscano. ‘Prima o poi’ – diceva Emilio, – ‘le leverò tale difetto che m’infastidisce’ (453).

[She used to try and talk the Tuscan dialect, but in such an affected manner that her accent was more English than Tuscan. ‘Sooner or later,’ said Emilio, ‘I must cure her of that habit; it is beginning to irritate me’ (*As a Man Grows Older*, 34-35)].

In order to emphasize her social prestige, Angiolina tries during her salon meetings with the Triestine upper crust to speak Tuscan-based Italian. According to Emilio, her attempts are rather unsuccessful and fail because her accent sounds more English than Italian. English, a foreign language, is closer to Angiolina’s affectation than Italian itself, which is supposed to be the “national” language of Italians in Trieste. Svevo continues to highlight the differences in quality between Italian and Triestine dialect. Stefano Balli, Emilio’s friend, flirts with Angiolina by being impertinent with her. Commenting on Balli’s impudent expressions, the narrator notes:

Dapprima s’era accontentato di dirglike in toscano, aspirando e addolcendo, e a lei erano sembrate carezze, ma anche quando le capitarono addosso in buon triestino, dure e sboccate, ella non se ne adontò (469).

[At first he used to come with them in Tuscan, in such softly breathed accents that they seemed to her a caress; but even when they came pouring forth in the Triestine dialect, in all their harsh obscenity, she showed no sign of offence (76)].

Here Svevo stages common socio-linguistic perceptions of those members of the upper class in turn-of-the-century Trieste that were sympathetic to Irredentism. Tuscan is associated with a pleasant inflection, while the local dialect assumes the features of an unrefined drawl.

In his earlier novels, Svevo framed the opposition between standard Italian and dialect in terms of social class division and possibly political allegiances. In *La Coscienza* the author transfers this linguistic tension onto an epistemological level, exposing the arbitrary use of Italian as the language of narration. In this way, Svevo offers his readership interpretative coordinates that radically undermine the centrality of the very language in which the novel is written. His main character Zeno emphasizes the alterity of Italian, claiming that the language of his confessions is almost a foreign tongue to him. In an often-quoted passage in the novel, Zeno makes what appears to be a most startling confession:

Il dottore presta una fede troppo grande anche a quelle mie benedette confessioni che non vuole restituirmi perché le riveda. Dio mio! Egli non studiò che la medicina e perciò ignora che cosa significhi scrivere in italiano per noi che parliamo e non sappiamo scrivere il dialetto. Una confessione in iscritto è sempre menzogna. Con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo! Se egli sapesse come raccontiamo con predilezione tutte le cose per le quali abbiamo pronta la frase e come evitiamo quelle che ci obbligherebbero di ricorrere al vocabolario! È proprio così che scegliamo dalla nostra vita gli episodi da notarsi. Si capisce che la nostra vita avrebbe tutt'altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto. (1050)

The doctor puts too much faith also in those damned confessions of mine, which he won't return to me so I can revise them. Good heavens! He studied only medicine and therefore doesn't know what it means to write in Italian for those of us who speak the dialect but can't write it. A confession in writing is always a lie. With our every Tuscan word, we lie! If only he knew how, by predilection, we recount all the things for which we have the words at hand, and how we avoid those things that would oblige us to turn to the dictionary! This is exactly how we choose, from our life, the episodes to underline. Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in our dialect. (404)

In the novel, Zeno's paradox becomes a linguistic conundrum¹⁰. In Zeno's fictional autobiography, written in standard Italian, the assertion according to which every Italian word presupposes a mendacious statement radically undermines any presumption of truthfulness in the novel. Near the end of the novel, the reader is told that the entire narration is

based on a language that cannot possibly express any truth. What is said in Italian is a lie, and the truth can only be spoken – and not be written – in the Triestine dialect.

Zeno's statement is far more radical than it might appear at first glance. Attributing truthfulness to the spoken language, excluding the written medium, is particularly significant for a language such as Italian. For many centuries, Italian was a written language that very few members of an elite spoke¹¹. It existed as a literary language, as the imitation of medieval models. Zeno's claim has far-reaching implications, as it casts a retrospective judgment onto the history of an entire literary tradition. The production of texts in Italian is an artificial replica of a linguistic model which is not spoken by the people who write it. Zeno calls attention to this state of affairs, and emphasizes the insincere and deceitful nature of his own literary endeavour in Italian. His autobiography is not much different from the work of authors who did not speak, but merely imitated, a literary model of language which was later adopted as the Italian national language. Zeno perceives the language he chooses as artificial for the purposes of his autobiographical narration, and for him this becomes the most pertinent means to deceive the credulous doctor.

