

Anti-pathos: On Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience*

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There is only one small difference of opinion between Augusta and me: what is the proper way of treating troublesome children. I always feel that a baby's sufferings are less important than ours, and that it is worthwhile making it suffer if by that means a grown-up person can be saved a great deal of annoyance; she, however, takes the view that having brought children into the world we have got to put up with them.

Zeno

The evil of ordinary resentment is the price man pays for a first glimmer of lucidity, for eating of the tree of knowledge.

Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox*

I. Mimetic Zeno: survival and power

La coscienza di Zeno (1923), translated into English by Beryl de Zoete after discovery by James Joyce (*Confessions of Zeno*, 1930), and retranslated by William Weaver (*Zeno's Conscience*, Everyman's Library, 2001, used here) is a well known Italian novel. Italian criticism has much enlarged on and argued over it, and now views Italo Svevo's book as one of the most innovative and important narratives of the twentieth century. But Svevo's writing being unstylish (dialogues are clumsy, vocabulary is limited, there are many errors of form, etc.), criticism has made many very different arguments for his greatness as a writer, none of them very persuasive. (Italo Svevo's real name was Ettore Schmitz, his family was a Jewish family living in Trieste, the chief port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire till 1918; little Ettore, born in 1861, spoke first Triestine dialect, then studied in a commercial German school, so that Italian was his third language.) Poet Eugenio Montale, for instance, said Svevo was the greatest Italian novelist of our time, and that "there is no modern author who extended the knowledge of the human soul more than Svevo." But since this criticism isn't familiar with Mimetic Theory, not to mention Generative Anthropology, the underlying reasons for Svevo's significance are still virtually unrecognized. Here I shall try to demonstrate how *Zeno's Conscience* points out the modern market's predicament as a

Darwinian-fighting-for-survival terrain from which violence is only partially removed and deferred, and where there is no place for sentiments like sympathy or mercy. The leitmotiv of all Svevo's works is mimetic resentment, which all forms of exchange can only increase, while deferring violence at the same time, until the saturation point is reached.

Zeno's Conscience indeed begins with evidence of a particular (and impossible) resentment, that of psychoanalyst doctor S. toward his own patient, Zeno. The doctor declares his intention to publish his patient's memoirs "and I hope he is displeased" (3). The novel ends with a manifestation of absolute resentment: mankind is regarded as a parasitic mass, of which Earth should be catastrophically purged. If Svevo's work as a whole lies under the sign of resentment, and if the disguising strategy (partially failed) of Zeno, who manipulates his own memory—a strategy accurately investigated by criticism—is rooted not so much in a misunderstood Oedipus complex as in a more fundamental problematic, then it is necessary to subject this novel to a closer scrutiny. It will reveal the signs of a collapse of bourgeois identity *qua* something historically definite, a breakdown as well of traditional mimetic mechanisms (a crisis our postmillennial world is consummating), and yet this survey will be particularly concerned with highlighting the real nature of these mimetic mechanisms. In my opinion, *Zeno's Conscience* is the most conspicuous example within twentieth-century Italian literature of penetration—albeit only partially lucid—into what constitutes the crux of human relations: mimetic inter- and intra-subjective rivalry. Here lies the true greatness of Svevo's novel. In this paper I can't deal with the questions regarding the novel's intricate pattern; instead, my goal will be to show how it lends itself to Mimetic Theory-based investigation, and how René Girard and Eric Gans can give us guidelines for an anthropological understanding of Zeno as a character and as a human specimen. Zeno, in fact, represents the twentieth century self as striving for its own escape from the boundaries of the Jewish and Christian revelations.

It is absolutely necessary always to distinguish between appetite and desire. While the first belongs also to animals, desire is properly only human. Sexual desire itself, as Gans notes, "as opposed to the sexual appetite, is desire before being sexual."[\(1\)](#) In the decades gone by, a lot of criticism has gotten lost in a tangle of paths, difficult to follow, faint or even aporetic, ending with embroidering the signs of fetishism discoverable in the novel's text, thus losing contact (or never reaching it) with the primary reality, that of desire itself, and not being able to understand the necessity, very strong in Zeno, of contrast with a mimetic rival, a necessity of mimesis that makes models and rivals rise one after the other in an infinite process.

2

Zeno seems to me first and foremost to be a master of resentment, a resentment that in him mingles with desire in an inextricable knot. He feels different from others:

Even when I was not thinking of my mistress, I still thought of her in the sense that I craved her forgiveness for thinking of other women as well. Other men leave this mistress disillusioned and despairing of life. I have never known life without desire, and illusions sprang up afresh for me after every shipwreck of my hopes, for I was always dreaming of limbs, of gestures, of a voice more perfect still. (399)

This is one of the keys of this book—Svevo's Don Juanism. Zeno's desire for women is restless and unlimited.

I was not satisfied with one or even with many; I desired them all! (13) . . . my dying eyes will be lifted in desire to the nurse by my death-bed, supposing she does not happen to be my wife, and that my wife allows me to have a pretty one! (14)

This unlimited desire, this unrestricted psychic urge to possess females, is in itself somehow primitive. Yet it is the expression not so much of the need to confirm a dubious potency through brutal sexual actions as that of a Power which feels threatened by death and therefore craves only its own survival (Canetti):

Hitherto my way of approach to the women I had had to do with had been quite different. I had put my hands on them at once without asking anyone's permission. (81)

Perhaps I didn't mention my virtue because I was constantly being unfaithful to Augusta in my thoughts, and even now, speaking to Copler, with a shudder of desire I thought of all the women that I was neglecting on her account. I thought of the women hurrying along the streets, all bundled up, and whose secondary sexual organs for that reason became too important, whereas those of woman possessed then vanished as if possession had atrophied them. I still felt keenly the desire for adventure: that adventure that began with the admiration of a boot, a glove, a skirt, of all that covers and alters shape (173-174).

