

INTERFACING WITH REALITY: *ZENO* AND THE UNSTABLE NARRATIVE

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

INTRODUCTION

I originally read Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* in a modern Italian literature class and was struck by how unknown the novel is. I was also taking a course on the modernist novel, and while we discussed William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, there was no mention of Svevo and his brilliant conception of the modernist novel. I made it my goal to read Svevo's novel in Italian and present it in a format that is accessible to anyone who may not be able to read the criticism in Italian. This thesis is an attempt to bring Svevo to a wider audience and involve him in the same discussions as other famous modernist authors.

Yet my investigation of Svevo revealed that he quickly transcends the tropes of the modernist genre through his unique background. Ever self-conscious and self-aware, he knew well the limitations he faced as an author, the greatest of which was his status as an outsider of the Italian culture. Svevo was born in 1861 and spent his entire life in Trieste, Italy — a city considered to be Italian only because of its proximity to the peninsula. As a result, he struggled constantly with his cultural identity. Unable to obtain popular success with his first two novels and his short stories, mainly because of his association with Trieste, Svevo made one final attempt with *La coscienza di Zeno*, the complex and multilayered writing project of a neurotic Triestine. At its core, *Zeno* is an introspective novel that is a direct attempt by the main character to discover the root of his neurosis and come to terms with the complexities of his life. While initially an account of Zeno's attempt to quit smoking, the narrative transforms into a self-examination of Zeno's odd social behavior and how that behavior affects his interpersonal relationships. Therefore, *Zeno* is psychoanalytical in nature and is filled with narratorial evasions, deceptions, false perspectives, and endless justifications. Svevo's work is largely rooted in his milieu, both in plot and location, the latter of which factors significantly into the setting and behavior of the characters. The result is a protagonist with a complicated history and an unstable

perspective on reality, concepts also applicable to the city of Trieste.

Central to Svevo's cultural background, and therefore his writing, was his home city on the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea. Long held as an important port in the Austrian Empire, Trieste has remained a geographic enigma, or a "città di confine" ("border city"), that owes its economic allegiance to the east and its cultural heritage to the west. Everything from the architecture to the cuisine and the cafès suggests a city caught in a crossroads. This environment of conflict and confusion translates to a mental state that pervades the city and is expressed by its artists and intellectuals. Trieste was never considered to be Italian on the basis of its strong dialect, geographical separation, and economic ties to the Austrians. Yet, despite cultural and political rejection from Italians, many Triestines felt their cultural history to be Italian. The ensuing difficulty in reconciling these two heritages shaped life in Trieste and tightened an already fierce grip that it holds on the minds and creativity of its citizens. Svevo's masterpiece of neuroticism mirrors the conflicted nature of his city and its cultural background.

The history of the city and the biography of Svevo are parallel in unfulfilled expectations and unstable narratives. The reality of the city of Trieste differs greatly from what it has been esteemed to be by any one of its many external influences. The constant friction between Austrian and Italian interests has created two competing visions that are mutually exclusive on a political level. Similarly, Italo Svevo as a writer was caught between distinct cultures, which ascribed him dual and conflicting statuses. The expectation for a Triestine was a career in business, yet Svevo strove for a literary legacy. Despite self-identification with Italian culture, his language and education associated him with Middle Europe. Svevo invokes Zeno as blinded by his fixation on creating an identity to the point where his perception of himself is entirely self-constructed with little basis in factual events. Trieste has thrived as a cultural center because of the writing of a generation of Triestine authors, including Umberto Saba and Scipio Slataper, who codified the experience of their city in

brilliant literary works, the foremost *Zeno*. In his novel, Svevo has created a main character that does the same for his own experience. The author and the protagonist are attempting to control their own unstable narratives, as defined by Trieste, through a creative process. The experience of Trieste has been profoundly influenced by the dual project of Svevo and Zeno because of the ability of the novel to clarify and disseminate the experience of being Triestine.

Given this dynamic, unique within modern Italian literature, it is little wonder that Svevo stands alone within the Italian literary canon. Identity is a central theme in modern Italian literature and has received notable treatment from lauded authors such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, who crafted stylistically opulent works exalting the glory of the superman in his Italian incarnation. The wildly popular and acclaimed Luigi Pirandello constantly explored the meaning of lost identity in his works, such as *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) and his famous play devoted almost solely to the topic, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921). Yet the particular flavor of the search for identity is different in *Zeno*, a true product of an author who, given his background, culled inspiration from sources radically different than those of D'Annunzio, Pirandello, and nearly all other Italian authors.

After years of anonymity and little reception, Svevo's novels and writings were discovered in France and have since risen to prominence within Italian literature, and yet there remains both a lack of understanding and explanation for the opaque nature of the work. And given how truly different this novel is from other classics of modern Italian literature, one wonders whether *Zeno* even belongs to the same discourse. It represents a profound struggle for fulfillment of a destiny and the difficult history of perception that Trieste continues to embody today. Because of these factors, its position within the Italian literary canon needs to be reevaluated and reconsidered. While other Italian novels of the time focused on reality and realism, *Zeno* features a highly abstract form of realism that blurs the line between art and life, creating a reality that is true because it is born out of

artifice.

Analyzing Svevo's masterpiece requires an attempt at finding unity in a novel that actively works against such an undertaking. In order to understand Svevo and his work fully, it is essential to find the source of that dynamic. Only in the city of Trieste, with its turbulent history and enigmatic position within Europe can the key to Svevo be found. And only by understanding the psychological impact that the city has on its thinkers and writers can we analyze how Svevo constructed the novel as an alternate telling of the attempt to control one's narrative. The plot of *La coscienza di Zeno* is consumed by the mental agony of the titular character as he creates realities for himself to cope with his life. Lurking over the text is a dense narrative structure that pervades the entire novel and destabilizes the reading process. After exploring the technique of Svevo in creating that structure, the novel begins to unfold and present itself as a complete cognitive process and an innovative new way for Svevo himself to interface with reality, an unprecedented and fascinating technique unseen within the Italian canon or even within Svevo's own oeuvre.

What follows is an examination of Svevo's background and the history of the city of Trieste. It covers all the major historical events as they relate to the distinct identity of the city. I will then examine the specifics of the novel to draw a connection between the city of Trieste and the technique of Svevo in crafting the novel. Finally, I will return to a discussion of Svevo's life to uncover how he conceives of literature in a new and innovative way that both likens him to and distances him from other famous modernist authors. In doing so, I will show how *La coscienza di Zeno* utilizes literature to create a complex exchange between literature and reality.

I. MAPPING “*TRIESTINITÀ*”

. . . Trieste ha una scontrosa
 grazia. Se piace,
 è come un ragazzaccio aspro e vorace,
 con gli occhi azzurri e mani troppo grandi
 per regalare un fiore;
 come un amore
 con gelosia.
 Da quest'erta ogni chiesa, ogni sua via
 scopro, se mena all'ingombrata spiaggia,
 o alla collina cui, sulla sassosa
 cima, una casa, l'ultima, s'aggrappa.
 Intorno
 circola ad ogni cosa
 un'aria strana, un'aria tormentosa,
 l'aria natia.

La mia città che in ogni parte è viva,
 ha il cantuccio a me fatto, alla mia vita
 pensosa e schiva . . . (8–25)

-from "Trieste" by Umberto Saba¹

Trieste immediately presents itself as a city of contrast. Saba described the city best as 'scontrosa' ("surly") as the city balances multiple cultures with an unsteady hand. The train to Trieste weaves around the Adriatic, alternately opening onto green farmland and jagged hills. The central train station spills directly onto the city, displaying everything exciting and unsettling about Trieste; taking Viale Miramare brings you to the Miramare Castle, remnant of the Habsburg rule of Trieste, while Via Giosuè Carducci brings you to the Piazza Oberdan surrounded by classical architecture reminiscent of Austria. From this piazza you can take the short scenic tram-ride up into the hills of Trieste, from which you can easily walk into Slovenia. From this vantage point, Trieste unfolds: the hill of San Giusto towers over the downtown area, which stretches out to meet the Adriatic Sea. The

¹See Appendix for translation

city itself seems transplanted, with its industrial tints clashing amidst the unnatural blue of the Adriatic and the rich green of the hills.

The city has a palpable “Italian” quality to it, as it must; the language is everywhere, as is the food, art and architecture. The Cathedral of San Giusto has all the Byzantine influences of San Marco in Venice. The city’s most famous museum, La Revoltella, houses detailed Italian sculptures in a magnificent Habsburg palace. Yet you can sit down for hours in the Caffè degli Specchi, whereas in Florence you would drink an espresso at the bar. In Trieste you might find genuine pastries, whereas in Rome you might only find basic fare of that kind. To highlight the historical complexity of the city, you can find the remains of an ancient Roman theater near a Catholic cathedral, within short walking distance of one of the largest synagogues in Europe.

My comprehension of Svevo came from my own journey to Trieste, after which I knew that the key to dissecting his work is understanding the city. I found such a dense population of different cultures to be an indicator that the particularities of Svevo’s novel may have origin in what can only be described as a confused city. I discovered the term “*triestinità*” (“triesteness”) which is used to describe the particular flavor of Trieste and the impact that it had on its residents, having come across it occasionally in histories of the city. The term is initially ambiguous because it refers to a quality that is abstract yet omnipresent. Katia Pizzi examines the ambiguous nature of Trieste in *A City In Search of An Author* wherein she discusses the term and summarizes it as “a local ‘superiority complex’ inevitably afflicting all Triestines, as well as a contributing factor to the city’s tragic history” (48). Pizzi touches on other aspects of the word, describing it in terms of isolation or a way to frame Trieste’s historical struggles. Yet through study of the history, literature, and culture of Trieste, I came to a different definition of “*triestinità*” that can be traced through its history until the present day, intersecting with famous writers such as Svevo and their works set in the city. “*Triestinità*” can be redefined as the sensation

of the profoundly unfulfilled. It takes a more complex form than simply isolation or historical baggage; it more specifically refers to the consciousness the that city gained when confronted with competing influences from external powers. While “*triestinità*” can apply to a search for identity, it also transcends the search to a level of dislocation from “the other.” Trieste historically had limited control of its own history and was plagued by the decisions and interests of other countries. The city has been continuously imposed upon and pushed in many directions, whether that be politically, socially, religiously or in any number of other ways. I use the term “profound” because there is a undeniable intelligence to the Triestini and their culturally dense lifestyle even though that intelligence aggravates the fact that external influences have often slighted the fortunes of the city. The presence of this “other” is critical to “*triestinità*” because the concept is dependent on the external.

Triestine writers have been particularly useful for codifying a meaning for “*triestinità*.” Umberto Saba, in his poem “Trieste,” explains well the unnatural elegance of Trieste that reaches a level of torment for its inhabitants. Scipio Slataper succinctly describes the odd appeal of the city, writing, “Trieste dà ai suoi figli un’anima in tormento e per questo e’ amata....”² (Slataper). James Joyce fondly recalled his years in Trieste, yet little of that remains in writing, except for his declaration that “Trieste is the rudest place I have ever been in” (Joyce). However, no author has captured the experience of being Triestine better than Italo Svevo, who documented the cerebral experience of the city. The most important aspect of *triestinità* is the psychological because it brings the term out of historical abstraction into personal relevance. I precede my analysis of *Zeno* by exploring and crystalizing the concept of “*triestinità*” through history. From my own experiences and conversations with Triestines, I found myself constantly attempting to name or quantify this “*triestinità*” without creating a reductive definition. It is this attempt to quantify such an abstract presence that lies at the heart of Svevo’s work. Svevo himself was unable to make

²“Trieste gives her children a tormented spirit and for this she is loved....”

full sense of the confusing times he lived in and the staggering history that preceded him. *La coscienza di Zeno* frustrates analysis because it explores the constant ambiguity of life and the workings of the mind. *Zeno* is not just a fictional novel that contains autobiographical elements of the author; it is a way for Svevo to comprehend the unstable nature of his life and interface with reality.

The historical progression of “*triestinità*” reflects the inability of Trieste to fully become any one of the cultural destinies that so influenced its history and so is unable to fulfill its fate as a Mediterranean emporium. The prolonged situation of suspension created a need to express and explain “*triestinità*” as it manifested itself through the writers of Svevo’s generation. As a result, centuries of chaotic history filter through these texts to create a unique and distinct Triestine culture.

1. Origins and History

Of pre-Roman origin, Trieste was founded around 200 c.e.. While the history of Trieste from its origins until the 1700s has little impact upon the visible modern character of the city, legends from antiquity show traces of that lack of fulfillment essential to understanding “*triestinità*”. Several myths surround the founding of Trieste, including such famous mythological characters as the Argonauts and Medea, but they all contain a fundamentally similar theme:

Il mito, situato nelle nostre terre e collegato da uno scrittore classico proprio alla posizione geografica di Trieste, ha questo vantaggio: che illumina, con l’intimo bagliore della leggenda, di là dalla storia, la funzione più vera della regione, quale intermedio fra l’Adriatico e i paesi della conca danubiana. (Tamaro 22)

The myth, originating in our homeland and tied to a classic writer regarding the geographical position of Trieste, has this benefit: it illuminates, with

the intimate glare of legend, more than history, but the true function of the region, which is to act as intermediary between the Adriatic and the basin of the Danube.

This geographical function delineated by Tamaro, fundamental even in its early days, will be the defining factor in Trieste's future status in Europe.

Prior to the 1300s, Trieste was put in the position of being static within the Mediterranean in terms of its identification. It had a conflicted relationship with Venice: "Tergeste [Trieste], dunque, considerata come parte della Venezia, fu compresa dentro la frontiera più propria dell'Italia, mentre l'Istria ne era ancora esclusa" (31)³. It could not be considered part of Italy, yet its position restricted it from being truly Istrian. In 1382, Trieste was voluntarily absorbed as part of the Austrian empire to avoid being conquered by the antagonistic Venice. The break with the regions of Italy was a conscious decision by the city to align itself with a protective power, a decision of identity that will occur repeatedly in future politics. Additionally, Venice and Austria emerge as two influences that had control over the city's decisions. Elio Apih, perhaps the definitive source on Trieste history, writes, "Era un organismo statico e, stretto fra i possessi veneziani e il povero ducato di Carniola, aveva chiari limiti al proprio sviluppo. Anche gli Asburgo avevano per esso scarso interesse" (Apih 7)⁴. At that time there was really no need for Austria to capitalize on Trieste because it was not interested in trading through the city. Trieste in the centuries following its alliance with Austria would have middling success as a commercial port but would eventually slip into considerable poverty.

Trieste became prominent during the 18th century when Austria envisioned a way to expand trade with the east, yet also remain in an advantageous position with the west. Maritime trade would be ideal, and the Austrians, under Charles VI, began discussing

³"Tergeste [Trieste], considered a part of Venice, was included inside the territory more appropriately Italian, while at the same time excluded by Istria."

⁴"It was a static entity and, restricted between Venetian territories and the poor duke of Carniola, had clear limits to its development. Even that Hapsburgs had little interest in it."

which Mediterranean city would become the new “emporio” (“emporium”). Trieste was chosen because it was in the least threatened geographical position in relation to Venice (“L’argomento è usato dai triestini nella memoria che è considerata il documento fondamentale della difesa della loro città nella disputa intorno alla scelta del luogo” (Finzi 19)⁵. Additionally, Trieste was the most ideal location for trade with Italy, Spain, Portugal and the lower Austrian regions. And so the city gained new life: “La Trieste moderna, la città nuova, era nata — o almeno aveva trovato le condizioni necessarie per la sua genesi e il suo sviluppo . . . nel 1719, quando un diploma imperiale aveva dichiarato Trieste, insieme con Fiume, porto franco” (Ara 10)⁶. Aside from its alignment with Austria, the declaration of the city as a free port was welcomed as a panacea to the city’s floundering fortunes, at that time wrecked by poverty (Tamaro 135). Trieste had finally gained an important foothold within Europe and bore the burden of the hopes of Austrian expansion, again adopting the vision of another power.

The initial years after the declaration of the free port were fraught by bad organization and constant tension between Austria and Venice over the maritime rights of Trieste. When the daughter of Charles VI, Maria Theresa, came to power, Trieste began to prosper. Aside from changing economic trends in the Mediterranean, the government of Maria Theresa had a much more focused vision, “tenendo vigorosamente a unificare e a centralizzare lo Stato austriaco” (Finzi 157)⁷. Here policies truly shaped the city into its modern form, with Roberto Finzi claiming, “Trieste moderna è frutto dell’azione di Maria Teresa” (25)⁸. She had a different vision for the Adriatic than her father: “si sostituiva la creazione d’uno stato di cose che avrebbe permesso di fondare dei commerci e lo sviluppo

⁵“The argument has long been considered by the Triestini to be the fundamental proof for defending their city in the dispute surrounding the choice of location.”

⁶“Modern Trieste, the new city, was born — or at least it acquired the necessary conditions for its genesis and development . . . in 1719, when an imperial order declared Trieste, along with Fiume, a free port.”

⁷“attempting actively to unify and centralize the Hapsburg state.”

⁸“Modern Trieste is the fruit of the action of Maria Teresa.”

di scambi sulle vie confluenti naturalmente a Trieste”⁹ (157). The change stemmed mostly from Maria Theresa’s openness to commercial projects in Trieste, something Charles VI had been hesitant to support. And despite the rise in population under Charles VI, it was the works and economic policies of Maria Theresa that salvaged the city. The key to prosperity for the Austrians became commerce, and that was where Trieste became very valuable: “Si poteva e si doveva allora puntare . . . alla via marittima, al quasi parallelo “Danubio salato” che da Trieste, attraverso l’Adriatico . . . fluiva al Mediterraneo Orientale, cosa che, inoltre, avrebbe pure favorito la possibile — e in parte avvenuta — espansione territoriale” (45)¹⁰. Ultimately, from the time of the declaration of the free port status through the ascension of Maria Theresa,

Trieste beneficiò di una lunga serie di provvedimenti: libertà di esercitarvi commercio e industria, miglioramento delle vie di accesso e delle strutture portuali, esenzione da imposte, istituzione di un banco di assicurazioni, protezione dei commercianti esteri in caso di guerra, nessuna perquisizione alle navi in arrivo, permesso agli stranieri di possedervi case e terreni. (Apih 9)

Trieste benefitted from a long series of measures: freedom to practice business and industry, the improvement of access routes and port structures, freedom from taxes, institution of an insurance company, protection from foreign trade in the event of war, no searching of incoming ships, permission for foreigners to possess property and land.

Finally there was indication of a direction for the city’s future after centuries of middling attempts to prosper. Austria adorned the city with its hopes for greater control of Europe,

⁹“He undermined a reality that would enable the creation of businesses and the development of exchanges along the routes that naturally merged in Trieste.”

¹⁰“They were able, and had to, point to the maritime routes, almost parallel to the “Salty Danube” which flowed from Trieste through the Adriatic and furthermore would have favored the possible future expansion of territory.”

and the city flourished in that role. Trieste had attached itself to a specific and legitimate identity to represent historical struggles of the Triestini.

Subsequently, Trieste's identity became inextricably linked to commerce but also the Austrian empire's struggles. Austria gave Trieste the method to become prosperous, and, most importantly, this turn of historical events initiated the trend that is fundamental to Svevo and Zeno: Trieste became a product, and perhaps victim, of what is ascribed to it. Through the 18th century and onward, Trieste was indirectly involved in European events, frequently a footnote in those happenings, as "era vissuta, per un secolo, di storia europea che era giunta su quel remoto lito adriatico e vi aveva insediato il suo intreccio, del quale però il luogo, la città sorta, non teneva in mano i fili determinanti" (21)¹¹. Whether it be the increasing nationalism that began to solidify borders, the turmoil within the Austrian Empire during Charles VI's struggles with succession, or the Austrian conflict with Prussia, Trieste was secondary to these events yet always affected by them. But its destiny seemed secure: Trieste became a major economic powerhouse among the likes of Vienna, Prague and Budapest.

However, in 1797, Austria became embroiled in the war with France, which "mise anche in luce le debolezze della nuova società triestina" (16)¹², exposing the fragility of the city recently nurtured by Austria to tenuous stability. The war served to interrupt the prosperity that had recently adorned it, and the Triestini saw such a conflict as detrimental to commerce: "Gli anni dal 1797 al 1814 formano quasi una parentesi nella storia di Trieste: un periodo strano, in cui essa si trovò presa in mezzo alle lotte tra la Francia, l'Italia e l'Austria, gettata ora da una parte ora dall'altra, contrattata, sfruttata, rovinata, privata delle sue funzioni economiche" (Tamaro 202)¹³. Trieste was afforded even greater power as

¹¹"For a century it lived the European history that reached its remote Adriatic shore and had woven its way through the city, which grew with Trieste holding the important threads in its hand."

¹²"brought to light the weaknesses of the new Triestine society."

¹³"The years from 1797 to 1814 almost form parenthesis in the history of Trieste: a strange period, in which it found itself in the middle of struggles between France, Italy and Austria, taken now by one, then another, haggled, exploited, ruined, stripped of its economic capabilities."

a key location within Napoleon's empire, "il centro effettivo d'una provincia più vasta" (213)¹⁴ but also suffered from the ruin of its economy due to a decrease in trade because it no longer held the status of free port. When the French occupation ended in 1813, Trieste was annexed back to Austria. Far from rushing back to Austria in a cultural sense, "nei successivi decenni, proprio colla questione nazionale dovrà scontrarsi l'iniziata espansione dell'italianità di Trieste. Il dominio napoleonico non solo, come si è detto, tirava le somme della realtà sociale della città, ma pure predisponessa qualche fondamentale vicenda del suo futuro" (Apih 20)¹⁵, indicating the choices of identity that persisted in the city.

Historically, since the 14th century, Trieste was linked to Austria and the Habsburg tradition. Austria had given it the means to become economically prosperous and free. However, there were undeniable links to Italian culture and the majority of the population had come to city of Trieste from Italy. The essential struggle arose from the cultural indebtedness to Italy and the economic reliance on Austria. This formed the crux of Irredentism, a form of Italian nationalism, in Trieste — join Italy or remain with Austria. Once again the fortunes of the city shifted, and it faced the choice of abandoning the historical precedent of the Austrian empire for commerce to join the country to which it owed its cultural heritage. However, the decision would be made despite the debate. In 1918, in accordance with the 1915 Treaty of London, Trieste was annexed to Italy. The decision hardly quelled the conflicts over identity, instituting "radicali modifiche di struttura e della funzione stessa della città" (107)¹⁶. The new presence of nationalism in the city would lead to only more conflicts regarding the identity of the city and did not bring the peace that the Triestini sought.

¹⁴"the effective center of a larger province."

¹⁵"In the following decades, it was truly through the question of nationality that it would see the initiated expansion of the Italian nature of Trieste. The reign of Napoleon not only, as stated, revealed the social reality of the city, but also foreshadowed key events in its future."

¹⁶"radical modifications in the structure and the function of the city itself."