Since dialect is the sole adequate expressive medium, Zeno can grasp the truth only through an epistemology of the vernacular. The narrator introduces an epistemological instability into the narrative apparatus, revealing a profound psycholinguistic dilemma that involves the impossibility of speaking the truth. Zeno cannot be truthful unless a dictionary is at hand. He can only articulate his story in the same way one speaks a foreign language, the mastery of which is, in this case, far from being satisfactory. In addition, Zeno calls into question the unity of the Italian linguistic community. His reflection not only addresses the synchronic dimension of the language, its communicative failure in everyday usage, but also the diachronic aspect: the literary history of Italian, the language of Dante and Manzoni, upon which Italian cultural and political unity was substantially constructed. Politically, in fact, Zeno's statement challenges the notion of an allegedly univocal front of ethnic Italians in pre-war Trieste whose loyalties were anything but straightforward.

With Zeno's confession that the book could have been written in dialect, or German for that matter, Svevo underlines that the book is not Italian by virtue of an inescapable national destiny. It could have been written in a different linguistic medium, which would have not been a

translation of the Italian version we are reading. A version of *La Coscienza* in the Triestine dialect would have told the protagonist's life from a different perspective. It would have been an autobiography in which other episodes would have determined a different personal profile for Zeno. Consequently, with the choice of different episodes to narrate changes determined by the linguistic medium, we would have known a different Zeno. This is why Zeno's account does not correspond to an absolute truth, but to a linguistically and culturally determined account of reality. Imagining his diary in a multiplicity of versions – for instance in Italian, Triestine dialect or German – opens up the possibility of parallel universes which exist simultaneously. This implication is certainly the starkest contradiction to what his psychoanalyst says at the beginning of the novel, when he recommends writing the diary so that Zeno can feel “whole” again. Instead, Zeno writes the diary and discovers exactly the opposite. His life is fragmented as a result of his different cultural allegiances. Zeno does not consider this fragmentation, or multiplicity, as a pathological condition. For him multiculturalism and linguistic border crossing constitute the norm. The pathological insecurity and psychosomatic manifestations of a hypochondriac constitute much of the lack of purpose in this man without qualities. The reader is invited to accept, together with Zeno, this alternative and experimental mode of existence¹².

Zeno's admission that with every Italian word he automatically lies is the most important confession that carries wide-ranging implications for his entire fictional autobiography. He returns to the notion of linguistic mendacity later in the text. He reports his failure to mention to the doctor that there is a lumberyard owned by him and Guido which is close to the house where he practices his psychoanalytic sessions:

Quest'eliminazione non è che la prova che una confessione fatta da me in italiano non poteva essere né completa né sincera. In un deposito di legnami ci sono varietà enormi di qualità che noi a Trieste appelliamo con termini barbari presi dal dialetto, dal croato, dal tedesco e qualche volta persino dal francese (*zapin* p.e. non equivale mica a *sapin*). Chi m'avrebbe fornito il vero vocabolario? Vecchio come sono avrei dovuto prendere un impiego da un commerciante in legnami toscano? (1060-61)

This omission is simply the proof that a confession made by me in Italian could be neither complete nor sincere. In a lumberyard there are enormous varieties of lumber, which we in Trieste call by barbarous names derived from the dialect, from Croat, from German, and sometimes even from French (*zapin*, for example, which

is by no means the equivalent of *sapin*). Who could have given me the appropriate vocabulary? Old as I am, should I have found myself a job with a lumber dealer from Tuscany? (414)

Zeno reiterates his idea that an admission in Italian cannot be comprehensive or truthful. He places this idea in the context of transnational business practices that make Trieste an important economic center in the empire. The technical terms for the great variety of lumber come from different foreign languages associated with imperial trade. He continues to indicate that nobody in Trieste has knowledge of the Italian translations corresponding to this specialized vocabulary. Zeno seems to imply here that a political annexation to Italy would only slow down or even harm business practices in Trieste. It is significant, however, that the narrator uses the term “barbarous,” which has a negative connotation, in lieu of the more neutral term “foreign” to describe the language of his trade. Faking a sympathetic attitude towards Italian Irredentism, Zeno raises a point that even the most fervent nationalist in Trieste could not ignore. With the final rhetorical question in the passage, Zeno pretends to wonder what economic and financial effects Trieste’s national deliverance would produce. He certainly knows the answer to the question, but leaves it open in order to avoid taking a public stance in the matter.