This Power in a simple middle class bourgeois such as Zeno finds a possibility of residual display, as regards the immediately sexual, only in clumsily seductive behaviors, which sometimes verge on paedophilia (the young girl Teresina, at the end of the novel), or entail the mediation of money (his mistress Carla, etc.). Moreover, it's important to bear in mind that Zeno always thinks about death, and this is a thought absolutely and purely selfish, stemming from archaic selfishness, bound to the idea of survival, as is revealed by the remark to his father when he tells him that he has made his will:

I'll never have to undergo that nuisance, because I hope all my heirs will die before me! (36)

The fear of ageing is linked by Zeno himself to a kind of jealousy (151): his wife could get into another's hands—just like all his possessions, we may add. Actually "The moment of

survival is the moment of power," says Elias Canetti in *Masse und Macht*,⁽²⁾ where we find a passage that clarifies Zeno's attitude towards his rival/brother-in-law/business partner Guido's death.

The moment of survival is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. It is as though there had been a fight and the one had struck down the other. In survival, each man is the enemy of every other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this elemental triumph. Whether the survivor is confronted by one dead man or by many, the essence of the situation is that he feels unique. He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of uniqueness and from nothing else.

All man's designs on immortality contain something of this desire for survival. He does not only want to exist for always, but to exist when others are no longer there. He wants to live longer than everyone else, and to know it; and when he is no longer there himself, then his name must continue.

The lowest form of survival is killing. As a man kills an animal for food, and cuts bits from it as it lies defenseless on the ground and divides it for himself and his kin to devour, so also, and in the same manner, he seeks to kill anyone who stands in his way, or sets himself up against him as an enemy. He wants to strike him down so that he can feel that he still stands while the other lies prostrate. But this other must not disappear completely; his physical presence as a corpse is indispensable for the feeling of triumph. Now the victor can do whatever he wants with him, and he cannot retaliate, but must lie there, never to stand upright again. His weapon can be taken away and pieces cut from his body and kept forever as trophies. This moment of confronting the man he has killed fills the survivor with a special kind of strength. There is nothing that can be compared with it, and there is no moment which more demands repetition.

3

What can't be performed again in reality becomes an object of a recalling ritual repetition, and hence an object of narrative repetition. Narration re-presents endlessly the high point of triumph. Lying prostrate, whereas the subject stands alive and well, the rival's physical body will give way to its representation within the transcendental world of signs, in the linguistic-narrative universe.

If we compare to this Canetti passage the famous "Hymn to Health" that erupts from Zeno after Guido's funeral (which he misses), we clearly see how this fundamental anthropological truth is interwoven with Zeno's consciousness.

That day the weather had turned fine again. A splendid spring sun was shining, and, in the still-soaked countryside, the air was clear and healthy. My lungs, taking the exercise I hadn't allowed myself for several days, swelled. I was all health and strength. Health is evident only through comparison. I compared myself to poor Guido and I climbed, higher and higher, with my victory in the very struggle where he had fallen. All was health and strength around me. The country, too, with its young grass. The long and abundant watering, the other day's catastrophe, now produced only beneficent effects, and the luminous sun was the warmth desired by the still frozen earth. Surely, the more we moved away from the catastrophe, the more disagreeable that blue sky would be, unless it could darken in time. But this was the forecast of experience and I didn't remember it; it grips me only now as I write. At that moment there was in my spirit only a hymn to my health and all of nature's: undying health. (392)

I shall make a point that will be hereafter confirmed: the comparison Zeno sees as a source of health is first of all a confrontation, an antagonistic relation between two competitive subjects. He is always driven to enter the lists.

Zeno proves to be fully aware of the true nature of desire. He knows that the objects on which it centers have no autonomous existence, being mere creatures of desire itself.

I was dealing with the simplest of girls, but thanks to my dreams of her, she appeared to me as the most consummate flirt. (82)

It is true that now I wanted all of Ada, whose cheeks I had assiduously polished, whose hands and feet I had made smaller, whose figure I had thinned and refined. I desired her as wife and as lover. But the way a woman is approached the first time is decisive. (84)

Thinking about Ada, whom he presumes he has freely taken as his own wife, the protagonist says:

She was the woman I had chosen, she was therefore already mine, and I adorned her with all my dreams, so that the prize of my life would appear more beautiful to me. I adorned her, I bestowed on her all the many qualities I lacked and whose need I felt, because she was to become not only my companion but also my second mother, who would adopt me for a whole lifetime of manly struggle and victory. (81)

For Zeno, a virile life is one based on confrontation and clash with other men; fight is necessary, victory desirable. Zeno's basic models are three. Of these, two are differently ideal; the first, abstract and ideological, is the Nietzschean-Darwinian victor in the fight for life and domination. The second, which we may call *local*, is the Triestine bourgeois and successful entrepreneur. Third we find the Girardian model-obstacle, here figured by Guido. As Eric Gans writes in *Signs of Paradox*, "mimesis itself defines a hierarchy, however

unstable, between subject-self and other-model, and this hierarchy is the basis upon which all others are founded.”(3) In the case of Zeno this hierarchy is extremely unstable, since the first model-mediator of desire for him is Guido, actually a weak personality, who’s unsure about what to do, and whom Zeno certainly chooses simply because from the outset he looks vulnerable. Indeed, to defeat Guido seems to be an easy task.

II. Guido: rival equal and violence deferred

In the eyes of Zeno, Guido Speier is an equal rival. The closest thing to a brother is a brother-in-law. Actually the core of this novel is not the Oedipal relation with the father, about which too much has been written by those who have been lured into the deadly traps set by Svevo’s text. The core of this novel is brotherly antagonism; its subject is doubling, doubles and their endless proliferation.

Svevo seems to be perfectly conscious that appropriative desire alone does not trigger rivalry, and his novel shows indisputable evidence of this consciousness. For instance, when Zeno feels himself compelled to counter the little fables composed by Guido, in competing for the admiration of Carmen-the secretary of the “business partnership” and Guido’s mistress-by telling better fables than his brother-in-law’s, the writer says something crucial:

What did I have to do with this? I didn’t have to fight to win Carmen’s admiration, which, as I have said, meant nothing to me; but remembering my behavior then, I have to believe that even a woman who is not an object of our desire can drive us to fight. In fact, didn’t the medieval heroes fight over women they had never seen? To me that day it so happened that the shooting pains in my poor organism suddenly became acute, and I thought I could alleviate them only by dueling with Guido, immediately writing some fables of my own. (308)

4

The model-rival precedes the object of desire, which one chooses just because it is desired by him. Given Zeno’s evident drive to deceive (other characters, readers, and himself), hence without stretching Svevo’s text (but this text is always conducive to demystification), we may suppose that in fact the protagonist got to know Guido first, and Ada only later on. As he states: “I would have hated him even if Ada hadn’t been present” (109). It’s hard to figure a rivalry more unambiguously declared.