We have now traced Trieste from its origins as a Roman colony to one of the most important cities in the Habsburg empire until its annexation to Italy. The unique historical conditions that brought so many different peoples to the city created a high level of heterogeneity. In many ways Trieste represented the gateway between the east and the west, and it thrived in that role. However, it would take little to incite the various factions of the city against each other, and the trend of nationalism that swept over Europe during the turn of the century would be incredibly problematic. Nationalism is rooted in identity, and Trieste famously thrived without demanding conformity. “*Triestinità*” can be mapped through the history of the city in the many struggles to become legitimate. Whether it be a victim of conflict with Venice, the project of the Austrians or Italian by nature, Trieste actively moved towards different visions to reclaim the history of the city, oftentimes prescribed to them by all of these fates. The sense of tension that accompanies “*triestinità*” gradually became agitated through various struggles with nationalism. Nationalism provided the “other,” which is essential to “*triestinità*” and factored into the vision which Trieste sought to fulfill.

2. “La città di confine”

This unique set of historical circumstances resulted in a number of cultural phenomena within the city, and this multiculturalism is one of the richest sources of Triestine pride. The cultural development also plays a key role in defining “*triestinità*” because much of the daily life of the Triestini is saturated with cultural and intellectual interests. Once established as a major commercial capital, Trieste was given a great amount of autonomy and freedom as a commune. The laws and attitudes in the city allowed many different heterogeneous cultural groups to exist without having to sacrifice their traditions for the sake of conforming. The time of Svevo, at the beginning of the 20th century, found many cultural and intellectual traditions at play. In addition to a strong Austrian cultural bond, Trieste

was also influenced by Germany. Intellectuals were reading Goethe and Schopenhauer as sources of inspiration rather than Italian classics. Triestini were capable of reading, writing and speaking in many languages, German most importantly because of the business ties that the city had to Germany. The second important cultural force in the city was that of the Slovenians. Typical discussions of Trieste often leave out the significant impact of Slovenian culture, but it was nearly as influential as German and Austrian components. Aside from the different traditions brought to Trieste by these groups, the exchange developed into the Triestine dialect, a form of Italian that contains influences of German, Slovenian and aspects of the Venetian dialect. A comprehension of the various influences at play in Trieste becomes essential to a later understanding of intellectual trends.

While Trieste certainly suffered from external political and commercial pressure from Austria, Venice, and the rest of Italy, the importance of commerce allowed a certain type of freedom to exist within the predetermined framework of commercial activity. Religious freedom is one of the more fascinating hallmarks of Trieste's history, particularly that of the large Jewish population. The influx of the Jewish community can be traced back to the institution of the free port, which brought any and all Europeans interested in business to Trieste. It benefitted from political acts of tolerance extended to the city to protect the Jewish population, most notably the "*Toleranzedikt*" of Joseph II from 1781–1782 (483), designed to grant religious freedom to immigrants. It was not just the Jewish population that was protected by this edict, but also Catholics. To the wealthy and powerful in Trieste, it mattered not what denomination of religion the people subscribed to because what the new Triestini had in common "*è essenzialmente l'«amor di lucro»*" (Apih 12)¹⁷, highlighting the importance of commerce in the city. One can see the peaceful coexistence of various religious groups in the sheer diversity of religious buildings present in the city today. In close proximity, Trieste houses the Cathedral of San Giusto, the Greek-Oriental

¹⁷"is essentially the 'love of profit.'"

Church of St. Niccolò, the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Spiridione, and the Israelite Temple Synagogue. Religion added another significant layer of diversity to the city which was allowed to exist without interference. Trieste notably contains one of the largest Jewish communities in all of Italy, a community which included Svevo. Additionally, while Trieste owed much of its cultural heritage to Germany, “anti-semitic humour found no favor among Triestine audiences” (Schächter 9). The respect given to the Jewish community is an important part of the city’s history and is unique in Italy.

The confusion over borders, the mix of cultures, and religions and the highly unnatural reception of nationalism are characteristic of certain areas of the Mediterranean. The fluid nature of exchange between border areas, such as Trieste, makes such zones highly cosmopolitan and heterogenous in nature, qualities fostered in Trieste due to the politics of Austria. Scholar Dieter Haller focuses on cosmopolitan areas of the Mediterranean and provides specific and detailed criteria for how and why such areas tend to be so diverse. He writes,

The Mediterranean region has numerous meanings appearing in these contexts, but they can basically be reduced to a few central components: cosmopolitan orientation and a strong urban ethos of ethnic and religious tolerance; mutual cultural enrichment and development of hybrid forms of expression; an orientation to openness out to sea; the historical depth of Trans-Mediterranean interconnections in the realms of trade and demography (Fabre 1996), particularly in port cities. (Haller 30)

This cultural diversity of the city, brought about by commercial interests, is responsible for the unique cultural makeup of Trieste. Of particular interest is Haller’s discussion on tolerance and how the various parts of these diverse areas adapted to each other. He further explains, “One primary component is emphasis on similarities of groups and the mutual tolerance which enables peaceful coexistence as a counter model to fundamentalism and

ethnic restrictions” (32), which indicates an openness that is unique to such types of cities. As previously stated, policies of nationalism were highly unnatural in a place such as Trieste, one which had existed for centuries in mutual exchange of cultures and local freedom. Yet Italian nationalism emerged as yet another influence to envision Trieste; in other words, Italian nationalism embodied the “other,” which delineated a vision for Trieste and sought to fulfill it by force. Rather than ideals of openness and diversity, “fundamentalist positions stress ethnic homogeneity and difference and turn against local traditions stressing cultural ties. Ideologies of openness and connection represent a danger to them and even a betrayal of loyalty to ethnically or religiously based communities” (41). The tolerant nature of the city and its history were at odds with these forces, which in turn added significant tension to the sentiment of “*triestinità*.”

The policies of nationalism had a widespread effect on Trieste and its relationship to Italy. Following the occupation of the French and its return to Austria, Trieste began to frame its identity in new ways. It sought freely to craft some type of concept to classify itself in all its diversity, which Claudio Minca terms the “Trieste nazione,” or the nation of Trieste. So different were the various subgroups in the city that only in embracing this diversity did it manage to find common ground. The ‘Trieste nazione’ is characterized as follows: “As a city lying on the margins of the vast Habsburg Empire, ‘cosmopolitan’ by virtue of its vocation as a plurinational commercial emporium and shipping port and ‘Italian’ by language, the idea of the distinctiveness of Trieste gradually takes hold” (Minca 261). As such, “The affirmation of Trieste’s Italian cultural identity is accompanied by a (re)assertion of the city’s ‘municipal’ specificity, assuring economic and political unity *within*” (262), a position quite antithetical to the nationalistic proposition of finding identity outside the local. As stated, the freedom of Trieste lies in the local, within an enclosed structure established by another, such as Austria. The effects of nationalism therefore act as an agitator to Trieste, forcing it to reject minority populations, most specifically the

Slovenian population, and retreat into Italian culture as reaction to forced homogenization. The attempt by the city to establish the ‘Trieste nazione’ shows an active attempt to recast the history of the city into a unique identity that the Triestines owned; it was not part of an Austrian attempt to expand or an Italian attempt to press the identity of its ideals. The debate over the fate of the city takes the tone of an assertion of autonomy. It was a decision the Triestini sought to make on their own terms, but it was ultimately determined by the onset of Italian nationalism.

Here we see Trieste again aspiring to a new destiny. Nationalism had forbidden it to search for identity within itself — it looks outward. It now begins cast itself as the Italian gateway to the east, a status that would leave it suspended and unfulfilled. Apih describes it best as a “una duplice situation: da un lato periferica, rispetto alla cultura italiana e nell’ambito dell’Impero asburgico, ma anche in un luogo di potenziale nodalità e centralità per i possibili collegamenti tra le diverse culture delle aree al cui confine la città si collocava” (Apih 278)¹⁸. When it finally gained the interest of Italy, it found not the freedom it expected, but nationalistic tendencies that again ran counter to the culture and history of Trieste for centuries. This turmoil took place entirely during Svevo’s lifetime; he was born in 1861, the same year that Italy was officially unified. And throughout his life, the association with various parts of Europe that would make Trieste an outsider also applied to Svevo. The city was stranded between an Austrian history and an Italian culture, which gave rise to a highly controversial and fascinating phenomenon that would serve as one of the main factors in the creation of *La coscienza di Zeno* — psychoanalysis.

¹⁸“A dual situation: on one peripheral side, with respect to Italian culture and in the realm of Imperial Austria, but also in a position of potential nodality and centrality for the possible contact of the diverse cultures in the areas surrounding the city.”

3. Psychoanalysis Flourishes

There is perhaps no greater indication of the existence of “*triestinità*” than the popularity of psychoanalysis. Within the context of Italy, the new science is uniquely Triestine. Psychoanalysis came to prominence around the turn of the 20th century largely due to the works of Sigmund Freud. The concepts of psychoanalysis in Svevo’s work are almost exclusively Freudian. Freud’s theories of psychology, most notably the Oedipus complex and the significance of dreams, were outlined in his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the subsequent abridged version, entitled *On Dreams*. Psychoanalysis as an actual science was controversial given the subject’s focus on the unconscious and other immaterial evidence. And while the topic of psychoanalysis flourished in certain countries, such as Freud’s Austria and also France, Italians rejected Freud’s theories and gave them little consideration for either scientific or artistic uses. Scholar Elio Gioanola concisely defines psychoanalysis as it existed in Italy, writing,

La psicanalisi è . . . un metodo di indagine dei fenomeni psichici e psicopatologici, un procedimento terapeutico delle nevrosi e una teoria metapsicologica. Soltanto la compresenza delle tre componenti indicate dà vita alla psicanalisi in quanto tale e dunque, all’inverso, nessuna delle componenti può prendere isolatamente il nome di psicanalisi. (Gioanola 9)

Psychoanalysis is . . . a method of investigating psychic and psychopathological phenomena, a therapeutic procedure for neuroses and a metapsychological theory. Only the presence of the three indicated components gives life to psychoanalysis as such and therefore, inversely, none of the three components alone can be considered psychoanalysis.

Therefore, we can speak of Freudian psychoanalysis in terms of the three aforementioned attributes — method, therapeutic procedure, and metaphysical theory — each of which contributed to the complex reception of the science in Italy.

The most comprehensive and detailed account of psychoanalysis in Italy is Michel David's *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*, which details the ways in which psychoanalysis was received and utilized in Italy during the time of Freud. David ascribes the general rejection of psychoanalysis within Italy to three factors: the rise of Fascism, the principles of the Catholic church, and the ideology of the Italian Marxists. Other scholars, such as Lucian Mecacci, have also asserted the importance of these three factors in not only opposing, but shaping the field ("la storia della psicologia italiana è interessante non tanto per gli specifici contributi tecnici, quanto per i modi in cui queste tre forze hanno reagito allo sviluppo della disciplina e l'hanno osteggiata") (Mecacci vii)¹⁹. Of the three factors, the opposition by the Fascists was potentially the most detrimental for the field of psychoanalysis in Italy. While Mussolini had an interest in psychology, specifically relating to the psychology of the crowd, he remained ambivalent toward psychoanalysis. Despite his brief contact with Sigmund Freud, well documented in Roberto Zapperi's *Freud and Mussolini*, the principles of psychoanalysis ran contrary to the Fascist attempt to focus on the nation rather than the individual. David writes,

Quando Freud scrive, nell'*Avvenire di un'illusione* (1927), che la civiltà è qualcosa che viene imposta a una maggioranza recalcitrante da una minoranza la quale ha saputo impadronirsi dei mezzi di potenza e di coercizione, il fascista può rallegrarsi e applaudire. Solo che Freud pensava che la psicoanalisi avrebbe fornito un'arma contro quelle forze. (David 35)

When Freud wrote, in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), that society is something that is imposed on a recalcitrant majority by a minority that knows how to conquer through methods of power and coercion, the Fascists were able to rejoice and applaud. Except that Freud thought that psychoanalysis could have provided a weapon against those forces.

¹⁹"The history of Italian psychology is interesting not for its specific technical contributions as much as for the ways these three forces reacted to the development of the discipline and attacked it."

Psychoanalysis is here described in way that moves the science beyond merely therapeutic; it could serve as an analytical framework for topics beyond individuals. Freud's work was unpopular among the Fascists because it concerned itself with the relation between power structures and the individual, a concept unwelcome to their anti-intellectualism. In addition to Freud's veiled criticisms of regimes such as Mussolini's, there were also several writers who dabbled in psychoanalysis that openly criticized Fascism, such as Saba, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Alberto Moravia, and Ignazio Silone (52–58), all of whom associated psychoanalysis with dissent from the regime. And finally, the issue of race also played an essential part in the rejection of Freudian ideas by the Fascists. A pattern emerged among the first enthusiasts of Freud, one that the Fascist party certainly took note of: "I primi freudiani italiani lo furono per la maggior parte: Modena, Levi-Banchini, Weiss, Musatti, Servadio, e su un piano letterario Svevo, Saba, Moravia, erano ebrei. Dovevano, come avvenne, subire la conseguenze dell'antisemitismo politico" (58)²⁰. These pioneering intellectuals of psychoanalysis were all Jewish, another target of the Fascists. Svevo scholar Elizabeth Schächter notes in her essay about Freud and Svevo's different approaches to their Jewishness that Freud was also very open about his Jewish heritage, finding even that "antisemitism strengthened his Jewish identity and his capacity to withstand hostility" (Schächter 79). Freud's transparent attitude toward his heritage made him an even greater target for the Fascists.

The other obstacles preventing the diffusion of psychoanalysis were the attitudes of the Catholic Church and the Marxists. The rift originates in the inevitably spiritual nature of Freud's work. Much of psychology and psychoanalysis attempted to address not only the mind, but the spirit. Benedetto Croce was highly critical of psychology because it "risultava una scienza ibrida, che cercava di applicare i metodi delle scienze naturali alla

²⁰"The first Italian Freud enthusiasts were Modena, Levi-Banchini, Weiss, Musatti, Servadio, and on a literary level were Svevo, Saba, Moravia. All of them were Jewish and had to undergo the consequences of political antisemitism."

dimensione dello spirito, oggetto di indagine della filosofia” (Mecacci 3–4)²¹. Croce saw psychology as attempting to apply various types of science to the spirit, an area he believed to be untouchable by science. As Gioanola noted in his definition of psychoanalysis, there is a key metapsychological aspect to psychoanalysis, which was criticized by those such as Croce. Additionally, David notes that Freud, despite his deliberate association with his Jewish heritage, was an atheist and that there were virtually no Catholic psychiatrists that utilized Freud prior to 1945, almost fifty years after his rise in popularity. However, at the time of Svevo and the initial interest of a certain few in the subject, it was highly controversial in the church as sacrilegious. Additionally, the church had close ties with the Fascist party, who, as discussed, were fundamentally at odds with Freud’s theories. The Marxists were equally skeptical, largely because they were similar in ideology to Croce, who was critical of its application.

Despite all of the disagreement surrounding the merits of psychoanalysis in Italy, the city of Trieste embraced the phenomenon, and it was explored in artistic and scientific circles from the late nineteenth to the earlier twentieth century. In fact, the advent of psychoanalysis in Italy can be attributed to Trieste in both forms, for many complex reasons. Firstly, the cultural association that Trieste had with Germany and Austria gave it access to the texts of Freud long before the rest of Italy. Not only did nearly all Triestini speak German, but many of them went to school in Vienna, exposing them to Middle European ideas. Dr. Edoardo Weiss, considered the first Freudian psychoanalyst in Italy, was from Trieste and studied under Freud in Vienna for many years before bringing psychoanalysis to his home city. Besides cultural and linguistic connections, Trieste found little religious conflict with psychoanalysis because the Triestini had displayed centuries of religious tolerance in addition to housing one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe.

²¹“resulted in a hybrid science that attempted to apply the methods of natural science to the dimension of the spirit, which was the aim of philosophical investigation.”

And yet there was something more profound that made Trieste ideal for a veritable obsession with psychoanalysis. Apih asserts that the cultural clash of the previous decades created a specific psychological state: “la complessità della situazione vissuta può tradursi in una psicologia assai mossa, tesa, contraddittoria, esplorativa magari dentro se stessa, concretizzarsi cioè in un atteggiamento di ricerca che riflette inquietudini o contraddizioni più vaste, una complessità psicologica” (279)²². The psychological state of the Triestines, brought about by so many centuries of conflicted history, created fertile ground for the explorations of the mind originating from Vienna. Triestine Giorgio Voghera, in an account that he published as *Gli anni della psicanalisi* [sic], described his own experience growing up in Trieste during the early twentieth century, around the time of the popularity of Freud and during the early stages of Svevo’s work on *La coscienza di Zeno*. Voghera’s title derives from the assertion that psychoanalysis was a local phenomenon because it appealed to the very nature of what it meant to be Triestine. He writes,

Gli adulti del mio ambiente (e non solo gli adulti) erano quasi tutti dei neurotici. Non dei neurotici “comuni”, come lo sono quasi tutti gli umani su questa terra, ma dei neurotici gravemente tormentati dalla propria neurosi. Era, in altre parole, della gente che soffriva molto, che non riusciva a trovare pace e durevoli soddisfazioni in questa vita e non sperava d’altro canto in nessun’altra. La psicanalisi dava finalmente un volto ben definito al loro male, ne indicava le cause, faceva balenare qualche vaga speranza di guarigione. (Voghera 3–4)

The adults around me (and not only the adults) were almost all neurotic. Not “normal” neurotics, like so many other people in this world, but neurotics that were gravely tormented by their own neuroticism. In other words, they

²²“The complexity of the lived situation could have resulted in a psychology that was disrupted, strained, contradictory, inquisitive of itself. It materialized into an attitude of investigation that indicated greater restlessness and contradictions, and a psychological complexity.”

were a people that suffered much, that could not manage to find peace and lasting satisfaction in this life and could not hope to find it in the next. Psychoanalysis gave a well-defined face to their unease, suggested the cause of it, and hinted at a vague hope for cure.

Voghera also notes the strain that nationalism put onto the city and its inhabitants, further crediting psychoanalysis as a welcome relief, an explanation of their discomfort;

Forse anche per questo la psicanalisi veniva salutata come una possibilità di evasione, un modo di irridere all'assurda "realtà" presente di considerarla una grottesca facciata di stolte ambizioni, di impulsi aggressivi, di inutili volontà di sopraffazione, che mascherava tutto un complesso di istinti e di terrori infantili ed animaleschi, di sensi di inferiorità inconsci. (4)

Maybe because of this, psychoanalysis was hailed as a possibility for evasion, a way of deriding the absurdity of the present "reality" and a way of explaining a grotesque façade of silly ambitions, of aggressive impulses, of useless will for oppression, that masked everything in a web of instincts and childish and animalistic terrors, of a sense of unconscious inferiority.

Voghera is describing the cumulative effect of years of tension agitated by the nationalistic imperative to conform. *Gli anni della psicanalisi* represents how Claudio Minca's theories about struggle for identification play out in the daily lives of the Triestines and is potentially the most clearly delineated description of "*triestinità*." His account encompasses the struggles of the city's past history with Austria, the sense of cultural loyalty to Italy, and the intellectual capacity to explicate the experience. Psychoanalysis took hold of Trieste and captured the fascination of so many writers because it was a method to describe the indescribable scission between places and identities. "*Triestinità*" here emerges for the Triestini: psychoanalysis was an obsessive interest because it defined their struggle to make sense of their lack of conclusive identity. Voghera's work documents how the historical

absence of fulfillment translated to the culture of the city. The defining characteristic of Trieste is this sense of searching and that search gives the city its unique nature or “*triestinità*.” Psychoanalysis and “*triestinità*” were a natural intellectual pairing because “*triestinità*” found expression in the ideals of psychoanalysis, which Voghera describes as an obsession born out of a mental state. And while Edoardo Weiss pioneered psychoanalysis as a form of science, Italo Svevo pioneered it as a rich source of literary inspiration.

4. Svevo's Trieste

From the issues of Nationalism springs the Irredentist movement in Trieste which would divide the city and produce many intense conflicts. Elizabeth Schächter writes on Irredentism and defines it as:

The Triestine manifestation of nationalism, the political movement that campaigned for the annexation of Trieste to the newly unified Italy. Its premise was the ‘national liberation’ of Italians living in Hapsburg territory to the north-east of the Italian border. The term derives from the period of the Risorgimento and refers to those parts of Italy that were ‘unredeemed’ or not yet liberated from foreign rule. (18)

As the precursor to more intense forms of nationalism in Trieste, namely the Fascists, the Irredentists were particularly hostile to “foreignness.” Angelo Vivante, in *Irredentismo adriatico*, described the conditions in Trieste during the Irredentist movement as they pertained to the Slavic population under the Fascists. The Fascists had a particular hostility toward the Slavs and “aimed to eliminate the Slav presence as an ethnic and cultural entity and at the same time promote a policy of Italian cultural supremacy” (33). The movements of Fascism and Irredentism, different groups yet equal in goal, represent a new direction for Trieste because the Irredentists attempted to force conformity with Italian culture. The group spearheaded a movement that required Trieste to adapt to one specific culture in a

city where previously it had been unnecessary. Guagnini attributes much of the tension over nationalism to the destruction of the culture and its legacy, suggesting that multiple levels of Triestine culture were affected: “L’accentuazione della prospettiva nazionalistica nella cultura ufficiale ha effetti negativi anche per le future possibilità di studio e ricerca sulle matrici e componenti diverse e complesse della cultura triestina, oltrechè sulla loro crescita e sviluppo.”²³ He goes on to say that this imposition of a predetermined culture can be seen as “tentativi di deformare un’identità, di falsificarla, che hanno avuto conseguenze incalcolabili anche oltre la fine di quel periodo” (Guagnini 288)²⁴. Here, more blatantly than perhaps any other time in the history of the city, an identity is constructed for Trieste that has little to do with historical precedent. The reality of Trieste as an Italian city is dubious, and the attempt by nationalists to push a prescribed idea of “Italianess” onto it created agitated local tension.

Part of the difficulty arose from the strong economic ties that linked Trieste to Austria, which, Schächter states, means “the economic imperative overshadowed political sentiment” (21). Again returning to the importance of geography, Trieste was advantageous to Austria because of its position on the Adriatic. But that same position was far less useful to Italy because the entire Italian peninsula was easily accessible in the Adriatic. Therefore the same location that made Trieste useful to Austria diminished its value to Italy. Schächter sums up the situation concisely: “Trieste was no longer a strategic centre of a huge Empire, now fragmented, but merely a geographically isolated town in the remote north-eastern corner of a country whose capital was many miles away in the south” (34). The debate over the future of the city represents the high-water mark of tension within the city because competing visions for Trieste’s future fractured the city from within, as opposed to those previously exerted externally. Would Trieste become Italian and lose im-

²³“The emphasis on the nationalist perspective in the official culture also had a negative impact on future possibilities to study and research the matrices and different, complex components of Triestine culture, beyond just their growth and development.”

²⁴“attempts to deform an identity, to falsify it, that had incalculable consequences well after that period.”

portant commercial ties to Austria, or would it reject its cultural progenitor and align itself with eastern Europe? All factions saw the same city in different lights and attempted to ascribe uniformity to a place that was built on contrast and diversity.

