

Triestine Follies: Italo Svevo and Jewish-American culture

«15.4.1890 ore 4½. Muore mio padre. U.S.» Per chi non lo sapesse quelle due ultime lettere non significano United States, ma ultima sigaretta.

Italo Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno*

Italo Svevo's connection with America surely does not end in this annotation made by Zeno. The idea of Svevo's special bond with American culture has been already mentioned by a few critics. Particularly stressed has always been Svevo's relation with Jewish-American culture, especially the literature. Brian Moloney most boldly stated that Svevo "in the United States has exercised a remarkably strong influence over Norman Mailer, Philip Roth and Saul Bellow" (1974, 125). This topic, as the whole question of Svevo as a Jewish writer, is complex, not to say controversial. It would be very valuable to know whether Svevo did actually inspire any of the three authors I shall focus on – "the magnificent three" of the Jewish-American fiction, namely Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth. Unfortunately, such direct proofs have not been found so far. "Is there, then, some quality or technique in his work, or some character or group of characters, with which Jews are more familiar and to which they are more likely to respond?" asks Brian Moloney (1973, 58). Indeed, we can discuss intellectual affinities, parallelism of *topoi* to understand the particular link between their works and those of the Triestine writer, as well as Svevo's possible influence on them. Nevertheless, in order to understand how Svevo's writings could relate to Jewish-American literature, it is vital to consider the subject in the wider context of Jewish-American culture in general. It is necessary to get a wider spectrum of the question: we have to analyze Svevo's success in the United States as well as the status of the Jewish culture in America.

Italo Svevo was introduced to the English-speaking audience by *transition*, one of the modernist 'little magazines' created by two Americans residing in Paris, Eugene and Maria Jolas. In 1929 *Il vino generoso* was translated as *The Wine That Kindles*. Nevertheless, Svevo's fame in the United States started only in 1930 with the publication of *Una burla riuscita* as *The Hoax*. The much anticipated *La coscienza di Zeno* – *Confessions of Zeno*, in America was released in 1930. Two years after the American readers were given *As a Man Grows Older*, the English version of *Senilità*, translated by De Zoete, with the title suggested by James Joyce himself. Although these early translations received enthusiastic reviews in American press, the commercial success was not what the publishers had expected, as a result of "bad times for the publishing market". Indeed, the Great Depression coincided with Svevo's debut in America which did not gain him but the admiration of the critics. The breakthrough came in the late forties with the re-edition of *Confessions of Zeno*. The American press was again flooded with enthused critique. Other reprints soon followed, but the editors grew hungry for new texts. More translations were commissioned and by the early sixties when *Una vita* finally came out as *A Life*, all of the Svevo's novels and most of the short-stories were presented to the American public.

Svevo's works are still being published in America. The readers' demand for the Triestine author lead editors to publish a much appreciated *Memoir of Italo Svevo* by Livia Veneziani, which also required a reprint. The early years 2000 brought into light new translations of Svevo's works. In 2001 a remarkable version of *La coscienza di Zeno* by William Weaver, called *Zeno's Conscience*, appeared. In the same year Beth Archer Brombert translated *Senilità* under the title *Emilio's Carnival*. In 2003, this time in Great Britain, *Una burla riuscita* was published as *A Perfect Hoax* in J.G. Nichol's translation. Moreover, Svevo is widely taught at American universities where apparently even "Aghios" – a quarterly of Svevian studies – was more demanded than elsewhere.

Lastly, Svevo continues to inspire contemporary American intellectuals, mostly of Jewish descent – which is significant in our analysis: Paul Auster, Francis Levy, Philip Lopate, Nathaniel Rich or even Robert Solow, the Nobel Prize winner in Economic Sciences, who chose *Confessions of Zeno* as his favourite book by a Jewish writer (Gorilovskaya 2008).