But behind us a hesitant call was heard: “Signorina! May I -?”

I turned, outraged. Who dared interrupt the explanations that I hadn’t yet begun? A beardless young gentleman, dark-haired, pale, was looking at her with anxious eyes. In my turn I also looked at Ada, in the mad hope that she would call on me for assistance. A sign from her would have been enough to make me fall upon this individual and

demand an explanation of his audacity. And if only he were to persist! My ailments would have been cured at once had I been allowed to give free rein to a brutal act of force.

But Ada didn't make that sign. With a spontaneous smile that slightly altered the line of her cheeks and mouth and also the light in her eyes, she held out her hand. "Signor Guido!"

That given name hurt me. Only a short time before, she had addressed me by my surname.

I took a closer look at this Signor Guido. He was dressed with an affected elegance, and in his gloved right hand he held a walking stick with a very long ivory handle, which I would never have carried, not even if they were to pay me a sum for every kilometer. I didn't reproach myself for having actually considered such a person a threat to Ada. There are some shady characters who dress elegantly and carry similar canes. (108)

Here the ambivalence of Guido's character is in full view, an ambivalence that will last until the end. His entry is marked by expressions of utter repugnance. His eyes are anxious, an evident sign of weakness, as is also his pallor, while we should notice that the stick, brassy as it is, is a token of strength, evoking shady characters clearly inclined to violence. Girard taught us, developing Max Scheler's lesson, that the model who is an object of resentment is always at the same time idealized, to the extent that to him are attached signs of a superiority he objectively does not have, and together with them, negative features equally unreal.

This passage reveals also another important point: Zeno has a drive to the use of force, to aggression, but never yields to this drive, because his socio-psychological and cultural condition doesn't allow him to be openly violent, and he always defers his violence through language. Thus language in him performs the function defined by Generative Anthropology.

In spite of his frequent protestations of close friendship with his brother-in-law, whom Zeno comes to proclaim his own "closest friend" (392), the novel's text is peppered with many expressions of enmity. Guido is "disliked" (112), "fool," "genuine fool" (119, 120), "charlatan" (128), "a fool whose every word shows what a jackass he is" (132), "a clever fool . . . also truly foolish" (310), "a boy," "a child," (340, 341), "nauseating and unmanly" (368).

In regard to the model-rival's ambivalence, the event in Via Belvedere is illuminating (141-48). "He was a very important person for me, and I would have been unable to refuse him anything" (141), Zeno says, beginning the narration of the fateful walk that will bring him to the threshold of homicide. After these words the text recounts that for Zeno "Guido's company was downright terrible" (142), and that in the conversation the protagonist contrives to sting him severely. But immediately they "were friends again" (143). Then the

narrator-protagonist claims to have listened, "with admiration" for his learning, to Guido delivering a tirade against women, inspired by "the brilliant theories" of Weininger (144). And then once more Guido's chatter drives Zeno to distraction, until his rival, incongruously, stretches himself out on the wall that separates the upper road from the one below, placing himself in a perilous position where he runs the risk of falling thirty feet, and Zeno begins "to wish fervently that he would fall" (145).

We reached the foot of the Via Belvedere. Guido said a little climb would do us good. Once again I fell in with his wishes. Up there, in one of those acts best suited to very young boys, he stretched out on the low wall that separated the street from the one below. He thought he was being brave, risking a fall of about ten meters. At first I felt the usual horror, seeing him exposed to such danger, but then I recalled the method I had invented that evening, in a burst of improvisation, to free myself from such suffering, and I began to wish fervently that he would fall.

In that position he continued preaching against women. Now he said that, like children, they required toys, but costly ones. I remembered that Ada said she liked jewels very much. Was he actually talking about her? I had then a frightful idea!

Why didn't I cause Guido to fall those ten meters? Wouldn't it have been fair to exterminate the man who was robbing me of Ada without loving her? At that moment I felt that when I had killed him, I could rush to Ada and receive my recompense at once. In the strange, moon-filled night, it seemed to me she must have heard how Guido was defaming her.

I have to confess that, honestly, at that moment I was ready to kill Guido! (145-146)

5

However, Zeno doesn't carry out his murderous intention. An prohibiting inhibition always stops him when he is on the verge of violence. But there is nothing moral here, only Zeno's wish to sleep well that night (146). He then has a fit of psychosomatic pain, which expresses his inhibition, and afterwards, as he has mentioned to Augusta how Guido talked about women, he notes:

The recollection of my words poisoned my mind for several days, while I may say that the recollection of having wanted to kill Guido hadn't troubled me for so much as an hour. But killing, even treacherously, is more virile than harming a friend by betraying a confidence. (151)

Physical violence is always deferred by Zeno, whereas backbiting or verbal attack is allowed. In the same way as he manages his deathly rivalry with Guido, Zeno's attitude in his extramarital clandestine affair reveals the complete irrelevance of the Judeo-Christian

ethical perspective for him.

I felt no trace of remorse. Therefore I believe remorse is generated not by regret for a bad deed already committed, but by the recognition of one's own guilty propensity. The upper part of the body bends over to study and judge the other part and finds it deformed. The repulsion then felt is called remorse. Even in ancient tragedy the victim wasn't returned to life, and yet the remorse passed. This meant that the deformity was cured, and that the tears of others had no further importance. Where could there be any room for remorse in me, when, with so much joy and so much affection, I was speeding to my legitimate wife? For a long time I had not felt so pure. (214-215)

Zeno's intermittent remorse and sense of guilt belong always to the psychological-verbal domain and never to the ethical one. Here archaism appears, and not by chance, when the narrator refers to Greek tragedy. Side-stepping two millennia of Judeo-Christian culture, as many western intellectuals pretended to do in the last two centuries (Nietzsche and Heidegger definitely, but also Freud), Svevo goes back to a scapegoat-based victimary culture, to the *pharmakos* as a means of purification. The victim does not return to life, and yet remorse vanishes; it never was true remorse. It vanishes because the deformity has been cured. Purification is always achieved by means of sacrifice.