The question of identity reemerges. Amidst the turmoil of Irredentism, Trieste underwent a cultural renewal. The discussions over politics and culture served as inspiration and material for some of the greatest works coming out of Trieste, such as those of Silvio Benco. Many writers and thinkers in the city were actively engaged in political affairs and were keen to recognize the issues of identity. The climate of identity crisis and the fate of the city, — caught between two frontiers, — created a fascinating social environment at that time, and the city itself, in its structures and features, began to take on the character of an imposing presence. The lack of cohesion and the conflicted history translated into an urban space, both physical and mental, that evoked a sense of “*triestinità*” that was key to discussions over the city’s future. This is the point at which reality and fiction begin to merge. The forceful questions facing everyday people in Trieste enters the consciousness of this group of thinkers and pervades their work. Real life and fictional life shape one another.

Born Ettore Schmitz into a Jewish family in Trieste and schooled in Germany, Italo Svevo’s pen name reveals instantly the fractured identity of the author: Italo in reference to his Italian cultural heritage and Svevo (“Swabian”) to signify his intellectual predilection for German literature and philosophy. Svevo’s education is typical of his time, as commerce was the traditional route for those living in the city. While schooled to go into finance, Svevo quickly developed a love of literature that became his hidden passion. He wrote sporadically for many years, notably starting and never completing a multitude of writing projects ranging from theater, to short stories, to novels. Commerce was such an important and prestigious career that Svevo was given little choice in his work, and the idea of literary ambitions in a city so dependent on economic activity was unheard of. Notewor-

thy is Svevo's failure to leave Trieste aside from his years of schooling. Mainly because of his work, Svevo was never able to fully realize his desire to visit Florence and purify his imperfect Italian according to Florentine literary standards. However, Svevo's own political sentiment and association with the Irredentist movement are dubious; he aspired to be part of the canon of Italian literature because that was where he saw his cultural heritage, despite his background in other literatures. As his most prominent English-language biographer, P.N. Furbank notes, "Undoubtedly, too, the excitement of the armistice and of the 'redemption' of Trieste from Austrian rule had something to do with his return to fiction. On the other hand, his sudden enthusiasm for German militarism in 1914, at a time when Germany was Austro-Hungary's ally . . . suggests that his anti-Austrianism never went very deep" (104). Svevo's own family was deeply divided over Irredentism and its implications. Svevo himself was in the minority in his family on his identification with Italy: "The family's division over allegiance to Austria or to Italy is not surprising. Many Triestine business people dealt primarily with Austria or were employed by Austrian firms. Business interests and family values were enmeshed" (Brombert 429). Svevo certainly understood the mental hold, rooted in this duality of allegiance, that Trieste had on its people, and it factors prominently into his novels, especially *La Coscienza di Zeno*, one of the most complex depictions of "*triestinità*."

And so, just like Trieste, Svevo suffers from a split with reality. Wanting to contribute to Italian literature, he wrote his works in an Italian that is marked by a lack of comprehension. So significant was his separation from literary Italian that scholar Salvatore Pappalardo states that Svevo "acquired a near-native command of German and studied Italian as a foreign language" (69). Like many in Trieste, he struggled to reconcile two different cultural legacies, one Italian and the other Austrian and German. His various literary endeavors, particularly with his first novels, *Una Vita* and *Senilità*, balance the tension between the Italian language and European sources, such as Schopenhauer and Zola. Svevo's

works more closely resemble Kafka and Joyce than they do Manzoni or Verga, considered classic authors of Italian literature in Svevo's time. Much like Trieste, his association with Middle European influences kept him outside the interest of Italian literary critics, yet his association with Italy set him apart from other Middle European authors.

Trieste is linked to *La coscienza di Zeno* through Svevo and the psychological state of those living in the city, particularly at the time in which Svevo was writing his final novel. The constantly unfulfilled nature of the city's destiny created the sense of "*tries-tinità*," or the lack of fulfillment when faced with strong influences. With a multitude of competing visions, the actual reality of Trieste was constantly in question. This sensation is precisely what Svevo's novel captures; the real and the fictional act in a symbiotic way that renders the novel uncomfortably close to reality. Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, scholars of Trieste and its literature, documented the movement of literature in Trieste before the time of Svevo, citing the rather uninspired and often dated nature of the literary production in 1800s Trieste. Yet during a short span of several years in the early nineteenth century, Svevo, Saba, Joyce and Slataper produce some of the most groundbreaking works of literature in Europe. Voghera's observations of the relation between the struggle for identity in Trieste with the psychological state, so particular to the city, is key to understanding Svevo. The city serves as a portal between east and west, both physically and intellectually. Trieste is constantly suspended between influences, creating a gap between the reality of the city and the potential to be greater, to fulfill the myth of its long history. The resulting inquietude created a group of writers that sought to reclaim and control the unstable narrative of their history and experiences, which were given form by the principles of psychoanalysis.

II. SVEVO'S NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

By tracing the story arc of each of the chapters of *La coscienza di Zeno*, we can begin to see several common threads that unite the novel and find their origin in the city of Trieste and its uniquely fractured history. Part of the difficulty in tackling *Zeno* lies in the fact that the novel must be taken as a whole. Specific analysis can only be undertaken once the overarching structural and narrative methods have been fully considered. I will begin examining the many layers of narration and the underlying methods of Svevo that underpin all subsequent chapters of the novel. Once Svevo's method of operating is established, it becomes much easier to understand why the novel lacks a sense of grounding.

Svevo's most acclaimed work, *La coscienza di Zeno*, while different in inspiration and execution, retains many of the signature characteristics of his writing. The novel features the main character in the role of the "inetto,"¹ living in Trieste and bearing strong resemblance to Svevo himself. It is structured as a diary of the titular character, a project undertaken to aid in psychoanalytic treatment. Instructed to record the most significant events in his life, Zeno recounts what he considers to be such from his earliest years until his writing project begins in his old age. We are presented with five chapters of varying length, penned by Zeno in the first person, that follow a non-linear structure. Zeno first speaks of his smoking habit, which is the purported reason he undertook the therapy, followed by an account of his father's death, his courtship and marriage, his short-lived affair, his business ventures, and, a final chapter, his experience with psychoanalysis. Taken as a whole, the novel recalls the life of a deeply neurotic and self-conscious modern man who is constantly attempting to make sense of the world.

Svevo's novel is difficult to analyze comprehensively because the author and the main character are operating on two parallel paths. Svevo's overall writing project ex-

¹ A term used often to describe Svevo's characters. Translated variously, typically as 'the inept one.'

amines the ways writers can rewrite their own lives and experiences to give them greater meaning. Such a method is made possible through the protagonist, a character who is also engaging in a writing project of rewriting his life. Svevo's initial goal is to lay the groundwork for Zeno's project through narrative structure and an introspective style. Meanwhile, Zeno is using the rewriting process to regain control of his uncontrollable life and experiences through an embellished retelling. As we move through the analysis of the novel, we must track the activity of Svevo as an author and how he disrupts our understanding of the confines of the novel so that Zeno can disrupt our understanding of reality.

Upon initial observation, several problematic aspects which hinder analysis of the novel immediately emerge, mainly the incredibly ambiguous nature of the narrative revealed by the introductory matter. The opening preface is penned by the doctor ('Dr. S.') conducting the psychoanalytic treatment, who introduces the entire text with an explanation of the diary as the work of his patient. He immediately admits ill intent in the publication of the diary: the doctor, not Zeno, has decided to release it to the public. He states, "Io sono il dottore di cui in questa novella si parla talvolta con parole poco lusinghiere,"² later revealing his intentions: "Le pubblico per vendetta e spero gli dispiaccia" (Svevo 5)³. Readers are immediately aware of a potential lack of authenticity based on this mysterious figure who both controls the text and is by admission extremely biased against the main character. Additionally, it seems that the methods of the mysterious doctor are not only biased, but faulty and scientifically incorrect. He writes, "Debbo scusarmi di aver indotto il mio paziente a scrivere la sua autobiografia; gli studiosi di psicoanalisi arricceranno il naso a tanta novità" (5)⁴, signaling a departure from traditional methods of analysis and that is far from standard practice in treatment of a patient. He ends his introduction by acknowledging both the value and authenticity of the work ahead: "Se sapesse quante sorprese potrebbero

²"I am the doctor that is sometimes referred to in this story with unflattering words."

³"I am publishing this for revenge and I hope it upsets him."

⁴"I have to excuse myself for having encouraged my patient to write his autobiography; students of psychoanalysis will turn up their nose at such a novelty."

risultargli dal commento delle tante verità e bugie ch'egli ha quí accumulate!" (5)⁵. The doctor is well aware of the dubious memories to follow, yet still he presents the text as a formidable work of psychoanalysis.

The second opening section, called the "preambolo," this time written by Zeno, is no less helpful and further obfuscates the authenticity of the work because it reveals the second major obstacle to analysis — Zeno's foreknowledge of psychoanalysis. Zeno states that he has studied psychoanalysis after beginning treatment, effectively taking advantage of his lack of supervision when the doctor leaves the city for a short period of time: "solo per facilitargli il compito, comperai e lessi un trattato di pisco-analisi. Non è difficile d'intenderlo, ma molto noioso" (6)⁶. Under the guise of helping the process, Zeno has uncovered the 'the rules of the game.' Zeno has defied one of Freud's most serious criteria for psychoanalytic treatment. Brian Moloney, in his essay "Neither yung nor easily freudened: Italo Svevo and Psychoanalysis," provides a cohesive discussion of *Zeno* and the accuracy, or inaccuracy, of the treatment described in the novel with respect to Freud's stipulations. He characterizes this choice by Zeno to be directly in contradiction to standard practice, as "Freud specifically stated that patients were not to read about psychoanalysis" (Moloney 39), as intellectual analysis of one's procedure hinders the results. The diary is now further contaminated by the protagonist's illicit knowledge of the analytic process used to examine his writing.

Finally, there is ample evidence in the preambolo that much of Zeno's process of recording and remembering certain events is subjective. The vicissitude between the past and present is constant during this section, suggesting a transitory treatment of time. Zeno recalls his childhood and uncovers an aspect of his cognitive process: "Ecco la mia fronte si corruga perché ogni parola è composta di tante lettere e il presente imperioso risorge

⁵"If only he knew what surprises could result from the writing of the many truths and lies he has compiled here."

⁶"only to augment my task, I bought and read a treatise on psychoanalysis. It isn't difficult to understand but it is very boring."

ed offusca il passato” (6)⁷. Zeno also recalls his previous attempts at retrieving memories, which he states had little effect on him: “Ma era dimenticata, perduta per sempre” (6)⁸. The functioning of his memory is difficult to establish because time shifts and ideas emerge and fade constantly as he works through his own mind. Hopes for clarification from the writer of the diary are immediately extinguished; Zeno travels from past to present, sometimes with little evidence of either remaining.

Aside from the tricky elements of the content, the two sections also reveal the narrative structure of the novel. Svevo’s presence is palpable throughout the text because he is so similar to Zeno. Initially it may seem that only Zeno is telling the story, but there are several levels operating above him. The real world author, Ettore Schmitz is at the top of structure, above Italo Svevo, the name adopted by Schmitz to pursue his literary career. Svevo produced the novel, which is controlled internally by the author of the preface, Dr. S. This character was given the diary by Zeno, who wrote it himself about his past self. Therefore, the narrative structure is as follows:

1. Ettore Schmitz
2. Italo Svevo
3. Dr. S.
4. Zeno narrator
5. Zeno character

We are now left with content that is controlled by a malicious figure and written by a subjective character who already knows the concepts with which his words will be analyzed. Readers are also five levels away from the true source of information. In other words, the novel contains several controllers of the text and storytelling process. It would seem that Svevo has outdone us before even entering the first chapters by repeatedly remov-

⁷“I wracked my brain because every word is composed of so many letters and the imperious present reemerges and dims the past.”

⁸“But it was forgotten, lost forever.”

ing the reader from contact with objectivity. Svevo does so to put control of the narrative into the hands of Zeno. Although the novel is under the curation of Dr. S., Zeno is the only source of information in the novel, so the power to tell the story lies solely in his hands along with the choice to be truthful or deceitful. Giulio Savelli theorizes that the novel rests on four levels of storytelling, all relying on “*una storia-base virtuale*” (“a base-virtual story”) (Savelli 97), on which the story rests, overlapped with the story that Zeno gives, the version that Dr. S. presents and the story of the relationship between Zeno and Dr. S. Zeno’s form of reality relies on the supposition of an inaccessible base reality (“*una storia-base virtuale*”) and all other levels of the story are created from the rapport between Zeno and other characters. Svevo’s decision to house the stability of the novel outside the reach of the reader is another way in which he puts control of the story and its telling into the hands of Zeno.

I outline the slippery nature of the opening of the novel to establish the unstable nature of the narrative method operating over the text. The significance of various controlling figures and influences on the work becomes clear as the novel progresses and will be covered in later discussion. The initial step in circumventing this ambiguity and instability is found by decoding the protagonist’s method in the opening pages of chapter one. Zeno, in the process of writing about his life, remembers several scenes from his childhood. The scenes give insight into how his memory works as it relates to the writing process and his integration of memories. An understanding of how Zeno’s memory works is essential because the entirety of the novel comprises of Zeno’s recounting significant memories. Additionally, his conscience plays a role in creating his story and occasionally mediates memory. There are several key “scenes” or “episodes” from the first chapter that unearth Zeno’s method of recalling and that serve as formulas, foreshadowing Zeno’s future interactions and indicating to readers the key features of Zeno’s recasting of his memories.

In chapter one, Zeno discusses his smoking habit, which began at a very young age. When he initially begins to consider his own memories, he writes, “Tutto ciò giaceva nella mia coscienza a portata di mano. Risorge solo ora perché non sapevo prima che potesse avere importanza” (9)⁹. It is a complicating revelation because it demonstrates how subjective his memories are. Zeno claims to store everything in his memory, “portata di mano,” (“within reach”) but he only acknowledges the aspects that he recognizes as important. Readers only have access to Zeno’s pre-selected memories, chosen from a seemingly endless mass of consciousness. The difficulty of this process is revealed immediately after this scene when Zeno recalls a memory, but only in pieces. He states, “ricordo un soggiorno prolungato per una mezz’ora in una cantina oscura insieme a due altri fanciulli di cui non ritrovo nella memoria altro che la puerilità del vestito: due paia di calzoncini che stanno in piedi perchè dentro c’è stato un corpo che il tempo eliminò” (11)¹⁰. It is apparent that memories are not only selected by Zeno, but they can also be fragmented in detail. Here we see Zeno selectively choosing pieces of memory to recall, or to ‘rediscover,’ from his consciousness. Another detail in a scene we will discuss later between Zeno’s mother and father also exhibits Zeno’s self-editing. He recalls, or rather, does not recall, “In quella scena mio fratello non appare, ciò che sorprende perchè penso ch’egli pur deve aver preso parte a quell’escursione e avrebbe dovuto poi partecipare al riposo” (10)¹¹. While it may seem obvious that Zeno would only include important events in his memoir, Zeno self-edits his presentation of himself, the first step to altering his own personal experiences and owning his story.

⁹“All this resided in my consciousness, within close reach. It is revived now only because I never before considered it to have importance.”

¹⁰“I remember a prolonged half hour in an obscure cellar with two boys of which I cannot find anything in my memory except for their puerile clothing: two pairs of socks standing because there was a body in them that time had eliminated.”

¹¹“My brother did not appear in that scene, which surprised me because I think he had taken part in that excursion and would therefore have participated in the repose.”

Along with memory, conscience may also determine how Zeno presents himself. Scholar Mariolina Salvatori asserts that Zeno's selection of memories and the inclusion of details within them can be attributed to conscience acting to shape memory. She writes, "The narrator is conscious of both the difficulty of recapturing the past, and of the latent danger that he who remembers might start believing in the reality of what is being remembered," yet is quick to add what we might suspect of Zeno: "at times we witness the debate between narrator and conscience about the objectivity of the account, or more often, we overhear the conscience's utterances left unheeded by the narrator" (170). Her interpretation reinforces the assertion that Zeno is aware that he is presenting inaccurate information. Additionally, Salvatore Battaglia posits reality and conscience as two forces that act independently yet are dependent upon each other: "Questa prospettiva di reciproca verifica, per cui la coscienza non arriva mai a fondersi interamente con la realtà né tuttavia riesce ad estraniarsene del tutto, finisce col generare nell'opera di Svevo una singolare sensibilità, una specie di aritmia" (225)¹². Battaglia attributes the unnatural relationship between conscience and reality to the constant and often opposite movement of the two. Zeno presents reality in his narrative as malleable, the product of the opposition between conscience and memory. Battaglia also states, "La realtà e la coscienza sono dotate di rispettiva ambivalenza; l'una si pone a stimolo o a servizio o a controllo dell'altra, ma ciascuna guarda la propria autonomia" (226)¹³. Reality potentially plays little part in the narrative decisions of Zeno. The author has again freed the protagonist from operating within the confines of his conscience, memory or reality. The reader must be constantly aware that Zeno's recollections can be only loosely based on reality because Zeno is crafting our perception of him.

¹²"This perspective of reciprocal verification, for which the conscience never bases itself entirely on reality, nor does it remove itself totally from it, generates a singular sensibility, a type of arrhythmia in the works of Svevo."

¹³"Reality and conscience are given respective ambivalence, the one placed to stimulate or service or control the other, but neither one attends to its own autonomy."

Zeno is an unreliable narrator — an aspect well-trodden ground among Svevo scholars — but its implications are worth summarizing. Savelli states that truth cannot be understood in a standard way because truth is “una impossibilità obiettiva per il lettore, che ha a disposizione solo il discorso di Zeno”¹⁴ (99). Guido Baldi attributes the ambiguity to the multiple Zenos at work: there is the ‘Zeno personaggio’ and the Zeno ‘della voce narrativa’ (135)¹⁵. Baldi compounds the complexity of the content of the novel by referencing the curation of the text by Dr. S. He writes,

Il personaggio-narratore inattendibile, assumendo la responsabilità del racconto, vi introduce un fondamentale elemento di indeterminazione; filtrato attraverso la sua voce tutto il testo diviene ambiguo, aperto, passibile delle più varie interpretazioni; ciò che dice Zeno può essere «verità» o «bugia,» o tutt’e due le cose insieme, e non vi è più nel testo alcun punto di riferimento fisso . . . che permetta di stabilirlo con definitiva certezza. (Baldi 135)

The unreliable character-narrator, assuming responsibility for the story, introduces a fundamental element of uncertainty; filtered through this voice, all of the text is ambiguous, open, applicable to many interpretations; anything Zeno says can be ‘true,’ or ‘a lie,’ or both at the same time, and there is no longer a fixed point of reference in the text . . . that stabilizes it with any certainty.

Baldi succinctly interprets the novel as transcending of the terms ‘lie’ or ‘truth.’ This complex hierarchy within the novel translates to a selection of events, conversations and figures that are retained by Zeno either to convince the reader (Dr. S.) of something or to unveil fixations that prove useful for analysis. Here Svevo has, in a sense, front-loaded the novel with all the patterns of Zeno’s behavior so that careful readers can understand how Zeno presents himself by choosing to show only that which aids his desired persona.

¹⁴“an impossible objective for the reader, who has only Zeno’s discourse available to them”

¹⁵Zeno the character and Zeno the narrator.

I raise these questions of legitimacy to establish that Zeno is not looking for a cure to any of the ills he openly admits to. If true, genuine psychological health was the goal, he would not flout the rules of psychoanalysis. Zeno must then undertake a self-analysis for other reasons. We know that Zeno wrote the diary with full knowledge that it would be read by the doctor. As he will later reveal, Zeno is actually writing to project to rehabilitate his own life story for an outside reader. He manipulates memory, conscience and reality to rehabilitate his image in the eye of the reader. Therefore, these components are not objective to Zeno; they are rather in service of image. The difficulty lies in the inability of Dr. S. to create an analysis that can contain Zeno's recollections in their entirety. Memory, as scholar Giuseppe Bonifacino states, forms the basis of the novel;

In Svevo, la contrapposizione frontale tra il medico e il suo antieroico malato, costituendo la situazione genetica . . . del destrutturato romanzo zeniano della coscienza, ne procura la contaminazione metamorfica, le risemantizzanti diffrazioni del non lineare strumento cognitivo — la memoria — - adibito dalla nuova scienza psicoanalitica del dottor S. all'analisi di un oggetto che sempre la eccede. (Bonifacino 146)

In Svevo, the head-on juxtaposition of the doctor and the ill antihero, constituting the original conflict . . . of the destructured novel of Zeno's conscience, lends to it a metamorphic contamination, a refigured diffraction of the non-linear cognitive instrument — memory — adapted by the new psychoanalytic science of Dr. S. to analysis of an object that always exceeds it.

Bonifacino highlights the fact that the novel is born out of a conflict of perception: Zeno's attempt to convince the doctor of his goodness accounts for his decision to break the rules and distort the truth, which creates the “destrutturato romanzo” (“destructured novel”) in a “contaminazione metamorfica” (“metamorphic contamination”) that overrides the doctor's

tools for analysis. Thus the relationship between the doctor and Zeno creates the text, but memory, along with Zeno's motive of creating an image of the self, expands beyond the capabilities of analysis. Zeno's failure to recall his brother's presence displays this tendency; Zeno's memory and intention are capable of reaching beyond the framework of Dr. S's method. Memory is inexplicable and too intangible to be examined holistically. As a novel that is based on memory, the narrative can only be classified as unstable.

We are left with an intentional construction of the image of Zeno, a thinly-veiled attempt to create an identity for himself through memory, at times mediated by conscience. While he intentionally constructs the account of his life to ensure control over his reception with the doctor, the details that he omits and the seams of his artifice are as revealing as his creations. The casual detail of Zeno's studying psychoanalysis is just that to Zeno, casual. But the reference unintentionally undermines his artifice as the dutiful patient of Dr. S. The subsequent chapters reveal Zeno to be constantly engaged in this process of telling a lie that in turn reveals an aspect of Zeno's character. We can penetrate the dense and unstable nature of the text by locating the seams, or inconsistencies, of Zeno's telling which uncover the ways he is twisting the truth to control the text. Mario Lavagetto, formidable in his many analyses of Svevo, describes this process and what it means for readers, suggesting that Zeno's method is to admit huge pieces of information as casual facts. He claims, "La sua «confessione» è fatta in modo apparentemente disarmato: in realtà l'acquiescente rivisitazione di tutti i luoghi comuni della psicoanalisi è sospetta e ha i caratteri della più abile e della più infida delle resistenze riconosciute da Freud,"¹⁶ later citing how important it is for readers to detect the edges of Zeno's presentation: "Ma la sua compiacenza è una trappola: per l'analista, e per i lettori che vorranno farne le veci" (182)¹⁷. Lavagetto highlights the necessity of considering the significance of all of Zeno's claims, no matter

¹⁶"His 'confession' is made in a seemingly innocent way: in reality the acquiescent revisiting of all the common concepts of psychoanalysis is suspect and has the characteristics of the most able and treacherous resistances identified by Freud,"

¹⁷"But his compliance is a trap: for the analyst and for the readers that track the changes."

how briefly or convincingly they are mentioned.