Zeno’s anxiety over correct language use affects his interpersonal relationships and romantic encounters, and assumes wider, social and political implications in his public interactions. An example of Zeno’s sociolinguistic concerns is the interaction with his mentor Mr. Malfenti, who is a successful businessman and will later become his father-in-law. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Zeno meets with him in the Tergesteo café and attempts to elicit some business secrets from him that might later be helpful in his own commercial activity. Through this friendship, Zeno is introduced into the Malfenti household, where he falls in love with Ada. Once Zeno decides to ask Ada’s father for her hand, he wonders in what kind of language he should propose: “Bastava dirgli la mia determinazione di sposare sua figlia... Mi preoccupava tuttavia la quistione se in un’occasione simile avrei dovuto parlare in lingua o in dialetto” (723) [I had only to inform him of my resolve to marry his daughter... Yet I was troubled by the problem of whether, on such an occasion, I should speak to him in dialect or standard Italian (97)]. Italian is the language that Zeno would use in a formal and official context, since he associates dialect with

lower education and lower class status. It is important to note that in this particular scene Giovanni Malfenti had gone to the Tergesteo, a historic café that is still open today, which was also a favorite meeting place for Irredentists. Speaking Italian there assumes a further meaning, as it would have been interpreted as indicative of nationalist political leanings.

In a comic turn of events, Zeno ends up marrying Augusta, Malfenti's other daughter, who falls in love with Zeno. Ada instead will marry Guido Speier. The scene in which Zeno is first introduced to Guido reveals much of the identity politics and its underlying social mechanisms that govern the interactions in the novel. Zeno, who is more at ease with the dialect, is jealous of Guido's mastery of Italian and immediately develops a dislike for his future brother-in-law:

Si chiamava Guido Speier. Il mio sorriso si fece più spontaneo perché subito mi si presentava l'occasione di dirgli qualche cosa di sgradevole: - Lei è tedesco? Cortesemente egli mi disse che riconosceva che al nome tutti potevano crederlo tale. Invece i documenti della sua famiglia provavano ch'essa era italiana da vari secoli. Egli parlava il toscano con grande naturalezza mentre io e Ada eravamo condannati al nostro dialettaccio. (735)

His name was Guido Speier. My smile became more spontaneous because I was immediately offered the opportunity of saying something disagreeable to him: "You are German?"

He replied politely, admitting that because of his name, one might believe he was. But family documents proved that they had been Italian for several centuries. He spoke Tuscan fluently, while Ada and I were condemned to our horrid dialect. (109)

Zeno is fully aware of the anti-Austrian sentiment of the Irredentists and consequently mimics their social strategies. By asking whether Guido is of German origin, he intends to insult him. Guido replies to Zeno's offensive remark with suspiciously calculated aplomb. His gracious answer sounds as though it has been rehearsed over and over again. While admitting that it would be reasonable to assume that he is German, he seeks refuge in an alleged bureaucratic evidence of his century-long Italian character. Without probably realizing it, Guido's justification is an implicit admission that his family is from German stock. To compensate his lack of a pure Italian identity, he has learned perfect Tuscan, and eagerly shows it off. Later, the reader learns that Guido in fact speaks German very well (283), just as Zeno speaks it, too (429). In narrating the episode,

Zeno opposes Guido's competence with standard Italian to the "horrid" dialect to which Ada and he are condemned. In denigrating the dialect and wishing for better competence in Italian, Zeno is adopting a dissimulating strategy similar to Guido's. As mentioned earlier, Zeno knows that he is writing his confessions upon his doctor's request and that his private diary is really a public document, subject to the scrutiny of official medical discourse. This explains his circumspect treatment of the nationality question and his careful avoidance of politics in his diary. Zeno stages himself as a self-loathing Triestine, constantly sick, condemned to speak an ugly drawl, longing to speak better Italian and to implicitly prove his political allegiance to Italy. Despite Zeno's antagonistic feelings toward his brother-in-law, he shares with Guido a well-calculated agenda that is on display in their social interactions. Guido's attempt to hide his German background bears a striking resemblance to Zeno's own strategy of social assimilation.