III. Other rivals

Guido's playing of the central antagonist's role doesn't prevent the emergence of other rival figures in the Svevian text, namely, the brother, the father, and Mr. Malfenti (Svevo's father-in-law). The first rivalry is that between two brothers (Abel and Cain being the archetype), and it is the first for Zeno too. The brother's figure is deleted; he is annihilated even in memory, except for a very short flashback that reveals his pale face and prognathism. His absent figure is invoked at the beginning of chapter III, just at the moment when Zeno remembers the genesis of his "filthy habit"(8) of smoking, which corresponds substantially to the beginning of Zeno's psychoanalytic treatment, and it is invoked again at the moment of the ultimate crisis of Zeno's involvement in psychoanalysis as well, in chapter VIII.

In the first of these two moments (7-8) the genesis of Zeno's weakness for smoking is clearly related to a contest that is acutely mimetic. This is strikingly revealed in a scene of his boyhood, rescued (and elaborated) by Zeno's memory: round one of the cardboard boxes in which cigarettes were then sold, several people collect, people who "are replaced by some clowns, who mock me" (7). The perception of being ridiculed is one of the concurring causes that generate resentment. One of those figures is a friend, Giuseppe, who has money and cigarettes, another is Zeno's kid brother, whose features we don't see. And the narrator says he is "certain he offered more of them to my brother than to me" (7). It's Cain's syndrome: the subject is sure he is mistreated in receiving a third less than he thinks

himself entitled to, in contrast with his unworthy brother, who receives more. Then Zeno writes that he and two other boys engaged in a competition to see who was able to smoke the most cigarettes, and he triumphed. From the outset therefore the cigarette signifies rivalry, mimetic contest. And we know that the *primum movens* of little boys to smoking is the mimesis of adults, the drive to be like them. Zeno's father is a heavy smoker. Chain-smoking for Zeno is a means to be like him.

In the second moment we have another scene from Zeno's manipulated memory, in which the brother "didn't appear, but he was its hero" (385).

I sensed him in the house, free and happy, while I was going to school. I went off, choked with sobs, dragging my feet, an intense bitterness in my spirit." (ibid.)

Where the English version translates "intense bitterness," the Italian text has *intenso rancore*, which means "intense resentment."

Italian literary criticism, with Freudianism well rooted in it, has engaged in a long-lasting analysis of the figure of Zeno's father, emphasizing his importance. I'll confine myself to noting that mimesis is so powerful in Zeno that, when his father is dying, he "almost unconsciously" imitates the accelerated rhythm of his breathing (45). Surely in chapter IV (The Death of My Father) we could read many signs of paternal weakness. And if in Zeno there is something never called into question, it is his contempt for weakness (his own paradoxically included).

6

Giovanni Malfenti, the businessman who becomes the hero's father-in-law, is a powerful man.

My deeply felt desire for novelty was satisfied by Giovanni Malfenti, so different from me and from all the people whose company and friendship I had sought in the past. Having gone through two university departments, I was fairly cultivated, thanks also to my long inertia, which I consider highly educational. He, on the contrary, was a great businessman, ignorant and active. But from his ignorance he drew strength and peace of mind, and I, spellbound, would observe him and envy him. (62)

Zeno always oscillates, when he is confronting the other, between envy (sometimes disguised as admiration) if the other seems to him to be like him but stronger, and antipathy if the other is apparently different. Mimetic antagonism, however, is always operative. When Malfenti appears, Zeno's mimesis is like a flash of lightning:

When I admire someone, I try at once to resemble him. So I also imitated Malfenti. (63)

What does Zeno admire in his father-in-law above all? His *brute strength* (67). Malfenti is a successful wholesale dealer, absolutely free from what he calls "humanitarian fancies" (68), whose sole aim in life is to get rich, whose morality is that of mere success. At the end of the novel, when Zeno succeeds in financial transactions, he becomes another Malfenti, with a difference: a more developed awareness of the mimetic nature of human beings.

On his death-bed Malfenti holds on to his tenets, and expresses, with the habitual brutality that Zeno so much appreciates, the envy of the sick towards healthy people, an envy without mercy.

I wept at my father-in-law's grave, even though his last farewell to me hadn't been too affectionate. On his deathbed he told me he admired my shameless luck, which allowed me to move freely while he was crucified on that bed. Amazed, I asked him what I had done to him to make him wish me ill. And he answered me with these very words: "If I could pass my illness on to you and thus rid myself of it, I would give it to you immediately, even doubled! I have none of those humanitarian fancies of yours!" (67-68)

We must underline that we don't find in Svevo any form of refusal (be it "social" or explicitly cultural) of his own society's structure, nor any utopian transcendence in the future (that appears only in the nihilistic outburst at the novel's end). On the other hand, Svevo doesn't dream of a pre-bourgeois past.

A mature Zeno is the novel's narrator. The gap between the narrated younger Zeno's time and the other characters' time (the major source of Svevo's humor and irony) could be explained à la Gans as deferral of violence. In several pages of the novel Zeno comes, in fact, to the threshold of violence—the most significant episode is the one we have seen of Via Belvedere, but there are others, such as the failed clash with his mistress Carla's singing teacher, or the violent action he dreams of against his fiancée Augusta—a violence he never condemns *qua* violence, whereas he often attacks people affected by a persecution complex. Zeno, however, never crosses the boundary of the transcendent domain of signs to enter the arena of real violence. Therefore the Svevian hero's attitude is open to a mimetologic and to an originary analysis alike.

Everywhere Zeno encounters enemies, he sees every male as a rival.

During those days of isolation, the most bitter jealousy was my constant companion. I had made the heroic vow to correct my every fault in preparation for my conquest of Ada in a few weeks' time. But for the present? For the present, as I subjected myself to the sternest discipline, would the other males of the city remain inactive, or would they try instead to take my woman away from me? Among them there was surely one who didn't need all these exertions in order to make himself welcome. I knew—I thought I knew—that when Ada found the man suited to her, she would immediately consent, without waiting to fall in love. During those days, when I encountered a well-dressed

male, healthy and carefree, I hated him because to me he seemed to fit the bill for Ada. The thing I remember best from those days is the jealousy that descended like a fog on my life. (100-101)

Zeno's omniconflictual attitude is fully revealed throughout his honeymoon.