A full understanding of Zeno's conception of reality is necessary because he operates in a realm of subjectivity but distilling Zeno's understanding into a useable framework is challenging because of the aforementioned complications. Reality for Zeno is more nuanced than simple facts or events rooted in objectivity because the narrative relies solely on memory, already established as subjective. Therefore, objectivity is all but obliterated by the structure of the novel. The only place that is not susceptible to Zeno's alterations is in the minds of other characters. Reality relates to the actions and words of those other characters, or that which he cannot control. Savelli, in *L'ambiguità necessaria*, writes that reality, as it relates to Zeno, is paired with truth and 'the world.' He claims, "Realtà, verità, e mondo sono ciò che si oppone al personaggio protagonista; e rappresentano altresì il versante su cui si pone l'autore che ha costruito quel mondo e quella realtà in cui il personaggio si muove, e che stabilisce per lui qual è la verità" (103)¹⁸. In other words, reality, truth and the world are concepts out of the control of the protagonists, but they are the base on which the novel is established. The author crafts the reality, truth and world of the novel and allows the character to exist on that plane. This links Zeno's conception of reality to other characters, but it also involves Svevo in the process for establishing Zeno as a character; he exists in the reality that Svevo creates, one based on ambiguity and "the other." The actions of others are what bring Zeno true distress and he is constantly seeking to evade them when they bring discomfort or criticism.

Scholar Sandro Maxia attributes Zeno's conception of reality to "un tempo misto," claiming,

"Il tempo misto è dunque il tempo della memoria, il tempo che fonda l'interiorità
in opposizione al tempo oggettivo scandito dai fattori esteriori, e non è pro-

¹⁸"Reality, truth and the world are those which are opposite the protagonist character; they also represent the plane on which the author stands who has constructed that world and that reality in which the character moves, and which stabilizes for him what the truth is."

priamente nè passato nè presente, perchè risulta dall'intreccio e dalla sintesi, sempre insidiata e continuamente ricostruita, del passato, del presente, e dell'avvenire. (Maxia 272)

Mixed time is therefore the time of memory, the time that is based on the interior as opposed to objective time articulated by external factors, and is not truly past nor present because it results from plotting and synthesis, always altered and continuously reconstructed by the past, present and future.

The concept of mixed time is essential for defining exactly what reality and non-reality mean for Zeno. Maxia references “tempo oggettivo” (“objective time”) which relates to objective events and the linear progression of time, which for Zeno exists within the realm of the time of memory. This reinforces Savelli's assertion that the objective story of Zeno's life resides in an inaccessible place (“una *storia-base virtuale*”). Therefore, past, present and future converge in Zeno's telling of his story. Both past events and future happenings influence the present moment, yet the present and future also determine the past because Zeno is rewriting the past through his diary. We must keep Zeno's conception of time in mind as we proceed because, “l'uomo non può sopprimere il ricordo del passato, e l'attesa del futuro” (272)¹⁹, ascribing Zeno's process to a conglomeration of the influence of all three. The past, present and future affect Zeno's image because he avoids allowing other characters to influence his image. Reality for Zeno is by default subjective and also resides in the thoughts of others. Zeno does not care about what actually happens, so long as other characters think of him in the way he would like. As *Zeno* focuses almost solely on Zeno's relationships with others, ‘reality’ can be defined as Zeno's world as prescribed by other characters. In other words, reality is ‘the other.’ This is what Zeno is constantly working against and attempting to modify, the opinions and thoughts of other characters, and sometimes even himself.

¹⁹“Man cannot reconcile memory of the past and the wait for the future.”

Finally we arrive at a starting point for any holistic analysis of the novel. We are now fully aware of the malleability of the information presented by Zeno. His crafting of an identity is so prominent that it forms the main conflict of the novel and serves as the backdrop for every event recorded in his memoirs. He agonizes over how other characters view him, which leads to odd behavior, much of which can be attributed to his reaction to those characters. There is always a gap between what Zeno desires and what other characters desire for him; or rather, Zeno's concept of himself and other characters' perceptions of him. The split between perception (his ideas and intentions) and actuality (those of others, or 'reality') gives Zeno a warped version of reality because he combines perception and actuality to make sense of the split. When he is threatened by another character's opinion of him, he invents a lie and pairs it with the truth to alleviate himself of worry.

The first two chapters describe the emotional baggage that Zeno will have to cope with for the rest of his life. In a sense, we can view the novel as divided into two halves, cause and effect. The original source of tensions described in these sections arises from his relationship with his father and mother, a conflict that gives rise to Zeno's unstable narrative. As I will explore in the following chapter, the manifestation of his neurosis refigures how he views reality and fiction, well beyond the simplistic realm of "truths" and "lies." By constantly searching for the seams of Zeno's telling, while keeping in mind Zeno's conception of reality, readers can track Zeno's control of the storytelling process.

III. DESTABLIZING THE NARRATIVE

We now move to the first and second chapters of the novel to discover the source of that instability so clearly evidenced in the preface and *preambolo*. As usual, Svevo and Zeno achieve different goals with the same text: Svevo is showing the dynamics of a search for dominance through Zeno's attempts to overthrow his father's supremacy. The relationship that Zeno has with each of his parents and the incident surrounding the death of his father serve to cement his mindset toward different roles in his life; in a sense, he is casting characters in roles and attempting to write their stories to gain dominance over them. Thus his parents establish the unstable narrative of Zeno's life that is replayed in the subsequent chapters of the novel with his wife, Augusta, and his nemesis, Guido Speier.

Zeno's neurosis in the first chapters reveals itself in predictable ways. He has a difficult relationship with almost every dominant male figure in the novel and finds reassurance and grounding from female characters. We have already seen Zeno attempt to legitimize himself to Dr. S., an effort that manifests itself in the form of the diary. Zeno is keenly interested in appearing legitimate to his father. He represents a strength and dominance that cause Zeno to suffer from a debilitating sense of inferiority for his entire life. He continually evaluates himself according to his father's standards, and his psychological turmoil originates from his attempt to meet that standard. Meanwhile, Zeno's behavior is also governed by the female characters who act as nurturers to him. Whereas the male figures represent an unattainable standard, female figures ground and comfort him. These gendered characters are central to four chapters of the book, and even when Zeno is physically near them, he is still influenced by them. All the functions of Zeno's memory, tempered by conscience and serving to alter reality, are present in this section and all following chapters. Zeno is omnipresent as he constructs a narrative to portray himself in the most dominant way possible because of his struggle for supremacy with his father. In these chapters we

can see the seams of Zeno's telling, allowing us to dig into his meaning despite his deceptions. Readers can see Zeno actively polishing his depiction next to his deteriorating father in an attempt to assert his legitimacy. Svevo is skillful in subtly revealing the contradictions in Zeno's telling, which allows readers to chart Zeno's search for dominance and strength.

The opening description of Zeno's cigarette addiction foreshadows difficulty with male antagonists. His proclivity for smoking seems to be the focus, yet it serves as an excuse for his inferiority complex. He runs from one male figure to the next before retreating into his smoking habit, which remains uncured for the rest of the novel. It is difficult to ascertain the source of Zeno's smoking habit because there seem to be many factors involved; Zeno himself lists endless and sometimes contradictory reasons for his desire to smoke throughout the chapter. The habit certainly does not stem from any sort of physical enjoyment because it initially made him physically ill, noted after he wins a smoking contest: "Dovetti chiudere gli occhi per non cadere stordito" (11)¹. Zeno's habit exists, agitates, and entices at all times because others provoke it; he always turns to others to attempt to cure himself. And yet these figures are exactly what drive him to smoke. He finds something threatening about these figures, exhibited by a deep aversion to doctors ("a questo mondo vi sono pochi uomini che destino in me una così viva antipatia come il dottor Coprosich" (48)²) which serve as agitators in many scenes of the novel.

However, the habit runs deeper than simply a sense of inferiority and emasculation. Zeno's father becomes more and more involved in the smoking habit as the narrative progresses. When Zeno makes a resolution to quit, his father taunts him. Zeno writes, "Quando il dottore mi lascio, mio padre . . . con tanto di sigaro in bocca restò ancora per qualche tempo a farmi compagnia. Andandosene, dopo di aver passata dolcemente la sua mano sulla mia fronte scottante, mi disse: —Non fumare, veh!" (11)³. Zeno's reaction to

¹"I had to close my eyes so I wouldn't fall over dazed."

²"There are few men in this world that generate such active hostility in me as does Dr. Coprosich,"

³"When the doctor left me, my father . . . with a cigar in his mouth stayed to keep me company. Leaving, after having passed his hand sweetly over my burning brow, said to me: —No smoking, ha!"

the comment? “Mi colse un’inquietudine enorme”⁴ (12). He later elaborates on the effect of these words by stating, “Bastava questa frase per farmi desiderare ch’egli se ne andasse presto, presto, per permettermi di correre alla mia sigaretta” (12)⁵. It is damaging to Zeno that his father is able to live comfortably and mock his attempts to quit smoking. His father views him as inferior; if reality for Zeno resides in the mind of ‘the other,’ Zeno is living a reality of weakness. Yet he chooses to continue smoking because it is an all-encompassing excuse for his weaknesses; he states, “io forse abbia amato tanto la sigaretta per poter riversare su di essa la colpa della mia incapacità? Chissà se cessando di fumare io sarei divenuto l’uomo ideale e forte che m’aspettavo?” (13)⁶. Zeno can discount his sense of inferiority solely because of smoking, a habit he knows he *could* quit. Zeno reveals his intentions; it is the excuse for which he can claim weakness, or rather a scapegoat on which he can blame all of his faults. Additionally, choosing to alternately quit and return to smoking returns the control to Zeno. Choice is essential; he takes responsibility for his weaknesses via the habit of smoking.

The relationship between Zeno’s father and smoking is complicated when Zeno steals his father’s half-smoked cigars. The scene is indicative of Zeno’s relationships and how he interacts with different character types. Zeno recalls, or “rediscovers,” an early memory from his youth. He describes “la dolcezza” (“sweetness”) of the scene as he lies on the couch after a long day in the presence of his mother. He recalls, “Non vedo che me, la dolcezza del riposo, mia madre, eppoi mio padre di cui sento echeggiare le parole” (10)⁷. The entrance of the father interrupts the scene as he is confused about his missing cigarettes. Zeno’s mother silences him, assuming Zeno is asleep, and Zeno reacts with relish: “Mi

⁴“A great anxiety struck me”

⁵“This statement was enough to make me desire his quick departure so I could be permitted to run to my cigarette.”

⁶“Maybe I loved cigarettes so much because I could reverse the blame for my incapability onto them? Who can say if ceasing to smoking would allow me to become the ideal and strong man I had always hoped to be?”

⁷“I saw myself, the sweetness of the repose, my mother and then my father whose words echoed.”

piaceva tanto che il babbo dovesse imporsi un riguardo per me, che non mi mossi” (10)⁸. His father professes that he might be going mad because he cannot understand why his cigar is missing, having just seen it previously. Zeno peers at his mother to gauge her reaction: “Essa s’era rimessa al suo lavoro, ma continuava a sorridere. Certo non pensava che mio padre stesse per ammattire per sorridere così delle sue paure” (10)⁹. His mother’s smile indicates her knowledge of Zeno’s thievery of the cigars. This scene foreshadows the dynamic he will have later in life: seeking protection from the dominant male figure with the complicit help of the female figure. The mother serves to comfort Zeno in his struggle for dominance with his father, in this case regarding cigarettes. If there were any doubt as to the role that women play in Zeno’s life, it is dispelled by his final remarks on the smile: “Quel sorriso mi rimase tanto impresso che lo ricordai subito ritrovandolo un giorno sulle labbra di mia moglie” (10–11)¹⁰. This is far more complex than an Oedipus complex; it demonstrates the role of protector in the struggle with the antagonist.

Scholar Paolo Bartoloni provides an analysis of the how Zeno constructs his world according to roles that he chooses to fill with certain contents or associations. Bartoloni invokes Lacan’s concept of the jug, which asserts that the container defies nothingness by creating a space to be filled. Bartoloni suggests that Zeno creates containers to house the archetypes of different characters, archetypes which Bartoloni regards according to their place, not their contents. Essentially, Zeno regards his father in such a way, not because he *is* his father, but rather the father inhabits the role of antagonist. Thus the presence of Zeno’s father is important because it fills Zeno’s need to have an antagonistic role in his life; as such, the role “must be emptied in order to be filled” (Bartoloni 403). Bartoloni articulates well one of the aims of my analysis, namely to “move beyond traditional Freudian

⁸“I was very pleased that my father had to be careful of me that I did not move.”

⁹“She remained at her task but continued to smile. Certainly she did not smile so at my father’s fears because she thought he was going insane.”

¹⁰“That smile was so imprinted on my memory that I remembered it immediately when I rediscovered it on my wife’s lips.”

psychoanalytic categories, including the Oedipus complex” (403), and to view the novel as significantly more intricate than an inferiority complex in relation to patriarchy. These two opposing roles (tension with the father, comfort with the mother) serve as the empty containers that exist for Zeno to fill with other characters should the role vacate. Zeno’s smoking habit is enabled by his mother and agitated by his father, behavior characteristic of their roles.

Beyond this, Zeno substantially develops the role of his father in his telling. As Zeno begins to describe his relationship with him, we can see the true dynamic emerging. Zeno writes, “Fino alla sua morte io non vissi per mio padre” (33)¹¹. He goes on to describe their similarities — “Nell’incapacità al commercio v’era una somiglianza fra di noi, ma non ve ne erano altre” (34)¹² — before making an important distinction that will frame the rest of the chapter: “fra noi due, io rappresentavo la forza e lui la debolezza” (34)¹³. Part of the process of competing with his father involves distancing himself: “Avevamo tanto poco di comune fra di noi, ch’egli mi confessò che una delle persone che più l’inquietavano a questo mondo ero io” (35)¹⁴. Zeno’s own assertions crumble because we can see that his struggle to overcome his father has continued long beyond the scene described and into the his current writing project. His mother never presented a threat to him; he always appeared good to her, despite his stealing cigarettes with her knowledge. His father, however, saw the weakness in Zeno, and that reality anguishes him until his writing project in the present. Svevo lets these details emerge on the periphery and remain clouded in the complicated narrative structure.

Zeno then restates his previous assertion of strength, but with a crucial addition: “Insomma io, accanto a lui, rappresentavo la forza e talvolta penso che la scomparsa di

¹¹“Up until his death, I never lived for my father.”

¹²“We were resembled each other in our lack of ability in business, but there were few other similarities”

¹³“between us, I represented strength and he weakness.”

¹⁴“We had such little in common that he confessed to me that I was one of the people in this world who unsettled him the most.”

quella debolezza, che mi elevava, fu sentita da me come una diminuzione”¹⁵ (36). Decoding this significant statement explains the power dynamic between the two that will resurface when the character of Guido Speier is introduced. Zeno thrived on the perceived weakness of his father when he was alive. Now that his father is dead, he feels that loss of comparison as a damage to his life. Zeno’s father was the standard next to which he could measure his own strength, but now he lacks that standard and the ability to favorably compare himself to another. Zeno’s sense of loss also reinforces my earlier assertion that Zeno’s father is more than his father; he inhabits the role of the antagonistic male from which Zeno derives his actions.

Another passage that underscores the competition between the two focuses on religion. Prior to the passing of his father, Zeno engages in an argument with him on religion, a topic they cannot find common ground on and which moves Zeno to further declare his father’s weakness: “Mi piaceva di vederlo felice nella sua illusione di essere tanto forte quand’era invece debolissimo” (42–43)¹⁶. Zeno was undisturbed by his mother’s earlier death because he attached religious significance to it and because he had certain religious inclinations when she died: “Poi un sentimento religioso tuttavia vivo attenuò e addolcì la grave sciagura” (32)¹⁷. Now lacking such religious beliefs, Zeno’s father asks him a question that no longer applies to him: “Anche tu, ora, pensi alla religione?” (40)¹⁸. Zeno replies that he merely studies religion, much to the displeasure of his father: “Tu non vorrai ridere della religione?” (41)¹⁹. The conversation on religion ends, and Zeno’s father goes to bed, clearly confused by Zeno’s beliefs. There is little apparent difference between his father’s religious beliefs and his mother’s, yet Zeno ascribes weakness to his father’s

¹⁵“And so I, next to him, represented strength and at times I think the diminishing of his weakness seemed a loss to me because that weakness elevated me”

¹⁶“I enjoyed seeing him happy in his illusion of being so strong while in fact he was very weak.”

¹⁷“An active religious sentiment attenuated and sweetened the grave disaster.”

¹⁸“So you’ve been thinking about religion lately?”

¹⁹“Certainly you wouldn’t laugh at religion?”

beliefs: “Non poteva però sfuggirmi l’evidenza della sua debolezza” (42)²⁰. The difference lies in perception, as Zeno actively searches for his father’s weaknesses, despite a double-standard; his mother is just as religious, but is not criticized.

The deaths of his parents are crucial to defining their roles and influence on Zeno’s life. He describes his mother’s death, detailed entirely in one paragraph, and his reaction is non-sequitur based on his relationship with his mother as described in the missing cigar scene. Rather than despair at the loss of such stability, Zeno worries not about himself or her fate. He writes, “Feci delle poesie per onorarla ciò che mai equivale a piangere e, nel dolore, fui sempre accompagnato dal sentimento che da quel momento doveva iniziarsi per me una vita seria e di lavoro” (32)²¹. Here we see Zeno’s small tribute to his mother (“delle poesie”) and his resignation to begin a serious life: “Il dolore stesso accennava ad una vita più intensa” (32)²². He then remembers her death as a rebirth of sorts: “Ricordo esattamente il mio stato di allora. Per la morte di mia madre e la salutare emozione ch’essa m’aveva procurata, tutto da me doveva migliorarsi” (33)²³. Of note is Zeno’s comment that he can remember the event with precision but then chooses to describe it with brevity. The source of such comfort in Zeno’s life, the stabilizer as it were, is lost, yet Zeno feels hopeful about his future because her perception of him was never threatening. Additionally, his religious inclinations at the time of his mother’s death signal an association between his mother and religion, describing her in terms of faith and as eternally watching over his life. He writes, “Mia madre continuava a vivere sebbene distante da me e poteva anche compiacersi dei successi cui andavo preparandomi. Una bella comodità!” (32–33)²⁴. His final exclamation

²⁰“Yet I couldn’t escape the evidence of his weakness.”

²¹“I wrote some poems to honor her that were the equivalent of crying, and in my sadness I was accompanied always by a feeling that from that moment onward a life of seriousness and work must begin for me.”

²²“That sadness hinted at a more intense life.”

²³“I remember precisely my state at that time. Because of my mother’s death and the wholesome emotions that it procured me, everything about myself needed to improve.”

²⁴“My mother continued to exist, very far away from me, and she was able to be happy about the many successes I was preparing for. What great comfort!”

on the comfort of his mother's eternal presence is indicative of his satisfaction with their relationship, and his mother is never again mentioned for the entirety of the novel.

Eduardo Saccone has examined the different treatment of the father and mother in Zeno's memory, ascribing the differences to desire. Zeno's mother never denied Zeno his desire, as seen in the stolen cigar scene at the beginning of the novel. In fact, Saccone characterizes her as, "l'Altro, supporto e garante del desiderio di Zeno" (342)²⁵. Of note is Saccone's usage of the term "l'Altro" ("Other") to describe his mother, terminology similar to Bartoloni's usage of the term 'thing,' both referencing an unreachable reality that is separate from Zeno. Since Zeno's mother enabled his forbidden desires, he does not view her passing as devastating, knowing she always forgave his weaknesses by allowing them to continue.

His father, however, is constantly antagonizing Zeno's desires. Despite the tense relationship with his father as seen in the smoking chapter, he declares the death of his father as the most important event of his life. His father's death is handled in the opposite way: we are presented with a totally biased examination that takes place over the course of an entire chapter. While his mother's death had a positive impact on his life, his father's is described as "l'avvenimento piú importante della mia vita" (32)²⁶ and as "una vera, grande catastrofe" (33)²⁷. And while he views his mother's death as a revival of his ambitions, his father's cancels his future entirely. Zeno states, "Lui morto non c'era piú una dimane ove collocare il proposito" (33)²⁸. The discrepancy in Zeno's reactions to their deaths is striking and suggests that his parents hold great significance for him in different ways. In particular, the death of his father is that starting point for Zeno's attempts to redeem his image for others and reject his father's (perceived) oppressive authority.

²⁵"The Other, supported and assisted Zeno in his desire."

²⁶"The most important event of my life."

²⁷"Truly a great disaster."

²⁸"After his death, there was no tomorrow to prepare for."

However, much like the description of his mother's death, Zeno describes his father's death in terms of himself and only himself. He writes, "Il mio dolore non era solo egoistico come potrebbe sembrare da questo parole. Tutt'altro! Io piangevo lui e me, e me solo perchè era morto lui"²⁹ (33). Zeno then proceeds to discuss his own future more as bleak and purposeless. We begin to see that his father's death is devastating not only (or perhaps not at all) because of the emotional loss, but because it requires something of Zeno or forces him to look at his life in a different way. The night of his father's death reveals much about their relationship, despite Zeno's active attempts to convince the readers of his own dominance. The tension and emotion of the evening is palpable, not necessarily because of his father's death, but because the death forces Zeno to confront his own status and choices in front of his dying father. Zeno continually brings strength and weakness into the discussion, a dynamic that prolongs the struggle incited all those years ago over the cigar.

After his father then goes to bed, Zeno follows, and is soon awakened by the servant Maria with news that his father's condition is fragile. He rushes to his father's bedside and begins to exhibit all forms of odd behavior, from shouting at him, to matching his father's erratic breathing: "Aveva una respirazione frettolosa, che io, quasi inconsciamente, imitavo" (46)³⁰, and to eventual hysterics, "Su quel sofà piansi le mie più cocenti lacrime" (47)³¹. At this point, the seams of Zeno's telling begin to show and he again brings his father's death back to himself and his life, affirming their relationship to be a power dynamic. Zeno writes, "I miei sforzi per diventare migliore non erano stati fatti per dare una soddisfazione a lui? Il successo cui anelavo doveva bensì essere anche il mio vanto verso di lui, che di me aveva sempre dubitato, ma anche la sua consolazione. Ed ora invece egli

²⁹"My sadness was not solely egotistical as these words may suggest. Quite the contrary! I cried for him and myself, and also for me alone because he was dying"

³⁰"His breath was hurried and I almost unconsciously imitated it"

³¹"I cried my most bitter tears on that sofa."

non poteva più aspettarmi e se ne andava convinto della mia insanabile debolezza”³² (47). This declaration by Zeno provides the key to his exasperation over the death of his father: he is obsessed with the idea that his father may die before Zeno can fully redeem himself.

