Bart Van Den Bossche

**Italo Svevo (1861-1928)**

Italo Svevo was born as Aron Ettore Schmitz in 1861 in Trieste, a city in the north east of Italy that until 1919 was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Due to the economic woes that hit his bourgeois family, he was forced to work as a bank clerk, albeit without giving up the dream of a literary career. Initially interested mainly in theatre, he published a couple of short stories and two novels, *Una vita* (1893; *A Life*), and *Senilità* (1898; *As a Man Grows Older*). During the first decades of the twentieth century, Svevo’s interest in literature seemed to have waned, at least in appearance, both because of the limited success of his work and his busy professional life. In the same period, however, he made a close friend of James Joyce (who lived in Trieste from 1905 to 1914) and discovered Freudian psychoanalysis, two important factors in the genesis of his third novel, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923; *Zeno’s Conscience*), soon recognized as one of the ground-breaking novels of international modernism. Encouraged by this success, Svevo planned a fourth novel and published several short stories. Svevo died in 1928 from the injuries sustained in a car accident.

With their detailed evocations of settings and the close analysis of the relations between various characters, Svevo’s first two novels, *A Life* and *As a Man Grows Older*, are still indebted to nineteenth century realism, yet the complex (and complexed) condition of the main characters, especially their moral and psychological disarray, their strong sense of uncertainty and existential inaptness, already foreshadow many of the typical modernist antiheroes of the twentieth century. Alfonso Nitti, the protagonist of *A Life*, is a young man dreaming of great intellectual and artistic achievements. He leaves his family home in the countryside for Trieste, where he starts to work as an employee in one of the city’s many banks. Involved in various kinds of intrigues and confronted with professional, artistic and sentimental failures, Nitti feels profoundly inapt to live up to his own expectations (the original title of the novel was *Un inetto*, ‘an inapt character’). He tries to cope with his sharp sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the other characters and the social classes to which they belong by developing an attitude of moral and intellectual superiority, even scorn, towards the codes and conventions of social life. Yet at the same time he seems fully aware that his literary and intellectual ruminations are a form of escapism, and an attempt to find some kind of justification of his existential situation and his feelings. By the end of the novel he can no longer avoid to face facts; unable to affirm his own identity and to assume the differences vis-à-vis the others, he sees suicide as the only logical outcome of his short and failed life.

The title of Svevo’s second novel, *A Man Grows Older*, hints at the existential inertia of the protagonist, Emilio Brentani. Just like Alfonso Nitti, Brentani works as an employee in one of Trieste’s financial institutions, and dreams of a career in the arts, so far with limited success. When Emilio gets involved with Angiolina, a young woman of dubious moral reputation, he slowly gets entangledin a web of illusions and (self)deceit. Despite the warnings of his friend Stefano Balli (who, contrary to Emilio, has a strong and lucid personality) not to take Angiolina’s love seriously,Brentani seems unable or unwilling to face the truth about her. Even after it has become impossible to deny Angiolina’s betrayal, he continues to cherish an idealized yet utterly false image of her. The impersonal narrator exposes, often with fierce irony, Brentani’s weaknesses, in particular the impossibility to achieve the kind of lucid and tragic self-consciousness achieved by Alfonso Nitti in *A Life*.

In Svevo’s third novel, *Zeno’s Conscience*, the protagonist Zeno Cosini, a middle-aged Trieste bourgeois, reconstructs the most important episodes of his life. These accounts were commissioned by his psychiatrist, dottor S., who attempted to cure Zeno from his multiple neurotic disorders, and who published his patient’s writings after the latter had unilaterally decided to interrupt the therapy. The various chapters (thematically focused on topics such as Zeno’s addiction to smoking, the death of his father, marriage and adultery), are full of meandering recollections, puzzling comments and whimsicaldigressions on the confused and often contradictory thoughts, feelings and desires constituting Zeno’s inner life. In his highly ironic and often hilarious accounts, Zeno relentlesslydissects his many shortcomings, yet in other passages he indulges in self-pity or in attempts to clear himself from any responsibility. Zeno presents the reader with a self-portrait whose features are constantly blurred and twisted: apparently, it is the moment of writing and interpreting itself that incessantly reshuffles the multiple, ever-shifting “truths” of a subject’s consciousness, prejudicing the sheer possibility of a coherent moral conscience.

Svevo’s oeuvre is characterized by the intertwining of profoundly analytical and inherently skeptical stances. As modern science and philosophy (from Darwin to Freud, from Nietzsche to Schopenhauer) are emanations of modern condition as well as tools to scrutinize it, it may be useless to try to counterbalance the analytical and rational *forma mentis* of modern man by any kind of vitalistic and Dionysian impetus. If there is an evolution to be recognized in Svevo’s fiction, it is the increasing tendency to see all kinds of remedies, therapies and consolations as mere strategies of self-deception and eventually as clumsy, tragicomical ways of denying the inaptitude that seems to be the core of human existence.

**List of Works**

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*Carteggio con James Joyce, Valéry Larbaud, Benjamin Crémieux, Marie Anne Comnène, Eugenio Montale e Valerio Jahier*, ed. Bruno Maier, Milano: Dall’Oglio, 1978.

**References and Further Reading**

John Gatt-Rutter, J. (1988) *Italo Svevo: A Double Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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Moloney, B. (1998) *Italo Svevo narratore. Lezioni triestine*, Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana.

Minghelli, G. (2002) *In the Shadow of the Mammoth: Italo Svevo and the Emergence of Modernism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Vittorini, F. (2011) *Italo Svevo*, Milano: Mondadori.

Paratextual Material

Ruggero Rovan, Bust of Italo Svevo (1931) (Triest, Public Garden)

Website: [www.museosveviano.it](http://www.museosveviano.it)