In the reviews, it has been noticed that Svevo could never be “famous in the d'Annunizian sense”. For critics it was clear that Svevo would not “attract a great number of readers, but only those who come to books for the purpose of widening their intellectual experience as well as for release.” Nevertheless, Svevo did become extremely popular among a numerous group of “literate Americans” who could call themselves “Stendhal's happy few”. His fame as a master, as a writers' writer, as a “sole genius of contemporary Italian literature”, in America, evidently continues till this day. What interested the early reviewers the most was the background of the Triestine writer. The press stressed, sometimes inaccurately, that the author was “a millionaire head of a shipping firm”, “efficient director of a Trieste paint factory” (interestingly, the Veneziani company actually owned its branch in New York City), “millionaire and banker”, “a businessman of large wealth” or even an “Italian tycoon”. His significant position on Trieste's commercial scene, which resembled the career of such American writers as Wallace Stevens or Mark Twain, in America must have added to the admiration of his works. This business aspect of Svevo's life was for the American critics much more appealing than the friendship with Joyce – much accentuated in Great Britain, or his alleged resemblance to Proust – often noticed in the French press. Furthermore, Svevo's “sober style” was highly praised. His protagonists were hailed as “Triestan brothers of Charlie Chaplin”, representing “a new comic type”, “intensely modern”, “fatally of the twentieth century” and Zeno especially as a “happy neurotic”, “an ironic portrait of every man”, “a great clown”, representative of a “modern leisure class”.

It is legitimate to assume that it was mostly Svevo's Triestine *milieu*, which is faithfully recreated on Svevian pages, that attracted Americans. Trieste, the strategic port of the Hapsburg Empire, the most emancipated Austro-Hungarian city, a melting pot, “a city of paradox” with “a richly cosmopolitan atmosphere”, as aptly called by Elizabeth Schächter (2000, 6). The inhabitants were open-minded, always welcoming new ideas. That was in great part the merit of the Jewish community of Trieste: “ambiente ebraico, libero da timori cristiani, fortemente positivista, culturalmente indipendente” (David 1966, 379)¹. Interestingly, analogous impact will be attributed to Jews in America by Giordano De Biasio who attributes to them “l'immunità dall'inerzia intellettuale” (1992, 28). The significance of Jews in Trieste is undeniable: it had been observed already by Lady Burton that “it is the Jews who lead society here, the charity and the fashion; they are the life of the town” (1893, 535)². Trieste at that time was a commercial, meritocratic city, where the aristocracy was measured by success and wealth, not by blood: the Cuzzin, the Morpurgo, the Brunner, baron Revoltella, the Scaramanga or Teodoro Mayer. In fact, also in Svevo's works we encounter such figures. The Maller family was an example of such social strata: in their house, “bisognava contenersi modestamente, da subalterno” (UV, 153); Macario “ogni dieci parole alzava la mano aristocratica” (UV, 206), and Federico treated Nitti with “aristocratica freddezza” (UV, 285). These families resemble the richest American dynasties – “tycoons”, sometimes pejoratively referred to as “robber barons”: Astors, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts or J. P. Morgan³. Influential and potent they were also supporters of culture and charity. Since the major part of the richest in America originated from, or did business in New York, this social characteristic of the city was strangely similar to Trieste's.

At first glance completely dissimilar, at a closer look they seem curiously akin. Trieste and New York – both rich melting pots which fostered unique culture. Important commercial ports where business played crucial part. Both welcomed exiles, in great measure Jewish. Trieste, like

¹ Citato da Schächter (2000, 135).

² Citato da Furbank (1966, 17).

³ It is worth noticing that Svevo was familiar with the history of these potent American families, and was eager to relate them to Italian context. In *La coscienza* Zeno observes “Passai una mezza giornata dinanzi ai ritratti dei fondatori di casa Medici e scopersi che somigliavano a Carnegie e Vanderbilt” (CdZ, 727).

New York, and America in general, guaranteed tolerance and freedom. The aggravated situation of European Jews, especially of the *Ostjuden*, beginning from the end of the Nineteenth century, constrained them find refugee overseas. Similarly to Jews that a century earlier were attracted by liberties offered them in Trieste, New York's Ellis Island – the gate to the New World – was the main destination. New York was the centre of the Jewish immigrants who slowly became a numerous and powerful group in the city. It attracted Jewish thinkers and artists: the examples of The New York Intellectuals group, or the German philosophers of Jewish descent connected to the New School for Social Research and its University in Exile, among whom Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss, speak for themselves. Both cities were important centres of finance – with stock exchanges, banks, insurance companies, where they were free to act. Such ambience is well documented in Svevo's works which are imbued with the cult of money that governed in Trieste. Similar portrait of the Adriatic city we find even nowadays, on the pages of Nathaniel Rich's novel *The Mayor's Tongue*: “The expensive cafes lining the piazza thrummed with the crowds of vacationers and bankers just off from work at the stock exchange” (Rich 2008, 126). This description could easily match Wall Street, as the greed of some characters in Svevo's unscrupulous Trieste could be translated into cinematographic figures like Gordon Gekko. Like Svevo's Trieste, New York became the common setting of Jewish-American fiction, especially in the fifties and sixties, as a natural background of the clash between the intricacies of Jewish heritage and the American culture. Therefore, comprehending the connection between Svevo's hometown and New York, the heart of American-Jewish culture, is significant.