In fact, the majority of Zeno’s concern during the events of the evening revolve around his father’s regaining consciousness. When the doctor arrives, Zeno immediately voices this concern, stating, “Ero pieno di terrore all’idea che mio padre avesse potuto rimettersi dal suo torpore per vedersi morire” (50)³³. He then asks the doctor, “Dottore! Non le pare sia una cattiva azione di farlo ritornare in sé?” (50)³⁴. Zeno even reiterates, again, “Poteva esserci un’azione più malvaglia di quella richiamare in sé un ammalato, senz’aver la minima speranza di salvarlo e solo per esporlo alla disperazione” (51)³⁵.

The answer to Zeno’s apparent obsession with his father’s knowledge of his current state can stem from multiple motives, but it most clearly seems connected to his father’s opinion of him. Zeno’s continual preoccupation with his father’s consciousness and his attempts to prevent it from emerging are of great agitation to the doctor assisting him. Zeno states, “dichiarai che mi pareva una crudeltà inaudita di non lasciar morire in pace chi era definitivamente condannato” (51)³⁶. We can deduce that Zeno is associating consciousness with life, and as long as his father remains unconscious, there is a chance his life will end. The doctor does not agree that his father is “definitivamente condannato” (“definitely condemned”): “Mi disse che gli pareva io volessi recidere anche quel tenue filo di speranza che vi era ancora” (51)³⁷, later stating, “Tenendo in vita suo padre io ho lasciata aperta la

³²“Were not my efforts to better myself always done for him? Weren’t the successes I strove for almost boasts against him, who had always doubted me, but also his consolation? And now he would not longer wait for me and he left convinced of my incurable weakness”

³³“I was terrorized by the idea that my father could recover from his torpor to see himself die.”

³⁴“Doctor! Doesn’t it seem a terrible idea to revive him?”

³⁵“What could be more ill conceived than recalling a sick man to consciousness without the slightest hope of saving him and only to increase his desperation.”

³⁶“I declared that it was an unimaginable cruelty to not allow a man to die in peace that was definitely condemned to such.”

³⁷“He said that it seemed I wanted to cut off even the thin thread of hope that still remained,”

via a tutte le possibilità” (51)³⁸. Zeno himself confirms this, actually stating his wish for his father’s death: “Non so però se tanta ira puerile fosse rivolta al dottore o non piuttosto a me stesso. Prima di tutto a me stesso, a me che avevo voluto morto mio padre a che non avevo osato dirlo” (53)³⁹. We might wonder why Zeno so openly admits such a devious thought without his typical veil of excuses and evasions, yet he provides an excuse later in the chapter, claiming he wished it, “per risparmiargli il dolore” (55)⁴⁰. It is apparent from this exchange that Zeno desires his father’s death, yet he is very tormented over it. His father represents the ultimate reality for Zeno: if reality exists in the minds of others for Zeno, his father is the ultimate source because he is able to know Zeno in all of his weaknesses and shortcomings. With his father maintaining a lack of consciousness, Zeno can undo the reality of his weak self.

However, this attempt backfires because Zeno is ultimately bested by his father. The climax of the chapter occurs as Zeno’s father is in the final throes of dying. Ordered by the doctor to keep him in bed, Zeno restrains his father: “Con mano vigorosa poggiata sulla sua spalla, gliel’impedii mentre a voce alta e imperiosa gli comandavo di non muoversi. Per un breve istante, terrorizzato, egli obbedì. Poi esclamò: — Muoio!”⁴¹ (59). Zeno’s worst fear is here realized; his father has regained consciousness and is aware of his imminent death. The scene ends in a dramatic and devastating fashion for Zeno: “Con uno sforzo supremo arrivò a mettersi in piedi, alzò la mano alto alto, come se avesse saputo ch’egli non poteva comunicarle altra forza che quella del suo peso e la lasciò cadere sulla mia guancia. Poi scivolò sul letto e di là sul pavimento. Morto!”⁴² (60).

³⁸“By keeping him alive, I leave open all possibilities.”

³⁹“Yet I don’t know if such puerile rage was a rebellion against the doctor or against myself. Firstly to myself, because I wanted my father’s death and didn’t dare say it.”

⁴⁰“to spare him suffering.”

⁴¹“With a strong hand on his back, I stopped him from moving while commanding him, in a loud and imperious voice, to be still. For a brief instant, frightened, he obeyed. Then he exclaimed: I’m dying!”

⁴²“With a supreme effort, he rose to his feet, raised his hand very high, as if he knew that only his weight would give it force, and he let it fall on my cheek. Then he slipped onto the bed and from there onto the floor. Dead!”

By now readers understand that Zeno is anguished by his father's opinion; therefore, the scene is clearly psychologically damaging to him. In a sense, his father has had the last word and literally landed the final blow in the struggle between the two. While his mother looks on in the afterlife at his successes, Zeno laments, "Egli [my father] era morto ed io non potevo piú provargli la mia innocenza!" (60)⁴³. He is horrified by the incident, especially when he discovers others commenting on it. Zeno has definitively lost the battle against his father and has failed to match his strength and example. Svevo is masterful in his description of the night of the death; Zeno's erratic behavior contradicts itself multiple times, such as when he states that he hopes his father will live, yet fears he will regain consciousness. Zeno is obviously lying; he hopes his father will die without regaining consciousness to observe Zeno's wish for such. Yet that doesn't happen; his father regained consciousness long enough to punish Zeno and best him.

However, in truly characteristic fashion, Zeno resorts to delusion to cope with the trauma. He returns to struggling with the power dynamic, stating,

Poi, al funerale, riuscii a ricordare mio padre debole e buono come l'avevo sempre conosciuto dopo la mia infanzia e mi convinsi che quello schiaffo che m'era stato inflitto da lui moribondo, non era stato da lui voluto. Divenni buono, buono e il ricordo di mio padre s'accompagnò a me, divenendo sempre piú dolce. Fu come un sogno delizioso, eravamo ormai perfettamente d'accordo, io divenuto il piú debole e lui il piú forte. (61)

Then, at the funeral, I remembered my father weak and sweet as I had always know him after my infancy, and I convinced myself that the rebuff issued by him in his near-death state was not of his volition. I became very noble and the memory of my father accompanied me, becoming always sweeter. It was a delicious dream, and we are now completely reconciled,

⁴³"My father was dead and I could no longer prove my innocence to him."

myself becoming weaker while he becomes stronger.

This description of his father bears little resemblance to how he was presented in the previous passages. The inconsistency is again indicative of Zeno's exerting power over the storytelling process. He has edited the image of his father to cast himself and his relationship with the father in a more flattering light. Zeno is again revealing his propensity for shading the truth to convince others (and himself) of his superiority to his father. He tells readers that he has accepted his weakness in relation to his father in order to reconcile. However, this is inconsistent with his early attempts to prove his strength. His submission to his father in this invented fantasy is merely to placate the memory of his father and remove the damage done by his father's final actions.

Finally, Zeno returns to religion for a final time to reconcile his father's death. In the last paragraph of the chapter, he creates an afterlife for his father, which I will quote in its entirety:

Ritornai e per molto tempo rimasi nella religione della mia infanzia. Immaginavo che mio padre mi sentisse e potessi dirgli che la colpa non era stata mia, ma del dottore. La bugia non aveva importanza perché egli ormai intendeva tutto ed io pure. E per parecchio tempo i colloqui con mio padre continuarono dolci e celati come un amore illecito, perché io dinanzi a tutto continuai a ridere di ogni pratica religiosa, mentre è vero — e qui voglio confessarlo — che io a qualcuno giornalmente e ferventemente raccomandai l'anima di mio padre. È proprio la religione vera quella che non occorre professare ad alta voce per averne il conforto di cui qualche volta — raramente — non si può fare a meno. (62)

I returned and remained at length in the religion of my infancy. I imagined that my father heard me, and I could tell him that it was not my fault, but the

doctor's. The lie was not important because he understood everything, as did I. And so the conversations with my father continued, sweet and hidden like an illicit love affair, because I still laughed at every religious practice, while it is true — and I want to confess it here — that I daily exhorted the spirit of my father to someone. It is only true religion that does not profess out loud of having the comfort that sometimes — rarely — that you can't help.

Zeno continues the dialogue, or struggle, with his father long after he died in an attempt to free himself of any guilt. He finds a typical target for blame — the doctor — and compares his post-mortem conversations with his father to an illicit love affair. In Zeno's mind, his father later understood him because they conversed after death. Zeno uses the same cognitive process as before to mitigate the death of his mother. He believes that they can observe him after their deaths, not out of religious belief, but out of a need to see himself as redeemed. After the death of both of his parents, Zeno still finds a way to suspend himself between the two by using religion as a tool to continue his relationships with both, or rather to create new relationships. While his mother looks on from a distance at his life, Zeno continues a dialogue with his father to establish his innocence, which is of great importance to him. Their behavior has reversed; now his mother is distant and his father is near.

Zeno frees himself from his guilt in several ways; firstly by assuming his father's final punishment was not a deliberate act. By doing so, Zeno does not have to live with the guilt of disappointing his father and forestalls the shame of being punished like a child. Secondly, and most importantly, he does not have to succumb to his father in his final moments. Zeno must convince the reader (Dr. S.), as he has done many times throughout this chapter, of his superiority to his father. He repeatedly states his own strength in the face of his father's weakness, statements meant to convince Dr. S. Most significantly, Zeno has

created something that does not exist. The post-mortem conversation that Zeno has with his father is the first instance in the novel in which Zeno the character (different from Zeno the narrator) blatantly fabricates reality (his father's opinion of him) to retell the story. The incident was traumatic enough that Zeno constructed an alternate sequence of events as a way to gain dominance over a reality that he believed existed in his father's mind: that Zeno is weak. The importance of Zeno's first true "creation" cannot be overstated because it is the impetus for a creative process that will determine his relationships with new roles in the following chapters. With both of his parents dead, Zeno will search to fill their vacant roles of comforter and antagonist and will employ fiction to do so, as he does for the first time after his father's death.

The early relationships with his father and mother serve as the backdrop for Zeno's behavior in the subsequent chapters of the novel because they instill in him an irreconcilable tension between aspiration and grounding, a dichotomy that destabilizes his narrative. He is perpetually suspended between their respective influences and the void to which he is constantly subjected is the key source of psychological tension for him. He is incapable of satisfying either of them entirely. Their shadows establish the neurosis, or the inability to reach a definite end that Zeno is seeking. Scholar Giuseppe Genco describes the phenomenon as it relates to the original struggle to quit smoking, stating,

La sua è una nevrosi che, al di là di una genesi edipica, si caratterizza sostanzialmente come patologia dell'«incapacità» di definirsi con chiarezza in un modo o nell'altro: osservare il proposito e non fumare, o fumare senza mai fare propositi di smettere. In questo modo Zeno sarebbe guarito, invece egli resta volentieri in una condizione di permanente indeterminatezza, di tensione profonda e apparentemente immotivata, di perpetua instabilità di abdicazione al suo potere di decisione per spostarlo all'esterno. (Genco 89–90)

Zeno's neurosis is such that, more than an Oedipal complex, it establishes itself as a pathology of the 'incapacity' to clearly define itself in one way or another: take for example the proposition to quit smoking or to smoke without making attempts to quit. Zeno could be healed, but instead he voluntarily remains in a condition of permanent uncertainty, of profound tension and an apparent lack of motivation, and of a perpetual instability through abdication of his power to decide and put it into action.

We can now see the psychological state of Zeno's suspension: this is his milieu, and he constantly decides to inhabit this zone despite the anguish it brings him. As I will discuss, Zeno has a propensity for crafting images, a result of his inability to be neither one nor the other. He can neither elevate himself to the level of health and intimidation of his father nor be good and healthy like his mother. Zeno is restricted to comprehending the world in a contradictory way: "Ambiguità e contraddittorietà sono i tratti distintivi del modo di essere di Zeno, sì che riesce difficile, per non dire impossibile, fissare il limite tra verità e menzogna, tra ciò che è riconducibile alla sua volontà inconscia e quanto è dovuto al caso" (Genco 93)⁴⁴. In his mind, it is necessary to be so ambiguous and untruthful because the reality is unattainable and unable to be controlled. In a sense, the opinions of others write his story, so he has taken to literally writing his story to regain that control.

Zeno's mentality mirrors the effects of "*triestinità*" in this chapter because he cannot reach a position of dominance. Whereas Svevo harnessed the symptoms of "*triestinità*" into the writing of the novel, Zeno harnesses the unstable nature of his upbringing to begin crafting images of himself. The final blow dealt by his father heralded a process of image creation designed to regain control of his own image and the perceptions of others. As mentioned, reality is defined for him as inaccessible in the minds of others. He cannot escape

⁴⁴"Ambiguity and contradiction are distinctive characteristics of Zeno's way of existing that render it difficult, if not impossible, to stay between the limits of truth and lies, between everything attributable to his unconscious will and how much is chance."

the perception imposed upon him, so he must create a new reality to alter that perception.

IV. AN ARTIST OF REALITY

Zeno's relationship with his parents demonstrates his ability to distort reality at his choosing to compose an image of himself for the reader. As we will see in his account of his marriage and dealings with his new family, the creating of the image is of prime importance for Zeno because it is a way for him to control the perceptions of other characters, as well as Dr. S. He creates to gain control of the unstable narrative of his life stemming from the unreachable reality presented by the parents, mainly by his father's dominance. It is important to reiterate that prior to the death of his father, Zeno as a character did not actively create a self-image. Any aspects of the plot, such as the discrepancy between what Zeno says and does, was brought about by Zeno the narrator's *retelling* of the story. However, starting with the death of his father and their post-mortem conversation, both Zeno the character and Zeno the narrator are engaging in a process of creating. Zeno the narrator is continuing to polish his retelling for Dr. S, while Zeno the character is creating within the context of that retelling. As such, tracking Zeno's movements becomes infinitely more complex in the following sections. Zeno begins to refill the roles vacated by his parents in the previous chapter. He searches actively for a wife and seeks the destruction of a new antagonist. Zeno, as both character and narrator, is always working to control the unstable narrative in increasingly more active ways as he moves through his life. And, as always, Svevo must be considered; he has complicated the process of reaching objectivity by further pushing the boundaries of fiction. The narrative structure established by Svevo allows Zeno to work freely with the components of reality, which are often inadequate means for Zeno to gain control of his story when used separately.

We now move to the final chapter of the novel to preface Zeno's new method of creating images, employed in the sections devoted to his wife and Guido. Entitled "Psico-analisi," the final chapter is a fascinating coda to the novel because it abandons the plot

to discuss his experience in writing his memoirs. He reveals himself fully as a tinkerer of reality, one who molds the truth with components of fiction. He openly admits his process of creation, referring to his memories as “immagini” (“images”), ones that he has created with all the details of real life. He describes the process of creating images as like “ottenere col vivo ricordo in pieno inverno le rose del Maggio” (409)¹. He describes them as “vivo,” highlighting the lifelike quality of the images. This semblance of life is key because it allows Zeno to believe in them fully. He remarks, “Ed io non simulai quell’emozione. Fu anzi una della piú profonde ch’io abbia avuta tutta la mia vita” (409)². The inclusion of lifelike qualities coupled with a complete dedication to his fictions means that his method of inventing reality is something more profound than a lie:

“Ma inventare è una creazione, non già una menzogna. Le mie erano delle invenzioni come quelle della febbre, che camminano per la stanza perché le vediate da tutti i lati e che poi anche vi toccano. Avevano la solidità, il colore, la petulanza delle cose vive. A forza di desiderio, io proiettai le immagini, che non c’erano nel mio cervello, nello spazio in cui guardavo, uno spazio in cui sentivo l’aria, la luce ed anche gli angoli contundenti che non mancarono in alcuno spazio per cui io sia passato. (409–410)

But to invent is a creation, not yet a lie. My inventions were like those fevers, which walked into the room because they were seen from all sides and able to be touched. They had the solidity, the color, the petulance of living things. By force of desire, I projected the images, which were not in my mind, into the space in which I watched, a space in which I could sense the air, the light and even the blunt edges that were present in any space that I had passed through.

¹“to obtain with vivid memory the roses of May in full winter.”

²“And I didn’t simulate that emotion. On the contrary, it was one of the most profound I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

This explains why Zeno is so easily able to invent while quickly assimilating himself to his creations. For Zeno, the invention becomes reality; it is inhabitable and tactile. He has felt every detail of his fictional world, such as the air and the light. Furthermore, the images exist within a space defined by, yet separate from, reality, taking the form of “alcuno spazio” (“any space”) through which Zeno has already passed. The spaces and materials for his creations are familiar, credible and living, yet they are altered enough to augment his image as a character and as a narrator.

The following passages are filled with descriptions of Zeno’s attempt to create reality out of nothing and craft memories where none previously existed, a process which initially occurred after the death of his father. Zeno lists his brother’s jealousy of Zeno’s schooling as an example of an invention that he now believes. He states, “Ero sicuro d’essermene avvisto, ma non subito ciò bastò ad infirmare la verità del sogno. Più tardi gli tolse ogni aspetto di verità: la gelosia in realtà c’era stata, ma nel sogno era stata spostata” (411)³. Zeno genuinely believes in the artifice he knows he has created for himself. Zeno’s life is told with such a mixture of truth and lies that it becomes a text unto itself. He is free to use reality or invention depending on which serves his image more appropriately. He describes the idea perfectly using again the metaphor of the roses in winter, “Io volevo ancora rose del Maggio in Dicembre. Le avevo già avute; perchè non avrei potuto riaverle” (416)⁴. Zeno wants the roses of May in December, regardless of method; he will conjure the rose despite the confines of the real world. Battaglia describes such a process as “L’incontro e il divorzio fra realtà e coscienza” (247)⁵ and that “Sentiamo che lo scrittore aspira a una tecnica di rottura nei confronti della stessa realtà e della stessa coscienza” (247)⁶. Zeno’s project is in effect a new way to interpret reality, yet it must effectively exclude conscience

³“I was certain that it happened, but that was not enough to invalidate the truth of the dream. Later they removed every aspect of the truth: in reality there was jealousy, but in the dream it had been altered.”

⁴“I still wanted the roses of May in December. I had already had them; why could I not have them again?”

⁵“The meeting and the divorce between reality and conscience”

⁶“We sense that the writer aspires to a technique of breakdown in the confrontation of reality and of his own conscience.”

or otherwise renounce the use of lies. Zeno's is a story which "non mira a configurare soltanto isolate storie di vittime e biografie di abulici o inetti; ma è la stessa coscienza che si pone come principale interprete e stabilisce una relazione perpetua di antagonismo con la realtà e con se stessa" (269)⁷. Svevo has again enabled Zeno, through the complex relationship between conscience and truth, to exist outside the confines of reality. Additionally, the characterization of Zeno's created images as antagonists to reality is apt because they serve to frustrate a perception of himself that already exists.

We must again pay special attention to Zeno's use of language. He dismantles the process of writing in one brief line; "Una confessione in iscritto è sempre menzognera"⁸ (409). He also brings up the issue of language, stating, "Si capisce come la nostra vita avrebbe tutt'altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto"⁹ (409), suggesting that different languages alone can tell different versions of the same story. These admissions signal Zeno's awareness of the subjective nature of the writing process and how much it depends on the mode and method of telling. Svevo and Zeno are speaking as one; Svevo is admitting the ability of his text to operate differently because of language constraints, and Zeno is doing the same to cast doubt on the details of his account.

Zeno also makes reference to his doctor's shock at a significant omission; his bother-in-law Guido owned an important lumberyard in Trieste. Zeno passes it off as unnecessary writing, claiming, "Se ne avessi parlato sarebbe stata una nuova difficoltà nella mia esposizione già tanto difficile" (419)¹⁰. He is again open about the unabashedly selective nature of his telling, and he even uses the language of composition to do so; his "esposizione già tanto difficile" would be harmed by certain details. Zeno is looking for complete control over a calculated attempt to compose a story. However, it should be

⁷"does not aim to configure isolated stories of victims and biographies of neurotics and ineptitude; rather it is the same conscience that which places itself in a position of prominence and establishes a perpetual relationship of antagonism with reality and with itself."

⁸"A written confession is always a lie"

⁹"You can understand how different our lives would be if it was told in our dialect"

¹⁰"If I had mentioned it, it would have made my exposition much more difficult."

stressed that Zeno does not tell such lies for the sake of being deceitful. As we have seen, he is constantly embellishing for reasons more akin to coping or comprehending than just inventing for the sake of it. As Bartoloni notes, “The distinction Zeno makes here between creation and lies is fundamental in understanding the concreteness and tangibility, the importance that fiction acquires in the eyes of Zeno as opposed to the futility and ephemerality of mere mendaciousness” (32). His ability to augment his experience with fictive details can be directly related to attempt to experience his own life differently. It would be reductive to claim that Zeno only does so maliciously; he is actively constructing everything in an attempt to gain dominance over reality, and the “concreteness” of his telling comes from the ‘living details’ he ascribes to his creations. Such a process of image creation is important to Zeno when images serve as a quasi-reality, one which purifies faults in himself and cultivates them in others, most specifically Guido. Zeno is constantly trying to envision his world along the lines of this process because doing so allows him to have it both ways in all scenarios, ignoring the strict confines of reality; he is able to be both weak and strong, innocent yet guilty. He is humorous when interacting with some characters and serious with others. He can act as devoted husband to his wife but he also becomes a passionate and intimidating lover. Svevo is omnipresent in the process as well; he works constantly exploring the many ways to craft images through Zeno. He also explores the process of writing by writing his own narrative and writing Zeno’s unstable counterpart. We will now look at the ways Svevo, through Zeno, uses the process of creating images to understand his career and marriage.

Following the death of his father, Zeno begins to tell of the story of his courtship and marriage of the Malfenti sisters. The events leading up to his marriage and the turbulent relationship Zeno develops with his brother-in-law and nemesis, Guido Speier, elicit the type of neurotic and self-conscious behavior readers have come to expect from Zeno. Instead of trying prove himself superior to his father in order to overcome him in a fictional

struggle for supremacy, Zeno now struggles similarly with a new rival. When faced with the insurmountable challenge of attracting a wife, Zeno engages in the process of creating images. He is not only the author of his own memoir, but also an artist creating images out of the fabric of reality and fiction. His and other characters' image of himself develops significantly throughout the novel, resulting in a clear progression from an inept and comical in-law to responsible patriarch. And conversely, the image of Guido decays noticeably from a paragon of culture and sophistication to that of an irresponsible and reckless child.

Zeno opens his discussion of his marriage by admitting to several aspirations. He states,

Nella mente di un giovane di famiglia borghese il concetto di vita umana s'associa a quello della carriera e nella prima gioventù la carriera è quella di Napoleone I. Senza che perciò si sogni di diventare imperatore perchè si può somigliare a Napoleone restando molto ma molto più in basso. La vita più intensa è raccontata in sintesi dal suono più rudimentale, quello dell'onda del mare, che, dacchè si forma, muta ad ogni istante finchè non muore! M'aspettavo perciò anch'io di divenire e disfarmi come Napoleone e l'onda. (62)

In the mind of a young man from a bourgeoisie family, the concept of human life is associated with the career, and in early youth, the career of Napoleon I. One does not, however, dream of becoming an emperor because one can resemble Napoleon in lesser ways. The most intense life is told by the synthesis of the most rudimentary sounds, that of the wave in the sea, which, once formed, changes every instant so it does not die! I also waited to become and to undo myself like Napoleon and the wave.