In our long progress through Italy, despite my new-found health, I was not immune to many sufferings. We had set out with no letters of introduction, and very often it seemed to me that many of the strangers among whom we moved were my enemies. It was a ridiculous fear, but I was unable to master it. I could have been attacked, insulted, and, especially, slandered; and who would have protected me?

This fear reached a real crisis, which fortunately no one, not even Augusta, noticed. I was accustomed to buying almost all the newspapers that were offered to me along the street. One day, having stopped at a news vendor's kiosk, I felt the suspicion that he hated me and might easily have me arrested as a thief, for I had acquired only one paper from him, while under my arm I was holding many others, bought elsewhere and as yet unfolded. I fled, followed by Augusta, to whom I gave no reason for my running off. (160-161)

7

Here Zeno's mimetic drive is revealed to be inextricably bound up with his fear of a confrontation in which he could be defeated. He evidently projects his own inclination to be resentfully aggressive onto every male human being he comes in contact with. It's a confrontation that could occur anywhere, at any time, and for any reason: for it has no cause beyond itself. *Polemos* is the father of everything.

IV. Pure Nature: Club-Law

Polemos is the father of everything. In this way we can speak of a Svevian naturalism, to the extent that nature, seen as a merciless legislator, is the steady landmark and the touchstone that enables him to measure the essential folly of the human, which, in Svevo's view, consists in opposing nature's demand for universal conflict, victory of the best, survival of the fittest. This is a folly that borders on impurity, which is a leitmotiv, strangely ignored by criticism, of *Zeno's Conscience*. Let us examine some passages where animal nature offers to Zeno guidelines that he generalizes and applies to the human realm.

The protagonist is put off by nurse Giovanna's "old crone demeanor and her youthful eyes, shifty like the eyes of all weak animals" (23). Weak, more than timid, suggesting the idea of a Darwinian natural selection. "The sick animal will not allow himself to be observed at any orifice through which disease or weakness can be perceived (39)" is said in reference to the father who turns his face when Zeno looks him in the eye. "Many animals become prey to

hunters or to other animals when they are in love" (105-106)—a sentence followed by the episode of the fly at which Zeno aims a blow. The insect has a leg paralyzed by the blow, but for a long time it cleans its wings, as if appearing to ignore which was the wounded limb, and

in the determination of that effort it revealed that its minuscule mind contained a fundamental belief that good health is the birthright of all and must surely return when it abandons us. (106)

Here a mind and a faith attributed to an insect don't signify the ironic promotion of flies to human status but rather the equation of humans with insects, or with crustaceans, as we see in the night fishing scene. When Zeno accepts his brother-in-law's invitation to go fishing with him, the shrimp with the hook through its tail—the bait—seems to him

to be moving slowly the upper part of its impaled body, that part that hadn't become a sheath. This movement made it seem to be meditating rather than writhing in pain. Perhaps whatever produces pain in large organisms can be reduced, in the very small, until it becomes a different experience, a stimulus to thought. (301)

Birds are invoked to emphasize the importance of the violin in the contest for Ada between Zeno and Guido.

It seemed ridiculous to me because, honestly, among human beings the violin should not count in the choice of a husband, but that thought didn't save me. I felt the importance of that sound. It was decisive, as it is among songbirds. (116)

Animality is simple, as it is club-law.

Once married, you don't talk anymore about love, and when you feel the need to speak of it, animal instincts quickly intervene and restore silence. Now, these animal instincts may become so human that they also become complex and artificial, and it can happen that, bending over a woman's head of hair, you also make the effort to find in it a glow that is not present. You close your eyes and the woman becomes another, only to become herself again when you leave her. You feel only gratitude, all the greater if the effort has been successful. This is why, if I were to be born again (Mother Nature is capable of anything!), I would agree to marry Augusta; but never to be engaged to her. (154)

Here animality is clearly distinguished from humanity by the absence of complication and falsification, that is, by its purity, whereas the human is characterized by a desire that creates its own object—beauty, of hair in this case—an imaginary object.

Guido told me Ada wouldn't believe him when he said that certain wasps could, with

their sting, paralyze other insects even stronger than they, then preserve them, paralyzed, alive and fresh, as nourishment for their offspring. I thought I recalled that something so monstrous did exist in nature, but at this point I was unwilling to give Guido any satisfaction.

"You think I'm a wasp, so you're aiming at me?" I said to him, laughing. (217)

8

This joke of Zeno's that turns into *lusus* the significant speech of Guido is in fact much more significant than the latter's, and points out a monstrous human reality: he desires to be that wasp, he desires his rival's paralysis. Each time animal behavior is invoked by Svevo within a conflictual situation, there is struggle, confrontation, and the doubles: predator and prey, healthy and sick, winner and loser. And sometimes the pure rage of the defeated turns into a verbal furor illustrated with an animal simile, as occurs when his mistress Carla leaves him.

I felt lost, and in my anger, like the dog who, when he can't reach the desired morsel, bites the clothes of the one withholding it, I said: "This husband of yours has an excellent stomach. Today he digests me. Tomorrow he will be able to digest everything you like." (264)

Sometimes an animal incurs Zeno's violence, a violence that is never discharged physically on a human being, and is always deferred. An animal can't strike back mimetically, and Guido's gun dog is a surrogate victim ("I took great pleasure in giving him an occasional kick when Guido wasn't in.") (281) Hence in Guido's presence the dog doesn't trust Zeno, and shows his dislike, but Guido misunderstands it—he doesn't grasp this dislike as a revelation of his brother-in-law's hostile feelings, as it really is: "How strange! . . . A good thing I know you, because otherwise I wouldn't trust you. Dogs as a rule never get their dislikes wrong." (ibid.)

The simple idea of sympathy (*syn-pathos*, lat. *compassio*, the true pity as Dostoevski sees it) just as it entails pathos, that is, suffering, is abhorrent to Zeno/Svevo, who is the opposite of Dostoevski. He thinks that its inexistence in nature makes it unjustified also among human beings.