It is known that financial world historically derives from the Jewish environment. This fact was undeniable either to the anti-Semitic Ezra Pound or to Jewish intellectuals like Yuri Slezkine. Slezkine in his book *The Jewish Century*, which I find of great significance in the analysis undertaken in this study, states that Mercury is the patron of Jews. “The god of all those who did not herd animals, till the soil, or live by the sword”, he was “the patron of rule breakers, border crossers, and go-betweens; the protector of people who lived by their wit, craft, and art” (2004, 7-8). Mercury was also the patron of Trieste. “Già i letterati ottocenteschi”, writes Ara and Magris, “avevano intuito l'anima borghese e commerciale della città, quella sua pretesa indifferenza alle lettere, quella prevalenza di Mercurio su Apollonio che è un leitmotiv della polemica morale che anima la letteratura triestina” (1982, 71).

Because of their mercurianism, being “urban, mobile, literate, mentally nimble, occupationally flexible, and surrounded by aliens”, the Jews became moderns *par excellence*. “Modernization (...) is about everyone becoming Jewish”, writes Slezkine (2004, 41). Apparently, most successful at “becoming Jewish” were precisely the Protestants. A New York Protestant preacher Madison C. Peters claimed even that Puritans were born-again Jews (2004, 55)⁴. Rationalism, dedication to the study, liberalism, mercurianism became emblematic for America in general. The New World, as Slezkine claims, based on the continuous pursuit of happiness, guaranteed by *The Declaration of Independence*, was in reality the pursuit of wealth (Ayn Rand's philosophy and the fictitious, mentioned above, Gekko, the protagonist of the film *Wall Street*, would be a poignant examples of such ideology) and knowledge (2004, 41). Jews, according to the author, excelled in these. The most desirable professions, especially in America, became those historically Jewish: doctors, lawyers, bankers. In such Jewish “character” of the American foundation, as one of the factors, we can seek the special connection of Jewish culture with the New World.

Jewish-American literature is well established in such context. It represents the nexus of the American reality and the Jewish heritage of several generations of immigrants, but remains appealing also to the non-Jewish American reader. That is surely one of the other reasons why Jewish American fiction became influential in the United States. The need for Jewish literature in

⁴ Peters went as far as claiming that “it was Jewish money and Jewish encouragement which backed the genius and daring of the Genovese navigator to brave the terrors of the unknown seas”, and that “it was Jewish energy and Jewish enterprise that helped build the greatness and the glory, the fame and fortune, the prestige and prosperity of this unapproached and unapproachable land” (Slezkine 2004, 56).

America appeared already in the eighties of the Nineteenth century due to the growing number of Jewish immigrants. Although it immediately started to flourish, it was still the Yiddish literature, inaccessible for the rest of the American public. The production of the Jewish American fiction exploded in the twenties of the Twentieth century. Jewish authors produced works in English and the Jews started to play pivotal role in the publishing business, the centre of which was New York. Nonetheless, it was not before the fifties that the Jewish American literature became mainstream and highly demanded also among the non-Jewish public (Lambert 2009). It was the time when names like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer or later Philip Roth achieved wide fame. Slowly, as Sanford Pinsker observes: “what was once the thirties' concern with the 'human condition' evolved into a fifties 'fascination with a 'Jewish' one” (1971, 88). And what is the most significant, it was precisely the time when Italo Svevo “made it”, using the American Dream terms, on the US literary scene. Svevo, contemporary rather of Abraham Cahan – a Jewish-American writer who was still rather a spokesman of the Yiddish culture – intellectually, he was much closer to the authors who emerged after WWII. Bellow, Malamud and Roth, all second generation immigrants, shared similar experience of the “emancipated Jews”. Already assimilated, detached from the tradition of the fathers, they felt the distress caused by the “patricide”.