One should not, however, make the mistake of uncritically equating Svevo's positions with Zeno's. For all the similarities, Zeno is not Svevo's straightforward novelistic double. Rather, the author intersperses bits and pieces of autobiographic material in the construction of characters and scenes. Like a great painter who indulges in a gesture of vanity by placing a small self-portrait in the corner of a large canvas, Svevo inscribes into the novel a fictional projection of the authorial self. He briefly introduces a minor character, inconsequential for the further development of the plot, named Nilini whom Zeno meets at the bourse. Nilini takes pleasure in educating Zeno in the matters of international politics, in which he was deeply versed thanks to his activity on the stock exchange (358). He introduces Zeno to the politics of the Great Powers, explaining shifts between peaceful relations and sudden warfare in international diplomacy. Svevo constructs a character whose ideas about international relations are deeply informed by economic transactions, an element that suggests an authorial projection in the character. Nilini's name is obviously a pun on the Latin word *nihil*, meaning "nothing" and a variation on Zeno's last name Cosini that indicates "small things."

Zeno and Nilini share a social ineptness, a profound clumsiness in matters of interpersonal relationships. More importantly, however, Zeno befriends Nilini because he smuggles the protagonist's beloved cigarettes: "Mi procurava delle sigarette di contrabbando e me le faceva pagare quello che gli costavano, cioè molto poco" (1002) [He procured contraband

cigarettes and charged me only what they had cost him, namely very little (358)].

Here Svevo's Habsburg aesthetic comes full circle. These illegally imported cigarettes are reminiscent of Zeno's clandestine smoking habit, which he described at the beginning of the novel. Stealing his father's cigarettes is analogous to illicitly getting cigarettes from the symbolic father figure represented by the Emperor, who was also called *Landesvater* in the imperial propaganda. The references to smoking at the beginning and at the end of the novel act as a narrative frame that contains Zeno's life and encapsulates Svevo's literary activity at the border between Habsburg Austrian and Italian traditions. In fact, while Zeno's Austrian cigarettes at the beginning of the novel can be read as a metaphor of Svevo's status as a Habsburg author, now the contraband cigarettes are again associated with his status of a transnational writer. With a few, masterly strokes Svevo paints in the brief characterization of Nilini his own self-portrait:

Potei accorgermi ch'egli era un italiano di color dubbio perché gli pareva che per Trieste fosse meglio di restare austriaca. Adorava la Germania e specialmente i treni ferroviarii tedeschi che arrivavano con tanta precisione. Era socialista a modo suo e avrebbe voluto fosse proibito che una singola persona possedesse più di centomila corone. (1003)

I could divine that he was an Italian of suspect coloration because it seemed to him Trieste would be better off remaining Austrian. He adored Germany and especially German railway cars, which arrived with such precision. He was a socialist in his own way, and would have liked any individual person to be forbidden to possess more than one thousand crowns. (358-59)

This little vignette reveals Svevo's peculiar position in the complex network of allegiances in Habsburg Trieste. In the construction of this minor character, the author projects his biographic information. Nilini's profile reads like a summary of Svevo's loyalties and beliefs. First, Nilini's Italian loyalty is called into question by his economic entanglement with Austria. He represents the common opinion that Trieste's prosperity is linked to Austrian economic policies and that the city's unification with Italy would signify its commercial decline. Svevo's business activities depended largely on producing and selling anti-corrosive paint for ships to the Austrian navy. He continued to sell the products of his company to the Austrian military even after Italy and Austria were for-

mally at war. In addition, Nilini's sympathy for Germany clearly reflects Svevo's attachment to his German background. The third element that suggests Svevo's self-portrait here is the character's personal interpretation of Socialism.

According to the writer Giani Stuparich, before World War I the various ideological positions in Trieste constituted a manifold political spectrum. In his 1948 autobiography *Trieste nei miei ricordi* Stuparich identifies four main viewpoints. The members of the first group perceived themselves as Austrian subjects and were loyal to the Habsburg monarchy. A second group saw itself as Italian first and foremost, even though it was torn between the myth of national deliverance and their economic interests. This frequently undecided mercantile middle class was not always fully committed to the Irredentist roadmap and was often hesitant to accept its ultimate goal of breaking with Austria. The Socialists, who were opposed to joining Italy, made up a third group. Their internationalist agenda entailed an economic collaboration among the various ethnic groups in a reformed empire, where every national group could enjoy more cultural autonomy. Lastly, a small group of fervent nationalists made up the Irredentist faction. Their boisterously declared goal was unification with the newly founded Italian Kingdom.