Zeno likens himself to a dissolving form, here a wave, that is ever-changing until it no longer exists, and he links that to his own concept of a complete life. Augmenting a proper

plan for life, according to Zeno, is marriage, which he wryly claims “ci dà a credere che dalla moglie risulterà anche un rinnovamento nostro, ciò ch’è un’illusione curiosa non autorizzata da alcun testo” (62)¹¹. And yet despite the humorous tone, Zeno indulges himself in the quest for an ever-changing form via career and the renewal of himself through marriage. The two key concepts in this passage are ‘diventare,’ or the becoming, and ‘disfare,’ or the undoing. These are the two methods that Zeno uses in the following sections of the novel to create images; they are either in service of constructing his own image or that of his wife, or that of dismantling the image of Guido. Thus we have a dual process of inventing to construct and to destruct, both useful to edit or enhance the narratives of Zeno the narrator and Zeno the character.

The process of constructing is outlined in Zeno’s attempt to find a wife. Zeno makes the acquaintance of Giovanni Malfenti through business and soon discovers that he has daughters. Once Zeno learns of them, and that they all have names starting with the letter “a,” his mind begins imagining their beauty, even drawing connections to his own name; “Io mi chiamo Zeno ed avevo perciò il sentimento che stessi per prendere moglie lontano dal mio paese” (69)¹². Rather than regarding their distance as a sign of incompatibility, Zeno sees it as an opportunity to better himself. Already Zeno begins to devise a marriage without any source of grounding in the real world and has made his judgment of the girls based solely on hearsay (“A quel tavolo si disse anche che tutt’e quattro erano belle” (69)¹³). He then continues on the path he created for himself by ending a long-standing relationship with another women, although he claims that it was unrelated to his knowledge of the Malfenti daughters and his impending visit to the household. This is another obvious inconsistency in Zeno’s telling indicating that he is resolute in his new

¹¹“One is also led to believe that a wife will bring about our renewal, a curious delusion that is not proved by any evidence.”

¹²“My name is Zeno and therefore I had the sense that I was attempting to procure a wife far from my own location.”

¹³“It was said at the bank that all four of them were beautiful.”

attempt to seek a wife. Svevo is also foreshadowing the failure of Zeno's attempt to marry; the Malfenti daughters are at the furthest point on the alphabet and clearly beyond Zeno's reach.

Zeno's ultimate goal is to obtain health and legitimacy through marriage, which is part of the ideal life: "Stavo proprio per arrivare in porto. Ancora adesso sto ammirando tanta cecità che allora mi pareva chiaroveggenza. Correvo dietro alla salute, alla legittimità" (71)¹⁴. He has inextricably linked his pursuit of a wife to his crafting of an image as strong and dominant. Zeno's excitement over finding a new wife relates to his need for certain roles, as discussed in the previous chapter. His new wife, whoever she may be, is meant to fulfill the role of the nurturer who will make Zeno healthy and whole, a role previously inhabited by his mother. Unbeknownst to the Malfenti daughters, he has burdened them with the task of being suitable to marry him without ever having met him. Zeno is, in his own words, seeking a woman who will make him whole, a woman he thinks should be his opposite, in order to correct his faults. And Ada Malfenti proves to be exactly opposite Zeno; she is serious and literal, while Zeno is rarely serious and constantly indirect. Introduced to Ada last, Zeno immediately discounts the woman who will actually become his wife, Augusta, describing her as having a squint ([*"la personificava tutta"*; *"It personified her completely"*]) and dull hair. He then eliminates Alberta and Anna because of their young ages. Finally, Ada enters and fulfills the expectation that Zeno has set for her, describing her as, *"una donna con i suoi occhi seri in una faccia che per essere meglio nivea era un poco azzurra e la sua capigliatura ricca, ricciuta, ma accomodata con grazia e severità"* (74)¹⁵, again underlining the *'severità'* (*'severity'*), contrasting Zeno's lack thereof.

Zeno does not hesitate to project his expectations and aspirations onto Ada, knowing within moments of meeting her that he will need to marry her in order to attain perfect

¹⁴"I had almost reached my goal. I now marvel at the blindness that at that time seemed clairvoyance. I chased after health and legitimacy."

¹⁵"A woman with serious eyes in a face that was made better by by those spots of blue amidst her snow-white skin and rich, curly hair, yet accompanied by grace and severity,"

harmony in his life. He describes how, “mi sia invece incantato ad ammirare altre qualità ch’io le attribuii di serietà e anche di energia, insomma, un po’ mitigate, le qualità ch’io amavo nel padre suo” (74)¹⁶. Zeno is fictionalizing not only the present, but also the future by assuming that Ada will transfer those qualities to him. His attraction to Ada is based on his perception of the quest for health and happiness. In fact, Zeno sees marriage, not love, as the end which he must assiduously seek; “quello di innamorarmene perchè bisognava passare per di là per sposarla” (75)¹⁷. In this sense, Zeno is working backwards from an end that he has already created; in his mind he has married Ada and achieved the perfect life. Now he must move backwards from the future, first by marrying her, then by loving her, all the way until the present moment. Zeno describes this, stating,

Era la donna da me prescelta, era perciò già mia ed io l’adornai di tutti i sogni perchè il premio della vita m’apparisse più bello. L’adornai, le prestai tutte le tanta qualità di cui sentivo il bisogno e che a me mancavano, perchè essa doveva divenire oltre che la mia compagna anche la mia seconda madre che m’avrebbe addotto a una vita intera, virile, di lotta di vittoria. (82)

She was the preselected woman, already mine, and I adorned her with all of my dreams because the prize of life appeared more beautiful. I adorned her, furnished her with all the qualities that I felt necessary and that I lacked, because she had to become more than my companion, but also my second mother that would have allowed me a full, virile life of struggle and victory.

But this concept of adorning, or embellishing, the woman he loves is not new to him, and his penchant for abstracting his subjects out of reality is commonplace for him. He goes on to describe how he employs a similar process for other women;

Nei miei sogni anche fisicamente l’abbellii prima di consegnarla ad altri. In

¹⁶“I was enchanted and admired other qualities of seriousness and energy that I had attributed to her, which, slightly altered, were the same qualities I admired in her father.”

¹⁷“To fall in love with her, first I had to pass beyond marriage.”

realtà io nella mia vita corsi dietro a molte donne e molte di esse lasciarono anche raggiungere. Nel sogno le raggiunsi tutte. Naturalmente non le abbellisco alterandone i tratti, ma faccio come un mio amico, pittore delicatissimo, che quando ritratta delle donne belle, pensa intensamente anche a qualche altra bella cosa per esempio a della porcellana finissima. Un sogno pericoloso perchè può conferire nuovo potere alle donne di cui si sognò e che rivedendo alla luce reale conservano qualche cosa delle frutta, dei fiori e della porcellana da cui furono vestite. (82)

Even in my dreams I embellished her before handing her over to others. In reality, I ran after women in my life and exceeded my reach. In my dreams I reached them all. Naturally I embellished them too, altering their traits. I do so like one of my friends, a precise artist, who makes portraits of beautiful women, thinking intensely of some other beautiful thing, such as very fine porcelain. It's a dangerous dream because it confers new power to these women whom one dreams about, and they retain some of the fruit, flowers and porcelain when they reemerge in real light.

Zeno is constructing his relationship with Ada to service the image of himself. Here we see Zeno emerging as a creator, an artist, one who takes his subjects into an artistic dreamworld to augment their beauty, only to return them to reality where they retain the remnants of his dreams. Zeno is not out of touch with reality or incognizant of it; rather, he is an artist using reality as his medium to create an image more adapted to his quest for legitimacy. Recall his description from the earlier passage; “Avevano la solidità, il colore, la petulanza delle cose vive” (409–410)¹⁸. His life with Ada is quickly invented and fully realized. He then becomes a literal artist as he engages in the act of writing his creations on paper, as an author would. This dynamic is the source of the novel's humor and irony; Zeno believes in

¹⁸“They had the solidity, the color, the petulance of living things.”

his images, but do other characters? When Ada is repelled by his humor, Zeno is ultimately unwilling to adapt himself to Ada, which is in keeping with his attempt to control his own narrative through the writing process.

However, there are certain instances when Zeno is successful in convincing other characters of the authenticity of his images. Zeno often tells stories from his life to entertain the Malfentis, naturally all fabricated and embellished, such as when he falsely professes a love of Latin. It is revealed that the Malfentis never believed any of Zeno's far-fetched stories, and, while they all knew them to be false, they still enjoyed them. The experience of the reader matches the experience of the characters because both are subjected to a crafted narrative that is clearly inaccurate in certain ways; Zeno is mirroring his storytelling technique within the story. We know Zeno's narrative is filled with inaccuracies, but it still reveals much about Zeno. Augusta in particular viewed them as a part of Zeno. He notes, "Ad Augusta apparvero perciò più preziose perchè, inventate da me, le sembrava fossero più mie che se il destino me le avesse inflitte"¹⁹ (84). In Augusta's interpretation, the events invented by him are personalized and fitting for his life, more so than if random fate had selected them for him. Zeno then provides a very illuminating analysis of this phenomenon as follows:

Eppure in gran parte quelle storielle erano vere. Non so più dire in quanta parte perchè avendole raccontate a tante altre donne prima che alla figlie del Malfenti, esse, senza ch'io lo volessi, si alterarono per divenire più espressive. Erano vere dal momento che io non avrei più saputo raccontarle altrimenti. Oggidì non m'importa di provarne la verità. Non vorrei disingannare Augusta che ama crederle di mia invenzione. In quanto ad Ada io credo che ormai elle abbia cambiato di parere e le ritenga vere. (84–85)

The majority of those stories were true. I can't say how many because I told

¹⁹"They seemed all the more precious to Augusta because, as they were invented by me, to her they seemed more mine than if destiny had inflicted them upon me"

them to other women many times before I told them to the Malfenti daughters, and against my will they were altered to become more expressive. They were true from the moment that I didn't know how to tell them otherwise. Today it isn't important to me that I prove their validity. I wouldn't want to disillusion Augusta who loved to believe them because they were my inventions. As for Ada, I believe that now she has changed her mind and considers them true.

This passage is essential to understanding how Zeno views creation and its relation to reality. Much as he created an image of Ada in his mind, only to set it loose in reality while still retaining certain aspects of his imagination, here he has created an alternate history for himself that is now masquerading in the minds of many as the truth, despite the initial knowledge that it was false. The stories are known to be false, yet they are accepted as some hyperrealistic truth that transcends reality. This process allows Zeno to have it both ways, so to speak. He can live in both the world of his creation and also inhabit reality without fully leaving his imagination behind. His relationship with reality is such that he has little problem intermingling the two. Oddly enough, Zeno is able to reconcile blatant lies with the truth and assimilate them into his life seamlessly to the point where others accept them as part Zeno, even while knowing of their fictitiousness. He also demonstrates the ability to internalize a fictional account of himself; it recalls the passage from the final chapter, wherein he writes, "Piú tardi gli tolse ogni aspetto di verità: la gelosia in realtà c'era stata, ma nel sogno era stata spostata" (411)²⁰. The process is the same; Zeno has removed aspects of truth from his telling of the passage, yet has internalized it as truth. Zeno also matches the language of the wave image from the beginning of the chapter, using the "divenire" to express his goal for fictionalizing the stories; the sense of becoming more, in this case "expressive," underscores his becoming closer to his image of the self.

²⁰"Later, every aspect of truth was removed: in reality, there was jealousy, but the dream removed all of it."

Expectation is key; Zeno expects other characters to accommodate his alternate reality. The process of construction works in reverse for the actual turn of events. Zeno is fixated on the images he has produced and he fully aspires to their fulfillment. While his future with Ada creeps backwards to meet him in the present, created in a different realm to be set loose in reality, the prearranged matching with Augusta is a constant and unforeseen surprise to him, mainly because it exists outside the fictionalized account of his life that he has created with Ada. Zeno fails to notice one of the most blaring aspects of his frequent visits to the Malfenti household — Augusta's affection for him. Zeno is completely shocked when Signora Malfenti surprises him with the information that his attention to Ada is distressing to Augusta. It would be fitting to say that Augusta's affections do not fit Zeno's narrative. He immediately dismisses her, and, as he adorned Ada with beauty and seriousness, he reduces Augusta to a few physical defects; he is destroying, rather than constructing her image. Zeno immediately resorts to forming explanations in his own mind, ascribing his failure to notice Augusta to hyper-perception, stating, "Si vedono meno bene le cose quando si spalancano troppo gli occhi" (92)²¹. Quite the opposite, Zeno doesn't notice her because he was fixated on his ultimate goal without considering that others might have plans for his future, signaling a detachment from reality and absolute adherence to his constructive process. He speaks of her presence as an irritation and something that can be removed, stating, "io dovevo finalmente eliminare quella seccante fanciulla dal mio destino" (119)²². Zeno makes one final attempt at acting out his pre-planned reality by proposing to Ada, knowing full well he will be rejected. He then follows his rejection by immediately proposing to Alberta, again to be rejected in self-sabotage. His final option, the path he had thoroughly planned on avoiding, is Augusta, who acquiesces knowing that she is marrying a man who does not love her; "Io devo dunque sapere e ricordare che voi

²¹"You don't see as well when your eyes are open too wide."

²²"I finally needed to remove that troublesome child from my destiny."

non mi amate?” (136)²³. Augusta accepts, and the Malfenti family is immediately informed, with Signora Malfenti slyly revealing her intentions to pair them from the start, stating, “Vede ch’io avevo indovinato tutto” (138)²⁴. Before now, Zeno’s own version of his fictional life diverges from true, tangible reality, or the reality of others. His failure to detect the machinations of Signora Malfenti in maneuvering the two together underscores his incapacity to comprehend a reality outside his own version and his own total adherence to his self-crafted image. Zeno does not work in a timeline of past to present to future, but rather future to present, of a reality that must quickly rearrange itself to match his image of the future. This is where tension arises; Zeno is always preparing himself and fitting his life and personality to attain some far off future. He has acquired “in pieno inverno le rose del Maggio,” only to discover that roses do not survive in winter.

Zeno is foiled in his attempt to marry Ada, but that does not mean his process of construction is finished. Now that he is married to Augusta, he begins to examine her in a new light and adorn her character with all characteristics necessary to complete his vision of a happy marriage, an essential component of his quest to be legitimate. He describes his marriage as a surprising success, stating, “Cominciò con una scoperta che mi stupì: io amavo Augusta com’essa amava me” (158)²⁵. Now that marriage to Ada is no longer a possibility, Augusta becomes the figure that fills the role of nurturer and is subsequently crafted into his perfect wife. Zeno speaks directly on the change, stating,

Non so piú se dopo o prima dell’affetto, nel mio animo formò una speranza, la grande speranza di poter finire col somigliare ad Augusta ch’era la salute personificata. Durante il fidanzamento io non avevo neppur intravvista quella salute perché tutto immerso a studiare me in primo luogo eppoi Ada e Guido. La lampada a petrolio in quel salotto non era mai ar-

²³“So I have to know and remember that you do not love me?”

²⁴“I see that I have predicted everything.”

²⁵“It began with a discovery that shocked me: I loved Augusta as she loved me.”

rivata ad illuminare gli scarsi capelli di Augusta. (158)

I'm not sure if it was before or after this affection that my spirit became hopeful, hopeful of resembling Augusta, who was the personification of health. During the engagement, I didn't glimpse this because I was completely immersed in studying myself first, then Ada and Guido. The oil lamps in that room were never able to illuminate the dull hair of Augusta.

Augusta is described as everything Zeno wants in a wife, specifically as a method to gain complete health. This admission confirms Zeno's inability to see possibilities outside his own constructions; to his surprise, Augusta is exactly the wife he needed. Additionally, in this same section of the novel, he discusses how his marriage is essential to the overall narrative he is telling: "Stavo collaborando alla costruzione di una famiglia patriarcale e diventavo io stesso il patriarca che avevo odiato e che ora m'appariva quale il segnacolo della salute" (160–161)²⁶. Zeno is using the terminology of creation ("costruzione"), as well as mirroring the word used in the description of the wave ("diventare," or becoming), to describe his process here. The wording is significant because it reinforces the idea that his marriage and the telling of it are in service of narrative of the patriarch, or a move toward the dominant role, which can only be achieved by becoming and morphing.

Not only does Zeno create images in an attempt to construct his life, he also projects weakness onto other characters to destroy the image of Guido Speier. Just as Ada is expected to fill the role vacated by his mother, Guido immediately inhabits the antagonistic role previously occupied by his father. From the instant they meet, Zeno is already projecting onto him, taking into account all factors, both physical and intellectual. After a falling out with the Malfentis over the confusion of Augusta's affections, Zeno accidentally meets Ada in the street, only to have their cold and rigid reunion interrupted by Guido. Zeno immediately began envisioning the Malfenti daughters once he heard of their existence and

²⁶"I was collaborating in the construction of a patriarchal family and I myself became the patriarch that I had once hated and that now seemed to be the true sign of health."

mirrors the process with Guido. He immediately views him as too young before finding much to criticize in his first impression; “Era vestito con un’eleganza ricercata e teneva nella destra inguantata un bastone dal manico d’avorio lunghissimo, che io non avrei portato neppure se m’avessero pagato per ciò una somma per ogni chilometro” (109)²⁷, stressing an immediate contrast. Zeno moves to embarrass him, inquiring about his seemingly German name, only for Guido to affirm his Italian roots and demonstrate his perfect Tuscan, at which Zeno remarks, “mentre io e Ada eravamo condannati al nostro dialettaccio” (110)²⁸. Just as when Zeno cast Ada as his future wife despite all obvious signs of the opposite, so Zeno has decided that he is superior to Guido despite all evidence to suggest otherwise. He dismisses him as simply a professional acquaintance of the Malfenti family despite the obvious rapport between Guido and Ada. He states, “Era stabilito ch’io non dovevo odiarlo perchè egli per i Malfenti non era altro che un commerciante importante” (112)²⁹. As we later discover, Guido is in fact an intimate friend of the family and an admirer of Ada. And aside from posing a threat to Zeno in his appearance and relationship with Ada, Guido also happens to be an expert violinist, another hobby of Zeno’s. He runs home and practices the violin, only to be disheartened with a declaration of loss; “Dopo un po’ di tempo mi parve che la mia lotta con Guido non fosse definitivamente perduta” (117)³⁰. And so Zeno engages in a struggle that reads in much the same terms as that with his father by foiling Guido always; he makes of joke of a seance Guido stages at the Malfenti household, criticizes his flawless violin performance and draws childish caricatures to humiliate him. The key difference between Zeno’s takedown of Guido and that of his father lies in the fact that Zeno the character is active in doing so; whereas Zeno the character never created images to destroy his father’s image and gain dominance, he is now

²⁷“He was dressed with a calculated elegance and he held in a gloved right hand a very long cane of ivory that I wouldn’t have ever carried had I been paid by the kilometer,”

²⁸“meanwhile Ada and I were condemned to our ugly dialect.”

²⁹“It was decided that I could not hate him because he was nothing more than an important client of the Malfentis.”

³⁰“After a moment it seem to me that my struggle with Guido was definitively lost.”

doing so within the plot of the text and assisted by Zeno the narrator in doing so.

Guido's already assured rivalry with Zeno is solidified by his eventual engagement and marriage to Ada. Guido has fully overcome him and gained the honor of marrying the most serious and beautiful of the Malfenti daughters. Yet just as their marriage is cemented, Zeno soon begins to stabilize. For the remainder of their relationship, Zeno and Guido seem to grow fully into their roles. The wives of Zeno and Guido also reverse. While Augusta was initially considered rather dull and simple, she grows into a dutiful wife, and her relationship with Zeno is a paragon of marriage. Augusta is an understanding and loving wife, while Ada is irritated by Guido's behavior. The disparity between the two wives is best illustrated in a passage regarding Zeno and Guido's old rivalry over playing the violin. Initially a source of pleasure for Ada, "ma soffriva orrendamente per il suono del violino,"³¹ which causes Zeno to exclaim, "Strano! Augusta invece era beata quando passando dinanzi al mio studiolo sentiva uscirne i miei suoni aritmici!" (317)³². Guido's crowning ability has suffered along with his reputation within the family, while Zeno's wife admires his amateur skills because they are associated with his goodness.

Additionally, Guido very openly takes a mistress by employing Carmen, a woman of astonishing good looks and dubious professional abilities. While Zeno successfully hid and maintained his relationship with his mistress Carla, Guido's is almost completely transparent to his wife and family. Augusta is notified of Carmen's presence in the office and knows immediately of Guido's intentions; "Essa ne fu oltremodo spiacente. Senza ch'io gliel'avessi detto, essa pensò subito che Guido avesse assunta al suo servizio quella fanciulla per farsene an'amante" (288)³³. She transmits the information to Ada, who has issues of her own. Ada's beauty is marred by Basedow Syndrome ("Povera Ada! M'era

³¹"But she suffered horribly at the sound of that violin"

³²"How strange! Meanwhile Augusta was thrilled when she passed by my study and heard my arrhythmic notes."

³³"She was very displeased. Without any mention from me, she immediately thought that Guido hired that girl in his workplace to take her as a lover."

parsa come la figurazione della salute e dell'equilibrio" [321–322]³⁴). Zeno once admired her beauty and potential ability to bring him health, but now she is no longer the image "dell'equilibrio." Zeno now thrives in comparison to Guido. In a symbiotic manner, Zeno becomes more esteemed as his brother-in-law collapses through both the efforts of Zeno the character to sabotage him on a textual level and the machinations of Zeno the narrator to assist in the depiction.

As we turn to the final portion of the novel, Zeno's ascension in the eyes of his family gives way to the downfall of Guido in every possible sense. I will now examine some of the ways that Zeno paves the way for Guido's downfall, creating a narrative that matches his own purposes and allows him to overcome his rival. His process of constructing his own image and destroying that of Guido come to fruition simultaneously. Guido falls into misfortune when his poorly run business goes into serious debt over several commercial fiascos. Zeno advises Guido to reach out for financial assistance, advice which Guido ignores. Both the pressure of impending financial doom for his business and the growing ire from his family regarding Carmen result in a failed suicide attempt. Zeno shows signs of irritation at Guido's near-fatal incident. Augusta pushes him to visit, and Zeno expresses his clear displeasure at dealing with Guido's weakness; "A me quella visita sembrava una seccatura insopportabile" (344)³⁵. After a brief visit, he is implored by Ada to continue looking after Guido, a request Ada knew well Zeno would take seriously from her, given his old attraction.

Yet Zeno's habit of cultivating an image for himself is at its most subtle at this stage of the novel. Zeno the character retreats into a passive role from which he enables Guido's downfall, again augmented by the active retelling of Zeno the narrator. Elizabeth Schachter notes a typical Svevian trope of a protagonist working within the presence of a Don Juan figure, in this case Guido, characterizing Zeno as "devious," in his dealings with

³⁴"Poor Ada! She had once seemed to me to be the paragon of health and equilibrium."