Undoubtedly, there is no coincidence in the fact that Svevo's success in America coincided with the explosion of Jewish-American fiction. Equally indisputable is the fact that Svevo's Jewish descent was a matter of great significance, even though we could agree with John Gatt-Rutter that “the evidence of Jewish thematic in Svevo which we are left with is rather generic” (1988, 22). That might be because of the complexity of Svevo's writings. Svevo's Jewishness, widely understood, is an intricate question. Numerous pages have been dedicated to that subject, by many illustrious scholars, who often reach contrary conclusions. It is not the purpose of present study to elaborate on that subject and add a new voice to the discussion. I find works of, among others, Giacomo Debenedetti, Giuseppe Antonio Camerini, Guido Lopez, Eugenio Levi, Brian Moloney and John Gatt-Rutter comprehensive, if not definite. Even somewhat skeptical Brian Moloney admits: “It is (...) true that Jews were among the first to recognize Svevo's merits” (1973, 58). The Jewish element, even if “sotterraneo”, to use Levi's words (1956, 122), is in Svevo's works crucial. It is what Vladimir Jankélévitch would call “una inevidente evidenza” (1986, 8) and the key to Svevo's success in the United States.

As Slezkine claimed, “the Jews stood for the discontents of the Modern Age as much as they did for its accomplishments”. And what is more important: “there is little doubt that Jewishness became one of [the] most important themes, symbols an inspirations” of the Modernism, “understood as an autopsy and accusation of the modern life” (2004, 54). Hence, it is not surprising that it was Leopold Bloom – notoriously inspired by Ettore Schmitz – to become a symbolic hero of the Modernism, a modern Everyman: “elevation of a Jew to the status of a modern Ulysses” (Nadel 1996, 13). This analogy is developed also by Bernard Malamud. Strongly influenced by Joyce, he used his Jewish protagonists in a symbolic and allegoric manner (Pinsker 1971, 124). Malamud, as Giordano De Biasio observes, “sul piano esistenziale (...) vede l'ebreo come simbolo della tragica esperienza contemporanea” (1992, 169). In *The Assistant*, as Pinsker aptly observes, „Bober's situation seems to be a variant of Leopold Bloom's (1971, 95). It is a novel of surrogate fathers and sons, similarly to *Ulysses*, but also to *Una vita* and even more so *La coscienza di Zenò*, so adequate for the era “without fathers”.

We can argue whether Svevo's protagonists are Jewish or not. Nonetheless, even if they do not have Jewish pedigree, they do possess what Vladimir Jankélévitch defines in his book as “coscienza ebraica”. This “Jewish consciousness”, as shown by Joyce, became a universal characteristic of the humanity in the modern world. Svevo as well, as Eugenio Levi rightly states, „scopre, e ci fa scoprire, in un momento dell'anima ebraica un momento dell'anima umana” (1956, 133). As we have already mentioned, for many modernists, and not only, Jews represent the modern malaise. Nevertheless, John Gatt-Rutter claims that: “existential solitude and angst is not a Jewish monopoly, not even a Jewish speciality.” “Isolation”, the critic continues, “illness (more existential than clinical), death, the devastating conflict of the son with the father, ineffectuality and the

problematic self – these are rather generic things” (1988, 22). Generic statements are always risky, but Vladimir Jankélévitch's essay on “the Jewish soul” seems to disagree with John Gatt-Rutter's accusations of precipitous conclusions. The French philosopher attributes to Jews “una malattia a priori, un handicap iniziale, come il peccato originale. Ce l'ha [a Jew] prima di qualunque contatto. È nato malato” (1986, 10). Pain and suffering is the essence of Jew's existence, it is something which defines them, according to Malamud. When asked by Frank Alpine “Why do Jews suffer so much”, Morris Bobber answers: “They suffer because they are Jews. (...) If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. (...) I suffer for you” (Malamud 1957, 125). Jankelevitch would concord again: “aver sofferto, aver sopportato l'infelicità non è forse uno dei segni dei segni distintivi della nostra umanità, una prova che meritiamo il nome di uomini?” (1986, 19).