In my opinion, even someone more innocent and more unlucky than Guido doesn't deserve compassion, because otherwise in our lives there would be room only for that feeling, which would be very tiresome. Natural law does not entitle us to happiness, but rather it prescribes wretchedness and sorrow. When something edible is left exposed, from all directions parasites come running, and if there are no parasites, they are quickly generated. Soon the prey is barely sufficient, and immediately afterwards it no longer suffices at all, for nature doesn't do sums, she experiments. When food no longer

suffices, then consumers must diminish through death preceded by pain; thus equilibrium, for a moment, is reestablished. Why complain? And yet everyone does complain. Those who have had none of the prey die, crying out against injustice, and those who had a share feel that they deserved more. Why don't they die, and live, in silence? On the other hand, the joy of those who could seize a good part of the food is pleasant, and it should be displayed in broad daylight, to applause. The only admissible cry is that of the triumphant. The victor. (367-368)

The law of nature is invoked here in a passage that is basic for reading this novel, within a scene of resentment that includes first Zeno's brother-in-law and then all who, being unfit for competition and defeated, become indignant as about an injustice. *Syn-pathos* and *anti-pathos* are here clearly outlined.

V. About resentment and purification

Doctor S. is resentful of Zeno. Has this resentment a reason? It could express Svevo's refusal of Freudian psychoanalysis as not concerning reality (no matter how intimate his knowledge of Freud's works), inasmuch as it is a mere discourse, a set of narratives. Zeno declares himself a positivist—"I am a convinced positivist and do not believe in miracles" (112).

We have to say that this novel as a whole comprises a rejection of psychoanalysis, which Zeno clearly and violently formulates when he claims to be healthy, absolutely (434), and the story (in all senses) ends.

If those hours of reflection at the doctor's had continued to be interesting bearers of surprises and emotions, I wouldn't have abandoned them, or before abandoning them, I would have waited until the end of the war, which makes all other activity impossible for me. But now that I know everything, namely that it was nothing but a foolish illusion, a trick designed to affect some hysterical old woman, how could I bear the company of that ridiculous man, with that eye of his, meant to be penetrating, and that presumption that allows him to collect all the phenomena of this world within his great new theory? I will spend my remaining free time writing. To begin with, I will write sincerely the story of my therapy. All sincerity between me and the doctor has vanished; now I can breathe. No stress is imposed on me any longer. I don't have to force myself to have faith, or to pretend I have it. The better to conceal my true thoughts, I believed I had to show him a supine obsequiousness, and he exploited that to invent something new every day. My therapy was supposedly finished because my sickness had been discovered. It was nothing but the one diagnosed, in his day, by the late Sophocles for poor Oedipus:

I had loved my mother and I would have liked to kill my father. (403)

Qua discourse analyst, the doctor deals with words and with words only. He can't attain reality. With his memoirs Zeno challenges him to do this. In the doctor's eyes, what Zeno writes to justify his own behavior is secondary to the impossibility of discriminating in the text even the simple reality of the events from the reconstruction made by Zeno, which decidedly he manipulates. However, if Zeno is Svevo, doctor S. is also S(vevo): they are doubles. And the bond between doubles is always automatically mimetic and violent, while doubles proliferate in an endless circulation. Svevo, who generated Zeno as a double, cannot but generate doubles in succession: his little brother, Malfenti, Copler, Guido, doctor S, and so forth. Incidentally, since the Italian for Health is *Salute*, doctor S. might also mean "doctor Health."

Zeno desires Health. It is tantamount to true life, true being, which is always where the self is not. Health, inasmuch as it is elusive, manifests a transcendental predicament. It is the residue of the divine central object. It is therefore the object of originary resentment. Here we can grasp the meaning of the ultimate phantasmagoria in the last pages of this novel. As Gans states, "the ironist is a masochist; his proof of being is furnished by suffering," and "the persistence of irony is proof that resentment of the divinity outlasts faith in it; the ironist is an atheist who condemns God for his failure to exist." [\(4\)](#)

The character of the great talker is always that of a resentful creature, and *qua* antihero it dominates modern literature. Zeno is a resentful human being, and he is such from the beginning; he retains this character, eluding every conciliation, unless it is merely apparent. Thus the end of the novel is by no means a sham; it is necessary, it is the omega that corresponds to the alpha of the beginning. If Health is unattainable, it's because the sacred has vanished, and for Zeno the sacred coincides with club-law, which the civilization of mankind, unfortunately, has opposed. Since Health can be experienced only as victory in a conflict, that of effeminate humans is secondary and deceptive. As the dead Guido is pure ("Guido now was pure. Death had purified him") (385), so only a global extinction of human life on Earth could purify our planet.

Max Scheler notes that old people are notably affected by resentment, because in their eyes the young have a strength that they don't deserve, and which would be better used by themselves who are so much wiser. [\(5\)](#) Before his third novel, which we are discussing here, Svevo titled his second novel *Senilità* (*Senility*). [\(6\)](#) When Zeno figures universal annihilation in the last pages of *Zeno's Conscience*, he is almost old. Max Scheler also elaborated the notion of organic mendacity, meaning that the resentful become more and more unfit for human relations, because their sympathy for humans is aborted in them, who see themselves surrounded by enemies. The resentful are inclined to mistake goodness for enmity.

The more the resentful are self-conscious, the more hypertrophied are their egos, relegating others to a role of mere functions, obstacles, ghosts. In fact, we see all the other characters

of this novel through the eyes of Zeno actor and Zeno narrator, without any certainty of objective truth. That is, if Zeno the narrator tells the truth, Zeno the narrated often tells lies, for various reasons. Moreover, Zeno always tries to highlight the poor self-consciousness others have, which points to their difference from him.

Resentment is circular. What criticism has noted with regard to the formulations in chap. IV and chap. VII respectively: "He was dead, and I could no longer prove my innocence to him" (59); "Now she was abandoning us, and never more would I be able to prove my innocence to her" (401), would signify no attainment of independence in Zeno's life, whereas it is better explained by knowledge of resentment, of its nature, and of the possibility of escaping from its dominance only through scapegoating. In *Zeno's Conscience* we have a scapegoat; it is Guido, but for reasons we can easily understand, this scapegoat can't fulfill its function, so that Zeno's resentment, increasingly mounting, reaches a climax where for the purification of Earth the human species as a whole has to be expelled from the world.