Svevo's political leanings need to be placed in this diverse context. In the past, the author's contact with patriotic associations such as the Lega Nazionale and the Ginnastica Triestina lead scholars to believe that Svevo subscribed to their Irredentist agenda. After all, he published articles in *L'Indipendente*, the daily newspaper of the Irredentist movement. The consensus today, however, is that Svevo's membership was dictated by political prudence, and that he preferred to avoid taking a public stance in the controversial political questions that animated pre-war Trieste¹³. Svevo's parable "La tribù" (1897), published in Filippo Turati's magazine *Critica Sociale*, shows that Svevo at least initially nurtured Socialist sympathies, by aligning himself with a Socialist tradition in Italy, strategically avoiding in this way to participate in the local debate. In fact, it would have been unwise for him to publish in the other Socialist newspaper *Il Lavoratore*, which in 1895 had officially become the mouthpiece of the Triestine Socialists, who were opposed to Irredentism, arguing that Trieste should remain under Habsburg rule in a federal and democratic reorganization of the Empire.

One should not mistake Svevo's approval of Socialist ideas as a subscription to militant proletarian class struggle. He adhered to a utopian anti-war Socialism that would eventually predispose him to European pacifism. By the time he was writing *La Coscienza*, his positions were closer to the federal and democratic internationalism of the Austro-Marxists. Immediately after the war, Svevo starts drafting a text entitled *Sulla teoria della pace* (On the Theory of Peace). Originally intended to be a large essayistic endeavour, the essay only survives as a fragment, since Svevo soon abandoned the plan in order to embark upon the novelistic enterprise of *La Coscienza*. Sharing the concerns of Triestine Socialists, Svevo feared that the dismemberment of the empire would have disastrous economic consequences for the city. Hence Svevo's post-war pledge for a European economic union, envisioned as a single market, and mainly conceived, in the election of Dante and Kant as inspirational models, as the synergy of Italian and German intellectual traditions.

Cautious to avoid controversial political proclamations, Svevo embedded much of his political beliefs in Zeno's textual strategies. The author never felt any sympathy for Italian nationalism, and was never an *austriacante*, to use the epithet with which Irredentists disparagingly called pro-Austrian Triestines. He saw Trieste as placed in a pre-national dimension, proud of its specific urban identity that was never completely Austrian, not entirely Slovene, and never fully Italian. In an age in which the rhetoric of nationalism gained social and political currency, this pre-national logic was highly dubious, since its non-national loyalty possessed a highly subversive character, a character that later made Trieste suspicious in the eyes of the Fascist regime.

Zeno's Trieste reflects Svevo's perception of the Adriatic city as a microcosm dwelling under a double colonial yoke that however defies both the imperialism of the Habsburgs and the nationalism of the Irredentists. At the same time, it does not fully reject Austria or Italy as it tries to embrace both. His emotional connection to an Italian Habsburg tradition makes Svevo long for a Trieste with greater cultural autonomy for the Italians, but solidly anchored within the multiculturalism of the Habsburg monarchy. Economic and religious considerations play an important role in his writings. His experience as a businessman encouraged a financial pragmatism thanks to which he refused to dogmatically accept the basic tenets of nationalist rhetoric. Like many others, he was keenly aware of the fact that the economic prosperity of the Adriatic city

depended on imperial economy policy. In addition, the Habsburg imperial policy of relative tolerance with respects to the Jewish community made Trieste a location in which a utopian future free of anti-Semitism could be conceived. Historical events, however, took a different turn. With his transnational background Svevo became, similarly to his characters Zeno and Nilini, an “Italian of suspect coloration”. He became suspect to those contemporaries who saw Trieste as an exclusively Italian city and afterwards to those Italian scholars who read his hybrid prose with uneasiness and who believed that conformity to a national linguistic standard is the measure of literary merit.

Svevo best expresses the existential condition of being a foreigner at home in *La Coscienza*. In the novel, the origin of Zeno’s chronic anxiety and social clumsiness has deep psycholinguistic origins. Zeno the foreigner is constantly attempting to protect himself from any suspicion that he might be insufficiently Italian. His autobiography is therapeutic inasmuch as it is a shrewd stratagem to ward off any such suspicion and to undermine the colonizing presence of Italian nationalist extremism. In the novel, Svevo constructs his identity through literary autopoiesis, through his *écriture habsbourgeoise*. The cultural practice of writing fiction in Svevo becomes a strategy of representation as well as a performance of his transnational cultural identity. In this way, Svevo stages an anti-colonial cosmopolitanism that did not only confront the nationalist paradigm of his time, but that even today constitutes a challenge within Italian national identity, still struggling to come to terms with its colonial legacy outside and inside its national borders.