In the idea of a Jew as an Everyman fundamental is the figure of the *schlemiel*. This Yiddish folk character, in European literature introduced by Adelbert von Chamisso, became the speaker of modernity: “the *schlemiel* is not a hero manqué, but a challenge to the whole accepted notion of heroism” (Wisse 1971, 39). In contemporary literature the *schlemiel* became a metaphor of the modern hero. For Malamud, as we have already seen, Jew is the representative man, and, as Ruth Wisse notices, for him the representative Jew is in fact the *schlemiel* (1971, 110). In the condition of the *schlemiel* the author of *The Assistant* finds the alternative for the governing religion of success (Wisse 1971, 111). And even though the humour of failure, strongly associated with that Jewish figure, could not be more “un-American”, the classic *schlemiel* transformed into a psychological or moral *schlemiel* (Pinsker 1971, 51), started to express common feelings in America. “America as a whole began to experience itself as a 'loser' after World War II and ever more insistently in the 1950s, the *schlemiel* was lifted from his parochial setting into national prominence” (Wisse 1971, 75).

“Every immigrant is a *Schlemihl*”, observes a Hungarian illustrator Willy Pogany (Pogany 1929, 3-4)⁵. „*Schlemiel*, after all, originates in centuries of exile”, adds Pinsker. “*Galut*,” which in Hebrew means “exile”, “was more than just a physical condition; it was also state of mind.” (1971, 19). In modern literature the significance of that folk figure altered. In fact, as Ruth Wisse insists, “Chamisso's book broadened the meaning of the word to include outsider, comically and clumsily alienated from bourgeois conformity”. *Schlemiel* came to represent the “psychic condition of the marginal man” (Wisse 1971, 16). Estrangement, insecurity, marginalization, became common sensations, and again, as Slezkine insisted, these were typically Jewish sensations. In American literature “the *schlemiel* is used as a cultural reaction to the prevailing Anglo-Saxon model of restraint in action, thought, and speech” (Wisse 1971, 82). Beginning from the sixties the bourgeois hypocrisy started to be widely denounced, not only in literature. Discontents of the society of that time is famously portrayed in the *The Graduate*. Incidentally, the movie was released in 1967, two years before the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Arguably, the main character of the film, Benjamin Braddock, might be a cinematographic version of the *schlemiel* – the product of the further evolution of the figure. The son of typical WASPs, detached from his family's values, turns out – to some extent accidentally – to be a Jew⁶.

Svevo's protagonists perfectly coincide with that image. Brian Moloney is correct: “they lack two of his [*schlemiel*'s] commonest characteristics”, that is: “they are not comic figures (...) and neither do they project themselves as comic figures” (1973, 60). They are, nevertheless, similar to the “unorthodox” *schlemiels*, or, better to say, they belong to his close family. *Schlemiel* is enrooted “in different category, the catalogue of the luckless or the inept, like the *schlimazl*, the

⁵ Citato da Pinsker (1971, 11).

⁶ The suggestions of Braddock being Jewish appeared after choosing Dustin Hoffman for the role. The screenwriter of the film commented on hiring the actor: “You know my theory about California genetics? (...) Jews from New York came to the Land of Plenty, and within one generation the Malibu sand had gotten into their genes and turned them into tall, Nordic powerhouses. (...) We were thinking about how these Nordic people have Dustin as a son, and it's got to be a genetic throwback to some previous generation” (Kashner 2008). Such statement surprisingly confirms Slezkine's ideas of Jews being Protestant's progenitors, as well as the *schlemiel* as an universal hero, a sign of the times.

golem, lemekh” (Wisse 1971, 13). The tradition of these figures in Yiddish folklore, and then Jewish literature, is very rich. Thus, inevitably, “the distinction between these categories is blurred”, and the *schlemiel* is just one of “a vast number of almost synonymous types” (Wisse 1971, 13-14). Ruth Wisse finds the common ground for these protagonists, which is of use in determining also Svevo's heroes: “the fool was luckless, and the inept man was likely to be considered a fool” (1971, 14). They are akin to Malamud's *schlemiels*, or Bellow's, like Joseph “the dangling man”, to name one of them. Deprived of the humoristic element, whose diary is “filled with suggestions of compromise, uncertainty, weakness, and failure” which were, as the critic underlines, “the inevitable consequence of urban, democratic living” (Wisse 1971, 81). Especially for Nitti Trieste, the city where “la gente si affannava per l'oro” (UV 318), is such an urban wasteland. Zeno, on the other hand, is a typical *schlemiel*, more akin to Bellow's later heroes, like Herzog, and to the whole gallery of Rothian *schlemiels*. He is the *schlemiel* through which Svevo, as Levi suggests, “umorizza i tormenti” and is an ironic mirror of his predecessors (1956, 135).