VI. An archaic dream: lynching Basedow

Basedow's disease plays a major role in Svevo's novel. After she gave birth to twins (an archaic sign of mimetic crisis that is by no means incidental) the disease affects Ada, Guido's wife and Zeno's sister-in-law, whom the latter had fancied as a wife for himself and whom he desires still. She now is deprived of health and beauty. By meditating on this pathology, Zeno reaches the conclusion that health is a median value between the two extremes of a scale.

Basedow's is a great, significant disease! For me, becoming acquainted with it was highly important. I studied it in various monographs and thought I was finally discovering the essential secret of our organism. I believe that many people, like me, go through periods of time when certain ideas occupy, even cram, the whole brain, shutting out all others. Why, the same thing happens to society! It lives on Darwin, after having lived on Robespierre and Napoleon, and then Liebig or perhaps Leopardi, when Bismarck doesn't reign over the whole cosmos!

But only I lived on Basedow! It seemed to me that he had shed light on the roots of life, which is made thus: All organisms extend along a line. At one end is Basedow's disease, which implies the generous, mad consumption of vital force at a precipitous pace, the pounding of an uncurbed heart. At the other end are the organisms depressed through organic avarice, destined to die of a disease that would appear to be exhaustion but which is, on the contrary, sloth. The golden mean between the two diseases is found in the center and is improperly defined as health, which is only a way station. And between the center and one extreme—the Basedow one—are all those who exacerbate and consume life in great desires, ambitions, pleasures, and also work; along the other half of the line, those who, on the scales of life, throw only crumbs and save, becoming those

long-lived wretches who seem a burden on society. It seems this burden, too, is necessary. Society proceeds because the Basedowians push it, and it doesn't crash because the others hold it back. I am convinced that anyone wishing to construct a society could do so more simply, but this is the way it's been made, with goiter at one end and edema at the other, and there's no help for it. In the middle are those who have either incipient goiter or incipient edema, and along the entire line, in all mankind, absolute health is missing. (316)

10

This is, however, a temporary conviction. At the end Zeno will claim his own absolute health. But he will be able to do it only after he has understood: 1) that health is a mere conviction, just as sickness is; 2) that he, Zeno, is a winner. Sickness is, then, just a conviction, sometimes groundless as in his case, of being a loser. Is also symptomatic of the fact that Zeno attains his health against the background of WWI, and that the token of health is the money he easily makes by seizing the opportunities provided by war. In contemporary inter-human competition, success is economic success, and the mark of a winner is money.

At the moment I pocketed that money, my chest swelled, as I felt my strength and my health. (435)

At the same time, Health is not given to humans insofar as they are human beings; in fact it resides only in the central object. Since all humans are lacking in Health, Zeno can feel himself to be supremely healthy. If you are purely and simply human, to declare yourself healthy or sick is one and the same thing.

Present-day life is polluted at the roots. Man has put himself in the place of trees and animals and has polluted the air, has blocked free space. . .

Any effort to give us health is vain. It can belong only to the animal who knows a sole progress, that of his own organism. (436)

Because of *techne*

Devices are bought, sold, and stolen, and man becomes increasingly shrewd and weaker. His first devices seemed extensions of his arm and couldn't be effective without its strength; but, by now, the device no longer has any relation to the limb. And it is the device that creates sickness, abandoning the law that was, on all earth, the creator. The law of the strongest vanished, and we lost healthful selection. We would need much more than psychoanalysis. Under the law established by the possessor of the greatest number of devices, sickness and the sick will flourish.

Perhaps, through an unheard-of catastrophe produced by devices, we will return to health. When poison gases no longer suffice, an ordinary man, in the secrecy of a room in this world, will invent an incomparable explosive, compared to which the explosives currently in existence will be considered harmless toys. And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness. (436-437)

For Svevo, technology blocks natural selection. Whoever evades the purely natural way is sick. Thus, all humans are sick. And all humans are resentful. And the Destroyer will be driven by what is the main characteristic of every human being, since he is like the others, only a little sicker (that is weaker, *i.e.* resentful). To what extent does Zeno-Svevo identify with him? I hazard a guess and say: totally.

The ultimate phantasmagoria of *Zeno's Conscience* seem to be endowed with a truly modern character, even an anticipatory one, but indeed it is only the consequence of a logic of purification that is very archaic, a perverted logic of which our text presents many signs: from the very beginning, where smoking is a *filthy* habit, through the many passages where Zeno's dream of Health is invested with an aura of purity, as in the liberating outburst subsequent to Guido's funeral. Sickness is impurity, pollution, *miasma*. Purification is attained through fire, violence, lynching. Hence I find very interesting that dream of Zeno in which we see the very scientist whose name is associated with Ada's disease. He is identified with the disease itself, and seems to be a veritable plague-spreader, a *pharmakos*. Criticism has always found a close affinity between the old Basedow of the dream and Zeno's father, whereas I think it would be better to read the passage of Philostratus' narrative in which Apollonius of Tyana purifies Ephesus of the plague by lynching an old beggar, an individual who looks much like the Svevian Basedow. René Girard in *I see Satan Fall Like Lightning* points to the revelatory and antichristic predicament of the Horrible Miracle operated by Apollonius.

"Take courage, for I will today put a stop to the course of the disease." And with these words he led **the population entire** to the theatre, where the image of the Averting god has been set up. [The Averting god in this case is Hercules, as will become clear later.] And there he saw what seemed an **old mendicant** artfully blinking his eyes as if blind, and he carried a wallet and a crust of bread in it; and he was **clad in rags** and was **very squalid of countenance**. Apollonius therefore ranged the Ephesians around him and said: "Pick up as many stones as you can and hurl them at this enemy of the gods." Now the Ephesians wondered what he meant, and were shocked at the idea of murdering a stranger so manifestly **miserable**; for he was begging and praying them to take mercy upon him. Nevertheless Apollonius insisted and egged on the Ephesians to launch themselves on him and not let him go. And as soon as some of them began to

take shots and hit him with their stones, the beggar who had seemed to blink and be blind, gave them all a sudden **glance** and showed that his eyes were full of fire. Then the Ephesians recognized that he was a demon, and they stoned him so thoroughly that their stones were heaped into a great cairn around him. After a little pause Apollonius bade them remove the stones and acquaint themselves with the wild animal which they had slain. When therefore they had exposed the object which they thought they had thrown their missiles at, they found that he had disappeared and instead of him there was a hound who resembled in form and look a Molosian dog, but was in size the equal of the largest lion; there he lay before their eyes, pounded to a pulp by their stones and vomiting foam as mad dogs do. Accordingly the statue of the Averting god, namely Hercules, has been set up over the spot where the ghost was slain.[\(7\)](#) (my emphasis)