- 1 Mario Lavagetto has cautioned against reading Svevo as a fervent Irredentist and stressed the author's sympathy for socialism that in Trieste was staunchly opposed to the "Redemption" and to the war. Giuseppe Camerino sees Svevo as an Austrian Jew writing in Italian. In his book he ascribes the traditional image of Svevo to an Italian nationalist historiography and literary history that offered a distorted image of Habsburg Trieste. He denounces the "the old and false image of our nationalist historiography that was invested in finding at all cost a strong and rooted tradition of independence movements in Trieste" insisting that we should, instead, look for the "bond that linked the city to the world of the Habsburgs" (186, my translation). While Camerino maintains that Svevo's work should be read as symptomatic of a general crisis of Habsburg literature, Enrico Ghidetti dismisses such claims as questionable arguments (310-11). For a reading of Svevo in the context of Trieste, see Coda and Schächter. For the relationship between Trieste and the Habsburg Empire, see Magris and Ara.
- 2 Such an act of inclusion and display of multiple transnational attachments can be, however, far from being a simple gesture of addition, as it may imply an act of omission as well. The public display of this composite European identity could at the same time be interpreted as an act of exclusion that tends to conceal, if not to obliterate completely, Svevo's Jewish background. I suggest that Svevo's pseudonym works like a palimpsest from which the trace of the Jewish experience and its inherent internationalism cannot be erased. Moreover, however hidden, Svevo's Jewish origin performs an adhesive function that facilitates and allows the hybridity emphasized in the pseudonym. In Svevo's pseudonym Jewish transnationalism becomes the necessary premise for his multiple cultural allegiances. For Svevo's pseudonym see Gatt-Rutter and Minghelli.
- 3 The term, coined by the Italians of Austria, literally indicated a person from the kingdom (regno) of Italy. It also indicated Italian standard, as opposed to the Triestine dialect.
- 4 Camerino maintains that Svevo tended to formulate his thoughts in German, a fact that would suggest that the Triestine author had a native command of the language (265).

- 5 Ernst Marboe provides a history of the Imperial Austrian Tobacco Monopoly (487). Maureen Healy comments on the symbolic role of cigarettes in Austrian World War I propaganda, pointing out the popular belief that an army that smoked well, also fought well. Given the scarcity of supply, the Austrian populace donated cigarettes and other tobacco products to the soldiers in the trenches (118). Svevo here seems to exploit the association between state-produced cigarettes and constructions of Habsburg masculinity.
- 6 For a history of Jews in Trieste see Dubin.
- 7 For a discussion of smoking in the novel see Klein.
By *écriture habsbourgeoise* I mean the literary production of polyglot and multicultural writers in the empire and their inscription in a Habsburg transnational literary canon. This writing emphasizes, in the context of a heterogeneous but thematically coherent Habsburg literary culture, diverse and mixed backgrounds, as well as multiple allegiances to different linguistic, cultural and religious communities.
- 9 Lavagetto has repeatedly emphasized the alterity of Italian in Svevo's literary production. Italian is an acquired language, learned with difficulty and never fully mastered. See *La Cicatrice di Montaigne* (191-92).
- 10 The name of Svevo's protagonist is reminiscent of Zeno of Elea, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher famous for his paradoxes concerning Achilles and the tortoise and the arrow never reaching its target. Svevo's Zeno is hence a figure epitomizing paradox.
- 11 In 1861, the year in which Svevo was born and Italy became politically unified, only about 2.5% of Italians spoke what could be termed as Italian (De Mauro, 43). In the same year, illiteracy was as high as 78% (Migliorini, 603). Italian began to be spoken very late in the Italian peninsula. The initial and slow diffusion of Italian began with a struggling primary education program and with the compulsory military service in the Italian Kingdom. Italian became a widely spoken language as late as the 20th century with the gradual spread of radio and television in Italian households.
- 12 As Elena Coda puts it "In *La Coscienza* illness loses its negative connotations and becomes a paradigm for the fluidity and the openness of an existence devoid of pre-established purpose" (219).
- 13 For comments on Svevo's discretion in political matters and his distance from the Irredentist cause see Ghidetti (162-63), Gatt-Rutter (115) and McCourt (88).



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