Malamud in *The Assistant* draws our attention to another *topos* very common in Jewish-American culture, as well as in Svevo, namely learning. “The text is their home”, writes Ira B. Nadel; “for Jews [and Joyce] the word is the promised land” (1996, 9-10). Books, libraries, universities – for Jewish immigrants they became “new synagogues”. Joseph Freeman in *The American Testament* admits that “by the time we were leaving the university we were no longer, culturally, Jews” (1936, 160-61)⁷. Alexander Bloom, in his “Prodigal Sons: the New York Intellectuals and their World”, often mentions hours spent in The New York Public Library. What for the New York Jews was The New York Public Library, for Svevo's protagonists was Biblioteca Civica. It can be argued that for them hours dedicated to the study, which was often the only genuine pleasure in life, were the reaction of the newly emancipated Jews to the Gentile world. Wanting to become like “the others”, being free to read any book the library could offer, yet they were still deeply enrooted in Judaic tradition of studying the Torah. Thus, on the one hand, this compulsive search for knowledge seems to be an act of assimilation. Nonetheless, paradoxically it might also be the way of remaining Jewish in the new, “Gentile” context. In *Una vita*, the bourgeois lifestyle – arguably, the Gentile lifestyle – threatens this “haven”: “nuovo modo di vita d'Alfonso era dannoso ai suoi studi”. Emilio, “una grande speranza per l'avvenire” (S 434), also suffered from quitting his literary path. He reminds us of Moses Herzog, who – like Nitti – dedicated himself to philosophy and who left academic life even though “his thesis was influential and was translated into French and English” (Bellow 1961, 12).

The Jewish protagonist looks for redemption, for sanity – which is a major Svevian theme. In his struggle the hero often encounters psychoanalysis. Freud is a significant leitmotif of all (of course not exclusively so) Jewish-American culture from Saul Bellow through Philip Roth to Woody Allen. The plot of *Portnoy's Complaint* is based on psychoanalysis. Moreover, Roth reaches for very similar means used by Svevo in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Both protagonists, Alexander Portnoy and Zeno Cosini, dig into their memories for the use of psychoanalysis. Both therapies are unsuccessful. What is more intriguing, the doctors that treat them both have names starting with S – Dottor S. and Dr. Spielvogel. Moreover, Alexander Portnoy is a young New York Jew, obsessed with sex. His sexual adventures and fantasies, on a smaller scale, remind us also of Svevo's protagonists: the fetishism for “stivaletti verniciati” is omnipresent in Svevo's oeuvre.

Sexual symbols, especially exogamy, as Joshua Lambert observes (2009, 5), demonstrate a significant theme in American-Jewish fiction. Assimilation was complete through a Gentile spouse. Portnoy speaks of “the longing in all us swarthy Jewboys for those bland blond exotics called shiksas. (...) a Marilyn Monroe yearning for her Arthur Miller” (Roth 1994, 152). *Shiksa*, a word that comes from Hebrew “sheketz” - “impure”, is most often a blonde. She is a means through which “purification” occurs, achievement of “absolute health”, as Giuliana Minghelli calls Augusta (2002, 177). “Dalla moglie risulterà anche un rinnovamento nostro, ciò che è un'illusione curiosa non autorizzata da alcun testo”, says Zeno (CdZ, 647). Such motif is present in all of the authors of

⁷ Citato da Slezkine (2004, 264).

our interest. In Bellow, to give some examples, Herzog's first wife, Daisy, is a *shiksa*, a celebration of pure "Americanness", as suggested by her name⁸. But it is Philip Roth who most vividly presented the idea. *Portnoy's Complaint* is a gallery of women through which the protagonist tries to achieve "liberation". The first *shiksa* he encounters is Alice Dembosky, his uncle's fiancée, a "blond *goyische* beauty! Another icon!" (Roth 1994, 54). Her name, "Alice", clearly brings in mind Svevo's female protagonists, all with names starting in "A" (could it be "Aryan" or a golden-haired "angel"?). Accordingly, in Svevo the liberation, the sanity also seems to come through a woman: "la grande speranza di poter finire col somigliare ad Augusta che era la salute personificata" (CdZ, 725). "Dagli occhi grandi e azzurri" (CdZ, 870), usually blondes⁹, of a pale complexion, they are contraries of the protagonists.