³⁵"That visit seemed an unbearable bother."

Guido, noting, “he appears to be compliant, inactive and weak,” and thus Zeno “masks his destructive impulses towards Guido and assists in his rival’s downfall” (79). Their changed relationship is interpreted variously by scholars along these terms, or else as symbiotic; Minghelli uses this term for his relationship with Guido and states, “Only after the death and financial ruin of Guido, now literally a finished man, can Zeno emerge from the shadow in which he had been waiting and live a brief moment of true and unquestioned health” (57). There is indication that the timing is not coincidental; Zeno capitalizes on the fragility of Guido’s situation to legitimize himself.

Shortly after the first suicide attempt, Guido’s business continues to fail, and his relationship with Carmen becomes more obvious. Much has been made of the startling order of events that lead to Guido’s death because he does in fact die with the involvement of Zeno. Some scholars attribute Guido’s death entirely to Zeno as a premeditated and passive attempt to achieve the final blow. Certain facts are unavoidable: Guido attempted to kill himself with morphine the first time and it is widely suspected that he faked a suicide for attention: “l’aveva fatto con tutte le prudenze, perchè prima di prendere la morfina se ne era fatta vedere la boccetta stappata in mano” (Svevo 343)³⁶. Shortly prior to his second suicide attempt, in the midst of his desperate financial situation, Guido asks Zeno about the properties of veronal versus sodium veronal. Zeno replies that the less toxic drug is veronal, to which Guido explicitly asks, “Sicchè chi volesse morire dovrebbe prendere il veronal al sodio?” (368)³⁷. Zeno confirms this. Discovered dead after his second attempt at suicide, Zeno notes the drug Guido used: “Veronal. Dunque non veronal al sodio. Come nessun altro io potevo ora essere certo che Guido non aveva voluto morire. Non lo dissi però mai a nessuno” (391)³⁸. For careful readers, this passage is shocking in its simplicity

³⁶“He had done it with prudence because before taking the morphine he made the uncorked bottle seen in his hand.”

³⁷“So if one wanted to die, they would have to take sodium veronal?”

³⁸“Veronal. Not sodium veronal. I alone could now tell that Guido had certainly not wished to die. I didn’t mention it to anyone.”

and ostensible irrelevance. Zeno gives little thought to the idea that his own information was the deciding factor in Guido's death. Scholars have had much to say about this, with scholar Elisa Martínez Garrido drawing comparisons to Shakespeare's Iago because of Zeno's subtle role in the death of Guido, also claiming, "Si tratta di un delitto che la cattiva coscienza del personaggio vuole seppellire, un delitto davanti al quale Zeno farà tutto il possibile per tentare di depistare il lettore" (37)³⁹. Here, possibly more clearly than ever, Zeno is hiding information from his telling. And while the question remains as to Zeno's deliberate actions leading up to Guido's death, it is undeniable that he played a decisive role and that his reaction is one of indifference. It is perhaps the most complete example of Zeno's ability to construct his own image through the process of defacing another. In Zeno's revisionist version of events, his own role in the death of Guido is negligible, when in fact it was his own information that enabled it. Empowered by the writing process, he can have it both ways; he can assist in the death of Guido, in the literal defeat of his nemesis, yet also preserve his conscience and status within the family.

In the end, Zeno is able to behave totally irresponsibly in all stages of Guido's death. He is able to skip Guido's funeral and sidestep reprimand from the Malfenti family. High off his victory over Guido, "Mi paragonavo al povero Guido e salivo, salivo in alto con la mia vittoria nella stessa lotta nella quale egli era soggiaciuto" (Svevo 397)⁴⁰, Zeno actually misses the funeral because he shows up to the wrong cemetery at the wrong time. Like the death itself, such a mistake has provided much material for scholars examining the Freudian aspects of the novel. Outraged by Zeno's absence from the funeral, he is able to convince the Malfentis of his innocence yet again with an artfully crafted lie. Zeno states, "Le raccontai anche qualche cosa di meno vero in appendice della verità" (399)⁴¹, blaming

³⁹"It is a crime that the bad conscience of the protagonist wants to bury, a crime associated with Zeno and he will do anything possible to sidetrack the reader."

⁴⁰"They compared me to poor Guido and I ascended greatly in my victory in the same struggle that Guido was surrendering,"

⁴¹"I told them other less than truthful things,"

his absence on a trip to the bank to ensure the reduction of Guido's debt. In fact, his lie is so convincing that he is actually elevated in the estimation of the Malfentis. On receiving praise for his actions, Zeno even comments on the success of his lie; "Era enorme che mi si potesse dire una cosa simile alterando in tale modo la verità" (402)⁴². Ultimately, Ada leaves for Buenos Aires with a mostly positive opinion of Zeno, and he closes his account of his life, disappointed that he cannot completely convince of Ada of his fraternal love for Guido; "Ecco ch'essa ci abbandonava e che mai piú avrei potuto provarle la mia innocenza" (406)⁴³. Ada is out of his grasp, and her memory will remain with her forever, unable to be altered. Zeno mirrors the statement he made about his father; "io non potevo piú provargli la mia innocenza!" (60)⁴⁴. She does not have any ill will towards Zeno, but does not entirely believe that Zeno loved Guido. This matching of language indicates the emphasis Zeno places on his ability to appear a certain way and definitively links his behavior towards Ada and Guido to his relationship with his parents. The process of acquiring a wife and overcoming his nemesis is reached through a different and more active method of image creation.

Readers may wonder whether there is ever an instance in the novel when we can view Zeno as being genuine and rational, or in the terms of this analysis, an instance when reality and fantasy align. There is one such instance, and it is the most poignant scene in *Zeno*. He reaches a moment of clarity with Ada regarding their past history. Highly emotional over his conversation with Ada regarding Guido, Zeno exclaims, "Hai finito con lo sposare un uomo ancora piú bizzarro di me, Ada" (348)⁴⁵. Following this, Zeno has the ultimate vindication from the woman he so wanted to marry. Ada responds, "Ma sono lieta per Augusta che tu sia stato tanto migliore di quanto ti credevo" (349)⁴⁶, describing Guido

⁴²"It was incredible that I could say such things and alter the truth in such a way."

⁴³"And so she abandoned us and I would never be able to prove my innocence to her."

⁴⁴"I could not longer prove my innocence to him!"

⁴⁵"You ended up marrying a more bizarre man than I, Ada."

⁴⁶"I am happy for Augusta because you are so much better than I had hoped,"

as “non sia quello che io m’aspettavo” (349)⁴⁷. Zeno has managed to ‘disfare’ the image of Guido in the same instance that he became legitimate to her. Ada then affirms Zeno’s victory over Guido in the eyes of the family, stating, “Sei il migliore uomo della nostra famiglia, la nostra fiducia, la nostra speranza” (349)⁴⁸. What Zeno had always wished for has finally been realized; of all his fantasies about becoming strong, healthy and idealized among his family, he has proof in the words of Ada of his goodness. In this instance, there is no need to adorn reality with anything because they are one and the same. The proof is in Zeno’s attitude after this encounter with Ada; “Tutto ciò era ben dolce, di un sapore raro in questa vita. Tanta dolcezza non avrebbe potuto darmi una vera salute? Infatti io camminai quel giorno senza imbarazzo e senza dolori, mi sentii magnanimo e forte e nel cuore un sentimento di sicurezza che m’era nuovo” (351)⁴⁹. The experience of being validated so openly translates to a sensory experience more rich than any of his fictions, complete with “un sapore raro” and a feeling of true health. Zeno’s mind is without tension or desire to transform the reality in front of him. Aside from feeling in full agreement with Ada’s words, all of his physical problems, manifested from his feeling of inferiority, have disappeared to be replaced with a feeling of happiness and contentment. He was finally open and honest, expressing his pain directly to Ada and received an equally genuine response. His mind rests easy because he does not need to craft a new reality for himself.

Zeno clearly operates on several levels; as both character and narrator, creator and destroyer. He is not content to live with perceptions of other characters, so he ignores the rules of reality to adorn other characters with his wishes and debase them with his passivity. This can be embodied by the image of the wave used to describe his process; by creating images, he can both “diventare” and “disfare,” at will. He must become “il migliore uomo

⁴⁷“not what I expected.”

⁴⁸“You are the best man in our family, our faith, our hope.”

⁴⁹“Everything was sweet, of a flavor rare in this life. How could such sweetness not give me true health? In fact, I walked that day without self-consciousness and without sadness, feeling magnanimous, strong and in my heart I felt a new sense of security.”

della famiglia,” by undoing Guido’s attempts to do the same. His image depends on it and he is active at all levels of the narrative in fulfilling his goal. His narratorial control parallels his efforts to prove his dominance over his father, a task that he ultimately failed to do, which gave rise to his creative process in crafting images. Zeno now employs that process to gain control of the unstable narrative of his life. He wishes to tell the story of a strong and capable patriarch and cannot do so without a creative process. Yet we must remember that Svevo is at the top of the narrative structure. His process of liberating Zeno from the confines of the standard novel indicate that he too may be creating in service of an image of the self.

V. WRITING THE AUTHOR

Through the plot of the novel and on multiple narrative levels, Zeno has sought control of his own narrative. Zeno does so not out of any sort of pathological behavior, but out of necessity to cope with a need to fulfill his self-crafted image, typically from the pressures of other characters. The confusion of his life and his crippling self-doubt lead him to cogitate on ways combat his psychological condition. We can elevate this concept to examine how Svevo is using the same process in his own understanding of his reality. This novel is not merely a way for Zeno to interface with an overwhelmingly complex reality in a new way; it is a way for Svevo to do the same. After descending into Svevo's text, we now return to the real life of Svevo in Trieste to examine the ways that Svevo elevates his literary output to the level of a new interface with reality. I will put Svevo back into context in Trieste and discuss the various ways that his city's history, compounded by his personal experiences as a Triestine, combined to create *La coscienza di Zeno*. We will then look at how Svevo lived beyond his time and the persisting identity struggles he was faced with as it relates to his literary output.

Svevo's early novels, *Una vita* and *Senilità*, bear striking resemblance to Zeno; both recount the lives of Triestini as they navigate their careers, love interests and families within the city of Trieste. Svevo constructs each novel with increasing skill in depicting the psychological states of the protagonists through various situations. The two early novels can be viewed as a progression of Svevo's experience because they include many elements of Svevo's life and experiences, as well as the dominating presence of Trieste. As with Zeno, Svevo focused on the confusing nature of the world around his characters, and, in the most reductive sense, he dealt with all the classic themes of modernist literature. Svevo's first novels seem lacking; *Una vita* reads as simplistic version of Zola, and *Senilità*, while much denser, does not fully demonstrate Svevo's talent for writing. Simona Micali addresses this

trend in Svevo's writings, suggesting that *Zeno* is the ultimate and most complete incarnation of Svevo's literary art; "Zeno's confession is actually the realization of Alfonso and Emilio's frustrated ambitions" (Micali 388). The similarity suggests Svevo is aiming at an overarching purpose for his literary output, and *Zeno*, his most successful, complex and famous novel, achieved the artistic statement that he labored over for decades. Camerino notes the progression of Svevo's work and highlights his structural choices:

Che i primi due romanzi siano scritti in terza persona, ma con sistematico ricorso al discorso indiretto libero, e il terzo sia scritto in prima persona, è già un dato molto significativo di un coerente, ma anche complesso sviluppo della ricerca di scrittura e di arte compositiva che si afferma in Svevo non negli ultimi anni, ma sin dai suoi inizi e sull'intero arco del suo cammino letterario. (Camerino 3)

That the first two novels were written in third person, but with a recurring free and indirect discourse. The third was written in first person, which is significant evidence of a coherent, but also complex development in the study of composed writing and art that can be found in Svevo, not in his final years, but from his beginnings and in the entire arc of his literary career.

The change in style suggests that his early works failed to fully express his literary ideas and that *Zeno* is the purest form of his vision.

The key aspects of *Zeno* are what elevate it above Svevo's previous work. Psychoanalysis is fundamental in analyzing the text itself and is also essential to its genesis. Michel David includes an entire chapter devoted to the Triestine writers in his work *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*, and he describes at length Svevo's discovery of psychoanalysis, which he dates to 1910–1912 (David 382). Of the many letters Svevo sent to his friend Valerio Jahier in 1927, one links his composition of the novel to his rediscovery of psychoanalysis. He speaks of his first attempt at a self-cure using psychoanalysis, writing,

“Se non altro da tale esperienza nacque il romanzo” (Svevo 858)¹. As the missing component in his lesser works, it is worth discussing why psychoanalysis had the impact it did on the novel. There is no doubt that psychoanalysis, beloved as it was in Trieste, was the impetus behind his work. It is clear that he was inspired by the science, but the novel indicates that he took it about as seriously as Zeno did. Svevo’s personal writings show that while he initially found psychoanalysis to be valuable as a practical science, he later changed his opinion after a negative personal experience with the treatment. He wrote as much in another letter to Jahier: “*Letterariamente* Freud è certo piú interessante” (Svevo 859)². David concludes, based on Svevo’s attitude toward psychoanalysis that “Freud è, in questo senso, piú prezioso per il romanziere che per il malatto” (David 388)³. Psychoanalysts and Svevo seemed to agree to disagree; he presented his work to Eduoardo Weiss, pioneer of psychoanalysis in Italy, who told Svevo that his novel conveyed very little valuable information on psychoanalysis. Svevo studied the science purely for artistic reasons. It was the missing element from his overall project as a writer and after incorporating it into his work, he was able to bring it to a higher intellectual level than his previous work. Psychoanalysis was mainly concerned with the study of the mind and one’s own psychological state; *Una vita* and *Senilità* are keenly focused on the same topics, yet they did not have the work of Freud to fully explicate that process. Psychoanalysis is also the inspiration for *Zeno’s* writing process. Dr. S. administered the task, hoping that “in tale rievocazione il suo passato si rinverdisse, che l’autobiografia fosse un buon preludio alla psico-analisi” (Svevo 5)⁴. Zeno’s creative project was jumpstarted by psychoanalysis as was Svevo’s.

As these parallels begin to emerge, Svevo resembles Zeno in much more profound ways. I have already noted the similarities between author and protagonist; they are both

¹“From such an experience the novel was born.”

²“Freud was certainly more interesting *from a literary perspective*.”

³“Freud is, in this sense, more precious for novelists than for the ill.”

⁴“In such a recollection his past is revived, such that autobiography was an excellent prelude to psychoanalysis.”

Triestini who have similar ambitions and inhibitions, evident from both the novel and Svevo's personal writings. Both are haunted by sickness, old age and a sense of inferiority. And both undertake significant writing projects to deal with their respective neuroses. The novel, like his early work, reads as an informal biography of the author. Much biographical criticism has been devoted to *La coscienza di Zeno*, as well as Svevo's other novels, but little has been done to elevate the discussion out of simple biography. The most striking aspect of Svevo's overall writing project is his relationship with his text and his characters. He moved towards a complete psychological portrait of a modern man and was ultimately aided in that ambition by Freud. But Svevo's project is far more fascinating and intricate than mere biographical criticism has thus far suggested. Svevo's own thoughts and writings match Zeno's, and there is a trend that suggests Svevo may have striven for more than simply writing an alternate story of his life.

Zeno was able to bring fictional elements into his real world and convince others of their authenticity. Whether that meant adorning his love interests with beautifying features or tarnishing his enemies with passive obstruction, Zeno was a master of mixing the real and the fictional to navigate life's confusion and reclaim his unstable narrative. Tedesco suggests that the key element to Svevo's work is its likeness to reality, claiming that Svevo's novel moves beyond a typical exploration of reality:

Una diversa concezione dei rapporti tra vita e arte, a quindi alla riscoperta dell'autobiografismo narrativo. Si dice riscoperta perchè si sa come, in generale, alla base di un'opera d'arte ci sia sempre un contenuto umano d'esperienze autobiografiche, e si sa pure come, in particolare, anche nel passato si siano scritte opere narrative e carattere autobiografico; ma la riscoperta, su basi nuove e moderne e personalissime, dell'autobiografismo con valore *tematico* e con modi particolari di analisi e di scrittura, è tutto merito, almeno in Italia, di Svevo. (Tedesco 436)

A different conception of the rapport between life and art, in order to rediscover the autobiographical narrative. One might say rediscover because as you know, in general, at the core of a work of art is always a human component of autobiographical experience, and as is also well known, in particular, even in the past many narratives were written of an autobiographical nature; but the rediscovery, on new, modern and very personal bases, of autobiographical writing as a *thematic* value with particular ways of analysis and writing, is entirely due, at least in Italy, to Svevo.

Therefore, Svevo's inclusion of autobiographical elements is more profound than a closeness to reality because it exists in the novel on a thematic level. The concept of autobiography as a method of revealing something of oneself is one of the key methods of psychoanalysis and the mode of Zeno in telling (and retelling) his story. Through the use of autobiography as a theme of the novel, "nell'evocazione interiore, la realtà acquista una nuova dimensione, non viene mai obliterata o anche semplicemente pretermessa" (438)⁵. The introspective nature of the novel gives reality 'una nuova dimensione' ('a new dimension') explored fully through Zeno's creative process. The contours of reality are not simply manipulated by Svevo for stylistic purposes; they are a main theme of the novel. Tedesco also links reality, in all its possible uses in fiction, to the process of writing an autobiography. It deepens the possibilities of a rapport with reality because it links personal experience to fiction. Zeno's creations in the novel are difficult to account for because they are interacting uniquely with reality. For example, Zeno tells the Malfentis fictional stories, but Augusta believes them to be true. In the end they become real: "Non so più dire in quanta parte perchè avendole raccontate a tante altre donne prima che alla figlie del Malfenti, esse, senza ch'io lo volessi, si alterarono per divenire più espressive" (84)⁶. They

⁵"in the interior evocation, reality acquires a new dimension, never obliterated or even neglected."

⁶"I can't say how many because I told them to other women many times before I told them to the Malfenti daughters, and against my will they were altered to become more expressive."

are not true in the traditional sense, but they become true and tell Zeno's story just as much as the truth. This is one example of many in the novel where Svevo is twisting the typical conception of autobiography as it relates to reality.

The creative possibilities of autobiography are clearly fascinating to Svevo and they raise the question of his true relationship to his text. Zeno in many ways resembles Svevo, but consider that Svevo also resembles Zeno in many regards, especially psychologically. Mario Fusco brings the relationship into question, writing,

La situazione principale della *Coscienza di Zeno* e la trama generale del romanzo sono abbastanza lontani dai dati della vita di Svevo. D'altra parte, la genesi del personaggio di Zeno, così come è evocata, presenta molti aspetti interessanti; Svevo tentava di identificarsi con il suo eroe, addottando il suo modo di fare e cercava in qualche modo di comportarsi come lui. In altre parole si calava in una *silhouette*, in un personaggio fittizio che gli serviva da sopporto, e tentava di vivere la sua vita, come fa l'attore con un ruolo teatrale. (Fusco 277)

The principal situation in *La coscienza di Zeno* and the general plot of the novel are distant enough from the facts of Svevo's life. On the other hand, the origin of the character of Zeno, as he is so evoked, presents many interesting traits; Svevo tried to identify himself with his hero, adopting his mannerism and trying to comport himself like Zeno. In other words, he descended into a *silhouette*, into a fictitious character that serves to sustain him, and he tries to live his life as if an actor in a theatrical role.

Fusco's interpretation suggests that it is possible for Zeno to tell the story of Svevo. Zeno and Svevo are complicating the typically one-way relationship between fiction and reality, extending the process to author and character. Svevo already established such a concept within the novel by freeing Zeno from the strict confines of reality when retelling his story.

The two walk in each others' steps, variously inhabiting each others' lives. In fact, Tullio Kezich compiled an entire volume on the premise that Svevo and Zeno lived parallel lives, appropriately entitled *Svevo e Zeno: Vite Parallele*, which includes two timelines compared point by point. The key to understanding this type of relationship is to be found in Svevo's personal writings. Svevo himself describes his process in writing the novel, characterizing it as follows:

E procedetti così: Quand'ero lasciato solo cercavo di convincermi d'essere io stesso Zeno. Camminavo come lui, come lui fumavo, e cacciavo nel mio passato tutte le sue avventure che possono somigliare alle mie solo perchè la rievocazione di una propria avventura è una ricostruzione che facilmente diviene una costruzione nuova del tutto quando si riesce a porla in un'atmosfera nuova. (Svevo 779)

I proceeded as such: when I was alone I tried to convince myself that I was Zeno. I walked like him, I smoked like him and I searched in my past for all of his adventures that could seem to be mine only because the reemerging of one of my own adventures is a reconstruction that easily becomes a new construction of everything when you can place it in a new atmosphere.

The possibilities for this perspective on fiction and reality are far-reaching and gives new weight to Zeno's unique method of creating fiction. Svevo is not merely an author who wrote a text that contained elements of himself. He is an author who uses literature as an entirely new method to interface with reality. Svevo is not inhabiting a character to explore his mindset for the purposes of verisimilitude; he actively searches for Zeno's life in his past and brings it to light. In this way, Svevo has transcended the literary process and has created a new way to interface with life and reality, the crystallization of a perspective on life and its anguishes brought about by "*triestinità*." This clarifies his rather uniform literary production preceding *Zeno* because psychoanalysis and the creative opportunities

it granted him through autobiography enabled him to engage with reality in a new way, augmented by personal experiences. Svevo's characters can be seen as a progressive evolution of his concept of reality; from the realism-inspired *Una vita*, to the ambiguous and psychologically enhanced *Senilità*, to the fully-formed and complex *Zeno*, we see Svevo developing his understanding of reality and the ways it can be manipulated. Svevo continued this concept through several of his short works after *Zeno*, such as *La novella del buon vecchio e della bella fanciulla*, which also explores similar themes of autobiography and the quest for health.

There are many nuances to this process of, as Machala calls it, "literaturization" of life. She suggests that *Zeno* "actually precedes and takes precedence over the writer," with the conclusion that "life imitates literature" (Machala 433). The ultimate implication is that we can read Svevo's life as a text, or rather we can read *Zeno* as an attempt to make sense of the world by crafting a novel using the ostensibly immiscible components of reality and fiction. And the continued writing project of three novels is a constant rewriting of his life; Machala again remarks of *Zeno*,

The repeated versions of his life which he experiences in writing, clearly will bring about a modification, almost a perfecting of the actual events he has lived through, so that progressively, the more he writes, the more valuable this written record will become. It is crucial to realize that for Svevo this kind of imaginative crystallization of parts of one's life is not meant in any way to falsify one's personal reality, but to render it more complete. (438)

Augusta's understanding of *Zeno*'s fictional stories mirrors this interpretation precisely. *Zeno* writes, "Ad Augusta apparvero perciò più preziose perchè, inventate da me, le sembrava fossero più mie che se il destino me le avesse inflitte" (84)⁷. *Zeno*'s life is an invention

⁷"They seemed all the more precious to Augusta because, as they were invented by me, to her they seemed more mine than if destiny had inflicted them upon me."

of Svevo's, and, while it clearly does not attempt to recall his entire life with accuracy, it gives Svevo's existence a more complete and personalized account.