11

Here is the correlated passage in *Zeno's Conscience*. In my view, Basedow bears all the signs of the scapegoat. He is old, alien, shaggy, and his demeanor is half threatening and half frightened. He is the one who has to be sacrificed, and the mob wants him to be lynched. But the modern world can't accept scapegoating openly, as its mechanism works only when misunderstood, nor is Zeno himself, who regrets the loss of hard natural selection, in a position to invoke bloody rituals. Nevertheless, in the core of bourgeois Zeno's life lurks the ancient monster of sacred, purifying violence. It can emerge only as an apocalyptic vision of universal annihilation. Indeed, if the world can't be purified, depolluted through the old violent ritual, it will sink into chaotic violence and final undifferentiation.

Where's Basedow now?" "Can't you see?" asked Augusta, the only one of us who managed to look into the street. With an effort we leaned out also and we could see a **great crowd** advancing, with threats and shouts. "But where is Basedow?" I asked once more. Then I saw him. It was he who was advancing, followed by that crowd: an **old beggar** wrapped in a huge cloak, **tattered** but of stiff brocade, his great head covered by **disheveled** white locks flying in the air, his **eyes protruding** from their sockets, **anxiously** looking forward with a gaze I had observed in fleeing animals, **of fear and of menace**. And the crowd was shouting: "**Kill the disease-spreader!**"

Then there was an interval of empty night. And then, immediately, Ada and I were alone on the steepest stair of our three houses, the one that leads to the attic of my villa. Ada was perched on some higher steps, but turned toward me, as I was about to climb up, though she seemed to want to come down. I was embracing her legs and she was bending toward me, whether out of weakness or the desire to be closer to me I don't know. For an instant she seemed to me disfigured by her sickness, but then, looking at her breathlessly, I could see her as she had appeared to me at the window, beautiful and healthy. She was saying to me in her solid voice: "Go ahead, I'll follow you at once!" I promptly turned to precede her, running, but not fast enough not to notice that the

door of my attic was very slowly opening and Basedow's head, with its white mane and that face, **half-afraid, half-menacing**, emerged. I saw also his **unsteady legs** and the **poor, wretched body** that the cloak was unable to hide. I managed to run off, but I don't know whether it was to precede Ada or to escape her. (320-321; my emphasis)

Conclusion

Gustaw Herling, a famous Polish writer who lived in Italy and was a great expert in Italian literature, argued that contemporary Italian writers were always too much concerned about style to be able to say anything truly substantial. I think it's difficult to disagree. At the bottom of the matter we find the inheritance of Petrarch's poetics and Pietro Bembo's (1470-1547) theory of literature, which have had innumerable reincarnations. Italian novelists are always—at least potentially—self-reflective academics, as we can see in Italo Calvino's *divertissements* and in Umberto Eco's narrative *Titanics*. No wonder then that modern Italian literature has little to say about such a substantive and crucial issue as resentment. We have had some exceptions, for instance in Ignazio Silone, Federigo Tozzi, and Cesare Pavese, who look at the sacrificial in some way (D'Annunzio is a special case), but the stylistic obsession (something to be studied as a mimetic phenomenon, perhaps) prevents Italian novelists from investigating reality with the insight into mimetic violence that we find in Jean Giono's *Colline* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Svevo's narrative has nothing in common with the virtuosity of the Italian literary tradition. This is due to his immersion in the world of industrial activity and commerce, far from belletrism: the domain of production and exchange. Nevertheless, Svevo's view of the modern Western world is in no way an optimistic one, and in his text exchange never occurs between equals who recognize each other as such, and all humans as free subjects. On the contrary, the exchange of information (signs) and goods turns into an exchange of blows; within the conflict, the sign itself, which emerged to defer violence, becomes a weapon, deferring and igniting it in an endless circle, like the mythical spear that wounded and healed the wounds. Exchange of signs may be an exchange of deceitful signs, as we see in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, where Mexican scalps are deceitfully sold for Indian, in a perverse market transaction.⁽⁸⁾ In Svevo's text, where truths and lies are inextricably interconnected, signs are absolutely ambiguous and are manipulated to trap the reader, for whom the narrator feels no sympathy. But in his turn the reader, who is aware of mimetic mechanisms, so powerful in *Zeno's Conscience*, can find just in this ambivalence of signs the revelation of the nature of the modern market system, where deceit is by no means less important and effective than veridicity. Moreover, *Zeno's Conscience* points to the untranscendability of the modern market system as a means of controlling violence, because, all things considered, Zeno, with all his drives to violence, remains an old inoffensive bourgeois, who evokes club-law, dreams of universal annihilation, but never crosses the border. Market resisters would cross the border not many years after Svevo's death.

*Outside the civil garden
Of every day of love there
Crouches a wild passion
To destroy and be destroyed.*

Auden

12

Notes

1. Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox. Irony, Resentment and Other Mimetic Structures*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1997, p.112. [\(back\)](#)
2. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, The Noonday Press, New York 1998, p.228. [\(back\)](#)
3. Eric Gans, *op.cit.*, p.19. [\(back\)](#)
4. Eric Gans, *op.cit.*, p.68-69 [\(back\)](#)
5. See Max Scheler, *Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bern, Franke, 1955, vol. III, 33-147 and Richard H Weisberg, *The Failure of the Word*, New Haven-London, Yale University press, 1984, passim. [\(back\)](#)
6. Translated into English by Beryl de Zoete, *As a Man Grows Older*, New York Review Books Classics, 2001 (vintage translation); and by Beth Archer Brombert, *Emilio's Carnival*, Yale University Print, 2001. [\(back\)](#)
7. René Girard, *I see Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2001. [\(back\)](#)
8. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, Vintage, New York 1992. [\(back\)](#)