Further supporting this concept, Micali opines,

Zeno admits that his memoirs are not the honest account of a life, his own, but rather an arbitrary selection of real facts, whose organization in a plot depends on the linguistic medium (plus other factors, which Zeno obviously prefers to conceal), and that, under different conditions, a different selection would produce a different plot and narration. (Micali 391)

Clearly Zeno's story is a product of a careful selection of details and influences. For Svevo, the "condition" under which he wrote his story was his unique experience as a Triestine and everything associated with "*triestinità*," a sense of a goal unfulfilled and the weight of history. A different experience would produce a text that hardly resembles *Zeno*. Genco also discusses the idea of a "literaturization" of life and connects it to a type of control, stating that the goal of writing is to understand oneself better, "che è il presupposto indispensabile per il conseguimento di un'autonomia e autentica capacità di gestire la propria volontà a la propria condotta" (126)⁸. We return to the idea of achieving control of a narrative through the construction of that narrative. The process of writing and analyzing oneself in turn strengthens the ability to control one's conduct. Svevo's writing project demonstrates this through his attempt to 'literaturize' his own life and Zeno's attempt to do the same.

At the risk of elevating Svevo's relationship with Zeno to complete abstraction, it is important to recall why a discussion about their complex relationship is useful. To do so, we must now return to the beginning — Trieste. The innovative approach to literature and reality explicated by Svevo are a direct result of the advent of psychoanalysis, and the exploration of the psyche. As previously stated, it is hardly coincidental that Svevo's literary endeavors were resuscitated by his discovery of psychoanalysis and the impact that it

⁸"which is the indispensable premise for the attainment of an autonomous and authentic capacity to manage one's own will and conduct."

had on Trieste was monumental, leading to the works of Saba, Slataper and even influencing James Joyce. Ultimately, *Zeno* is the artistic manifestation of Voghera's observations on the neurosis of the Triestini. The history of Trieste is defined by inability to reach one or the other, its suspension between two dreams. It was adorned with the hopes of a Mediterranean emporium and the locus of a brilliant new commercial experiment, only to be disrupted by the invasion of Napoleon and the Irredentist efforts. Attaching itself firmly to the dream of an Italian city proved to be equally disappointing and provided no solace to the city. It is perpetually stuck between two histories and two cultures. As Minca so aptly puts it,

Trieste is often described and represented today as a noble widow, a melancholy theatre of decline, the embodiment of the memory of a magnificent imperial project whose echoes still mark the city's identity discourses. This sense of a composed decadence haunts the city in countless ways and leaves some visitors with the nagging sensation of something that could have been, but has not and perhaps never will. (Minca 257)

Minca may be correct in his assertion that the city may never reach a place of equilibrium because it suffers under the weight of such an intense and fractured history. The onset of Fascism and World War I exacerbated the problems to the level of daily consciousness, which was occurring during the time of Svevo's most prolific output as an author.

And yet this process and tension gave rise to Svevo and his work. Smothered by the sense of multiple realities, he became a creator of such. Unable, like most Triestini, to make sense of his complicated history, Svevo made it his intellectual project to create a new one. Svevo, like Zeno, is taking control of the unstable narrative of Trieste through the creation of fiction. Zeno uses multiple techniques to craft his own image in search of a narrative of legitimacy and control. Svevo does the same: using the raw materials of "*triestinità*," that sense of a lack of fulfillment, he controls the narrative of his experience

and codifies the experience of being Triestine. His attempt was successful: he created the defining masterpiece of the city's considerable intellectual community and a classic of Italian literature. The usage of the medium of writing is Svevo's new way of interfacing with his world by disrupting the rules of reality.

"*Triestinità*" permeates Svevo's project, including his protagonist. History can only define "*triestinità*" in a factual way; Svevo's novel provides a complete psychological portrait. The Triestini were so taken by psychoanalysis because it allowed them to enter to realm of the mind and into many ways tear back the curtain of illusion to discover the source of their confusion. Voghera certainly seems to suggest as much. His experience with the incurable neurosis of the Triestini and their severe anguish at the historical and political turmoil of the "anni della psicanalisi" can be seen on every page of *Zeno*. Take for example the role of the antagonist in Zeno's life, inhabited by his father and Guido. The conflict between the two is a key determinant in Svevo's discomfort; again, Voghera describes "una grottesca facciata di stolte ambizioni, di impulsi aggressivi, di inutili volontà di sopraffazione, che mascherava tutto un complesso di istinti e di terrori infantili ed animaleschi, di sensi di inferiorità inconsci" (4)⁹. The retreat into psychoanalysis and into the mind experienced by the Triestines, according to Voghera, was a direct reaction to a terrifying historical and emotional reality in the face of great aggression, which is precisely Zeno's method to cope with a debilitating sense of inferiority. And the Triestines flocked to psychoanalysis with the same fervor and hope with which Zeno tries a new cure for any of his habits, whether it be smoking or illness; "La psicanalisi dava finalmente un volto ben definito al loro male, ne indicava le cause, faceva balenare qualche vaga speranza di guarigione" (3-4)¹⁰. The novel serves not only as a way for Svevo to interface with reality, but it also works as a barometer for the emotional landscape of a city in great turmoil over

⁹a grotesque façade of silly ambitions, of aggressive impulses, of useless will for oppression, that masked everything in a web of instincts and childish and animalistic terrors, of a sense of unconscious inferiority."

¹⁰"Psychoanalysis gave a well-defined face to their unease, suggested the cause of it, and hinted at a vague hope for cure."

identity issues.

The reception of the novel is worth discussing in the context of this analysis because the ultimate dream of Svevo, another narrative toward which he constantly moved, the accomplishment that would give him total health, was recognition within the canon of Italian literature. If we are to read the text of Svevo's life as inextricable from his literary production, most specifically *Zeno*, this area must be discussed. Svevo eventually gained popularity in 1925 when his work was championed in French literary circles. Valère Larbaud, a French writer and literary critic, contacted Svevo about his work, which he received through James Joyce (Furbank 119). Larbaud's work led to huge success for *Zeno* in France. Eugenio Montale, who frequented Paris and its literary salons, discovered Svevo's work and was the first Italian critic to create a favorable discussion of Svevo's work within Italy, despite the early negative reception. Svevo had finally fulfilled his dream of achieving literary recognition within Italy, only to die himself in 1928, at the height of his fame.

In many ways, the acknowledgment of the novel by critics is the ultimate chapter in the dual life of Svevo and *Zeno*. Unfortunately, Svevo's legacy is likened to his city of origin and the politics associated with it. The intellectual topics popular in Trieste found no favor or counterpart elsewhere in Italy, least of all its literary capital, Florence. Brian Moloney notes the reception, along with the classification of Svevo, citing his unique influences;

Non possono limitarsi a studiare il triestino nel contesto della letteratura nazionale, bensì affrontare una ricerca comparata, rintracciando forme, tendenze, ideologie che Svevo ha in comune con la letteratura francese, tedesca ed inglese. (Moloney 20–21)

We cannot limit ourselves to studying the Triestine in the context of a national literature but we must consider a comparative study, retracing forms, tendencies, ideologies that Svevo has in common with French, German and

English literature.

Svevo had access to an array of discourses, if only because of his upbringing with knowledge of all mentioned languages and the dense culture of Trieste. The reception of Freudian psychoanalysis was negative and the city was closely associated with the new science. The reasons for the poor reception of psychoanalysis — religion, politics and Fascism — applied to Svevo and were compounded by his association with Trieste.

His influences are Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud rather than Dante, Carducci and Manzoni. The distance between Svevo and his contemporaries is perhaps the most crucial factor in his reception. Scholar Franco Petroni writes, “La principale ragione dell’ostilità o dell’indifferenza della critica ufficiale del suo tempo sta però, più che negli occasionali errori di sintassi, del resto molto spesso giustificati da ragioni espressive, nel fatto che Svevo, sia per gli argomenti dei suoi romanzi che per le scelte formali, era lontano dalla tradizione italiana” (275)¹¹. Petroni’s description of the reaction as hostile is apt; Svevo’s novel was criticized in many regards, most tracing back to Trieste and his usage of Triestine dialect in writing the novel. Svevo’s ties to Trieste also kept him uncomfortably close to an area of Italy that was not considered classically acceptable.

I raise the question of whether *Zeno* belongs within the canon of Italian literature given how different his influences and output were. I find it fitting that *Zeno* concerns itself so intensely with legitimacy and fulfillment, only to find itself on the outside of elite literary conversations in Italy. Based on his influences, Svevo is closer to Middle European literary trends, which is not surprising given the foundational role Freud plays in the construction of the text. In a complete analysis of Svevo’s work as it relates to Middle Europe, entitled *Italo Svevo e la crisi della mitteleuropa*, Giuseppe Antonio Camerino lists the qualities of Svevo’s work that classify it as Middle European. He writes,

¹¹“The chief reason for the hostility and indifference from official critics in his time was more than occasional syntactical errors, but mostly was justified by expressive reasons, in that fact that Svevo, more in his the subject of his works than in formal decisions, was very distant from the tradition of Italian literature.”

La prima riguarda il modo d'agire automatico dei protagonisti, i quali sembrano goffamente sbagliare sempre i tempi delle loro azioni, spesso inconsapevoli delle stesse e a volte guidati da impulsi sottratti al controllo della volontà, per cui finiscono per conoscere nel migliore dei casi solo a posteriori l'esito del loro agire, cercando anche consolazione e autoinganno. La seconda costante riguarda il conflitto ineludibile tra i cosiddetti sani e attivi e i cosiddetti malati o inetti o presunti incapaci o contemplativi, del tutto negati alla vita pratica. La terza costante riguarda la predilezione dell'analisi interiore nei protagonisti e il senso di strenua autodifesa delle proprie particolarità e singolarità (come le presunte malattie). (Camerino 194)

The first factor is the typical behavior of the protagonist, which seems to always clumsily mistake the timing of his actions, often unconscious of himself and at times is guided by impulses out of his control so that in most cases he ends up knowing only the posterior outcomes of their behavior, searching also for consolation and self-deception. The second factor is the inescapable conflict between the so-called healthy and active and the so-called sick and inept, or those presumed incapable and contemplative, denied of practical existence. The third factor is the predilection for interior analysis displayed by the protagonist and the sense of strenuous self-defensiveness of their own particularities and singularities (which are presumed to be illnesses).

The three factors listed by Camerino, including key themes of Svevo's, such as ineptitude and the tendency towards introspective examination, suggest that the worldview of Svevo coincides with a Middle European sensibility. Aside from that fact that these aspects are fundamental to Zeno's characters and plots, as Camerino indicates, they all have a similar theme; "È evidente che tali costanti si rilevano strettamente collegate e nella rappresentazione narrativa riflettono assai spesso quell'umorismo che deriva dal contrasto tra realtà e

apparenza”¹² (194). The main concerns of *Zeno* revolve around the conflict between reality and the images of Zeno (‘apparenza’), again linking it to a canon altogether different than the Italian canon.

Scholar Arduino Agnelli investigated the original concept of “Mitteleuropa” on a geographical level, specifically citing Trieste as a major locus of the concept. He writes, “L’intersecarsi di genti diverse, senza che un profilo nazionale prevalga sugli altri, può essere il dato riscontrabile in un momento iniziale del processo di sviluppo di una città, destinato scomparire, non appena i suoi abitanti sono in grado di fornire prove più valide della loro capacità d’esprimersi” (242)¹³, discussing the idea of the effects of such a cultural climate and “gli effettivi soggetti di storia”¹⁴ on peoples of that area. Agnelli’s analysis of Trieste relies heavily on the foundations provided by Lorenz von Stein, who claimed, “il punto d’unificazione delle linee che vanno da Nord a Sud ed all’inverso al tempo stesso l’intera costa marittima meridionale della Mitteleuropa, condensata in una sola città, è Trieste” (von Stein)¹⁵. Trieste can be seen as potentially the most pure of locations within Middle Europe because it effectively acts as the literal crossroads, physically and culturally, of the two sides of Europe.

And yet Svevo still is restricted from other authors of the Middle European canon, such as Kafka and Proust. The element of “*triestinità*” contains aspects of Italian culture that separate Svevo even further from other authors of that canon. The only canon that Svevo appears to inhabit is the Triestine. Svevo initiated what many consider to be the golden age of Triestine literature, a genre all its own. If Svevo’s qualifications for inclusion within the canon of Italian literature or the canon of Middle European literature are

¹²“It is evident that such aspects reveal themselves as closely linked and in their representation within the narrative often reflect that humor that is derived from the contrast between reality and appearance”

¹³“The intersection of different peoples, without a national profile imposed upon them, can be verifiable evidence in the initial moment of the process of development of a city, destined to vanish, as its inhabitants are hardly able to establish valid proof of their capacity to express themselves,”

¹⁴“The subjective effects of history”

¹⁵“The point of unity for the routes that run from North to South and in reverse for the entirety of the southern maritime coast of Middle Europe, condensed into one city, is in Trieste.”

in question, surely he must belong in the unique genre of literature devoted specifically to explicating “*triestinità*.” Bruno Maier’s *Saggi sulla letteratura triestina del novecento* provides an introduction to this unique genre and highlights some of the commonalities and typical themes. He describes the literature preceding Svevo and his contemporaries as “quasi sempre mediocre e uscì solo di rado dal livello dell’improvvisazione e dell’oratoria, pur se adempì storicamente un meritorio ufficio d’incitamento alla lotta nazionale” (5)¹⁶. The political issues that captivated the city resulted in a literature that was solely political in nature. Yet Svevo is credited with bringing the discourse of Triestine literature to the human level. Maier describes this shift:

L’immissione nelle forme letterarie di una vita intimamente vissuta e sofferta, di un complesso di problemi umani suggeriti da un’assidua, coraggiosa, spregiudicata analisi interiore, di essere «come gli altri», e della difficoltà, del dolore, dell’ammarezza che la costituzionale incapacità di realizzare una simile aspirazione comporta, si ha nei due romanzi giovanili dello Svevo, *Una vita* (1892) e *Senilità* (1898). Fin da quel momento lo scrittore pone l’uomo al centro dei suoi libri: l’uomo in relazione o, piuttosto, in conflitto con il mondo che l’attornia; l’uomo che soffre della sua irrimediabile, fatale condizione di «vinto» o di «superfluo»; che solo con la fantasia, in una sfera di solitaria evasione, riesce ad attuare i propri sogni, al coperto dalle insidie della realtà nemica. (5)

The introduction of literary forms about an intimately experienced and suffered life, a complex of human problems raised by diligent, courageous, unrestrained interior analysis, of being like the others, of difficulty, of sadness, of texture that the constitutional incapacity to realize a similar aspiration brings, can be found in the two first novels of Svevo, *Una vita* (1892) and

¹⁶“almost always mediocre and rarely deviated from the realms of improvisation and oratory, while historically fulfilling themselves as worthy of official praise for their encouragement of the national struggle.”

Senilità (1898). From that moment onward, the writer placed man at the center of his works: the man in relation, rather, in conflict with the world around him; the man that suffers from his incurable, fatale condition of “winning” or of “being unnecessary”; that only with fantasy, in the sphere of solitary evasion, can he fulfill his dreams, all under the weight of the pitfalls of a hostile reality.

Maier’s conclusions establish Svevo as one of the key progenitors of the genre of Triestine literature and describes the effect that “*triestinità*” had upon the city’s writers. The idea of “la costituzionale incapacità di realizzare una simile aspirazione comporta”¹⁷ is a key concept that is specific to “*triestinità*.” Svevo defined how “*triestinità*” could serve as inspiration and thematic material for works of literature coming out of the city. I raise the issue of the classification of Svevo’s work within a particular canon because Trieste has largely attached its identity to literature and the literary process. The above mentioned authors have defined the city and all its uniqueness in a way that history or politics never could. A string of influential authors followed in Svevo’s wake and they continued the trend of interfacing with their city and culture in different ways. Scholar Rosa Fasan notes that “Gli intellettuali triestini del Novecento vivevano d’arte e vivevano nell’arte” (Fasan 1)¹⁸, a relationship that took reality into account in many of the ways Svevo did through *Zeno*. It would be reductive to classify Svevo as anything other than an innovative author that is a product of his city’s wide panorama of influences and unique history. In this way, the Triestine writers, led by Svevo, gained control of the unstable narrative of their city’s history and funneled “*triestinità*” into a canon of literature that has defined the city and established a legitimate and complex legacy of ingenuity.

Svevo has attained the status of an author that is inseparable from his city, much like Kafka’s Prague, Zola’s Paris, and Joyce’s Dublin. The experiences of these authors

¹⁷“the constitutional incapacity to realize a similar aspiration brings”

¹⁸“The Triestine intellectuals of the twentieth century live art and lived in art,”

have defined their cultural environments and have become a crucial part of their legacy. Despite this relationship with European authors, Svevo demands inclusion within the canon of Italian literature because Italy's most famous authors have become known for writing of their respective regions. For example, Giovanni Verga captured the complicated history and rugged aspect of Sicilian life in *I Malavoglia* and has contributed to the 'image' of Sicily in many ways. Cesare Pavese wrote extensively of the fertile countryside of The Langhe in his poetry and prose, which highlighted the uniqueness of Piedmont. Much of D'Annunzio's poetry is rooted in the Abruzzo region and tells of the lush greenery in "La pioggia nel pineto," while exalting the pastoral nature of the region in "I pastori." These writers have created an image of their regions which now serves as a focal point for their identity. The canon of Italian literature is filled with regional authors that are classified together on the basis of their ability to capture the diversity of Italian culture. While Svevo may not describe a city or lifestyle that is stereotypically Italian, he does receive inspiration from the peculiarities of his history. Therefore, he works within the smaller canon of Triestine literature, but still belongs to the legacy of regionalism that is a fundamental aspect of Italian literature.

CONCLUSION

The progression of instability in Svevo's work begins in Trieste and filters down through history until its boiling point during the years of Svevo, or the years of psychoanalysis. The varied history gives rise to a definitive sense of "*triestinità*" that creates a twisted reality felt by the key authors of the early nineteenth century. The author Svevo cannot fully express his experience as a Triestine until psychoanalysis provides an outlet for his difficulty with reality. *La coscienza di Zeno* emerges from the discovery of psychoanalysis and the process of writing the novel allows Svevo to interface with his past and present in a way that frees him from the constraints of time, reality and truth. Zeno can be read on a textual level as Zeno's dealing with reality and creation, but also a literal level of Svevo doing the same. The novel is a successful attempt to move beyond fiction and allow himself and his character to alternately take precedence. Enveloping Svevo and his novel is Trieste, which created the intellectual environment necessary for the author to distort the format of the novel dictated by the Italian canon, yet retain enough of its traces to be considered in the discussion.

Svevo has done much to expand and explore many themes inherent to modernist literature, but his true contribution to the literary world extends far beyond the confines of a novel. My extensive exploration of Svevo's proclivity for enhancing reality is indicative of his ability to make a text matter as more than simply an intellectually stimulating novel. Readers are privy to a complex psychological process of envisioning a world of contradictions, aggression and questions of identity. Furthermore, Svevo has crafted a novel describing the human experience in a place such as Trieste. While the novel contains many references to physical places within the city, to which readers can follow Zeno in a physical sense, Svevo's work more fittingly serves as a psychological portrait of a unique place at a unique time. Svevo is endlessly sympathetic to his fellow Triestines and has a deep com-

prehension of their struggle. And lest we lose track of Svevo's ability to double everything, the process of his own struggles informing his work functions in reverse; in many ways *La coscienza di Zeno* has made Trieste and created an alternate version of the city. As mentioned, I myself visited Trieste with a map of the city already created in my mind by Svevo. I could not escape Zeno's presence at every turn, whether that be in the contradictory architecture, the many monuments to Svevo and his fellow writers or the caf  s where they wrote and discussed literature. Zeno put Trieste on the map in an intellectual sense and helped give a face to a city that for centuries was identified by its relation to other, greater nations. Trieste is Svevo's Trieste, and the author is the main attraction of the city.

I mentioned that Svevo's contribution lay beyond the confines of a novel and the proof is in everything that is Zeno around Trieste. Svevo, like his character, is able to have it both ways. He can operate with high-minded ideas such as those of Freud and Schopenhauer, yet his text can be taken to the streets for analysis. An understanding of Zeno is a fitting tutorial of Trieste and life there during the 19th century. The novel serves as a crossroads between any number of concepts, whether that be 19th century history, Middle European intellectual trends, Italian language or even the culture of transient border cities. *Zeno* is now considered to be an Italian classic. It stood the test of time and has been reevaluated as groundbreaking work and esteemed as highly as any other traditionally Italian novel. As I discussed, this change hardly came overnight and Svevo had to struggle with making his work known to the world outside of Italy before he could gain recognition within it. Trieste also gained legitimacy with the Italians and has since been annexed into Italy as Italian.

I was fortunate to be able to explore the current culture of Trieste through my travels there and made the acquaintance of a local. My initial impetus for this project came about as a result of the insider view of Trieste that I was given, a rare privilege in a place that lacks the tourism of most other major Italian cities. This afforded me the opportunity to see

specifically how life compared to what I read in Svevo's novel. I was fascinated to find that despite the fictional nature of Svevo's novel, "*triestinità*," was immediately palpable in the city and its inhabitants. They seem to have a constant sense of mobility or unsettledness. The word I often heard used was 'trasloco' ('moving') which is a sense of removal or constant transfer. In many ways, Trieste is a modern Italian city with a thriving local culture and in many others it will always be relegated to its fractured past. I find that the Triestini sense this and are able to embrace everything that is there now while balancing it with everything that has been, which they construct into a unique cultural identity. Svevo's role in establishing the attitude of Triestines toward their past and history is formidable and his work is a source of local pride.

And yet despite the intensity and seriousness of Svevo's struggle as an author, parallel to the struggle of the city through history, "*triestinità*" contains an undertone of wit that enables the Triestini to outsmart even the most daunting legacy. Svevo's strength as an author is his ability to quickly disassemble an intense situation with a single ironic observation. Perhaps the most famous line from the entirety of *La coscienza di Zeno* is as follows: "La vita non è né brutta né bella, ma è originale!"¹⁹ (Svevo 335). There is no more fitting way to describe the attitude of the Triestini and their perspective; life cannot be reduced to the rigid confines of good or bad. It is far more complicated and subjective. And certainly the same can be said of Svevo and Zeno; their attempts to stabilize their realities are not based on the components of beauty or ugliness, but rather the ingenious and original combination of both.

¹⁹"Life is neither beautiful nor ugly, but original!"

APPENDIX

. . . Trieste has a surly
grace. If it is pleasing,
it is so like a ravenous and harsh delinquent,
with blue eyes and hands too big
to present a flower;
Like love
with jealousy.
From this hill every church, every one of its streets
I can see, whether it leads to the cluttered beach,
or to the hills which, on the rocky
summit, the last house clings to.
Around,
enveloping everything,
is a strange air, a tormented air,
the native air.

My city, which is alive in every way,
has made a nook for my life,
pensive and shy . . .

-from "Trieste" by Umberto Saba

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