Memory and the past is another typically Jewish theme which seems to unite Svevo with American-Jewish writers. "L'ethos della memoria ha nella pietas ebraica un ruolo centrale: il ricordare e l'essere ricordato [...] è un segno di merito e di felicità" (Debenedetti 1971, 91)¹⁰. The past is a recurring *topos*. In most of the works by Malamud and Bellow there is a particular longing for the past. This melancholy is present also in Svevo, especially in *Una vita* and *Senilità*. Emilio's nostalgia toward "la dolce cosa ch'era la religione" (S, 451) or Nitti's desperate longing for his native town, often referred to by critics as a lost *shtetl*¹¹. Similarly, many works of Jewish-American authors have the same theme of the *shtetl*, especially Roth's short story *Eli, the Fanatic*, or Malamud's *The Fixer*. But also in Zeno, interested in the "origini del Cristianesimo" (CdZ, 627), the nostalgia for the past is noticeable. As Giuliana Minghelli observes, "Svevo's 'anxious hope for health' speaks of the fear of a futureless future and the hope contained in the past (...), a return performed in the very act of writing and memory, the return of a faith transgressed" (2002, 195). The critic, who agrees with Giulio Savelli, sees in the final explosion the collapse of the "future into the farthest past, reconnecting the mythical twins, health and sickness" (Savelli 1991, 476)¹². Memory, as part of the fixation with the past, even though not exclusively exploited by the writers of Jewish descent, was willingly used by the discussed authors. It is interesting to notice that *La coscienza di Zeno*, *Portnoy's Complaint* (memories revealed to the psychoanalyst), *The Dangling Man* (a journal) or *Herzog* (partly in the epistolary form) – are all to some extent "a memorial therapy", to use Giordano De Biasio's terms (1992, 200). Clearly, such literary devices might be a result of some general trend. Nevertheless, considering the importance of the Jewish background of these works, we cannot let it pass unnoticed. Perhaps we can concord with Joseph, the protagonist of Bellow's "Dangling Man". In what Ruth Wisse considers "throwing down the gauntlet to Hemingway" (1971, 79), one of the most American of American writers, Joseph states that "to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste" (Bellow 1944, 9). Yet, introspection in the "era of hardboiled-dom" is necessary to remain true to oneself – and perhaps to one's own origins.

Svevo's phenomenon, even if not on a grand commercial scale, in the United States is indisputable. Enthusiastic reviews, numerous reprints, new translations, respect among many, even contemporary, intellectuals are the marks of a great success. As I have tried to prove, the key to that success are Svevo's roots. Trieste, as the milieu of his oeuvre, and his Jewish descent, are

⁸ The name brings in mind two great protagonists, symbols of the American female of their respective eras: Daisy Miller (Henry James "Daisy Miller") and Daisy Buchanan (Francis Scott Fitzgerald "The Great Gatsby"). The name "Daisy" suggests, paradoxically, "purity" and "innocence", and at the same time it is a challenge to these concepts.

⁹ Ada (as well as Alberta) was not a blonde, and it opens the door for further speculation on the subject.

¹⁰ Citato da Benussi (1998, 340).

¹¹ Even though John Gatt-Rutter opposes to this idea, noting that Svevo did not have an immediate experience of the *shtetl* and that what Nitti's nostalgia could be "at best an ancestral myth" (1988, 21-22), Camerino draws our attention to similarities between Malamud's "The Fixer" and one of the Svevo's tale. Both represent the experience of leaving the *shtetl*: "la gabbia rappresenta la libertà, il mondo esterno, rappresenta la prigionia. (...) il destino ebraico trova anch'esso la sua prigionia nell'amaro mondo della storia e (...) nell'esilio urbano. (...)" In Malamud's novel, on the other hand, "il protagonista del romanzo non avrebbe voluto uscire di prigione dove pure tra sofferenze ha vissuto sicuro" (1996, 74).

¹² Citato da Minghelli (2002, 195).

undoubtedly present in his writings. These factors helped Svevo's prose to be appreciated in America. Trieste with its multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and capitalism, represented everything that was valued in America. In a sense, it was also analogous to New York, in many ways the heart of America, but most importantly, the centre of Jewish-American culture. Jewish-American culture is, on the other hand, precisely what links Svevo to the United States. It is one of the most poignant factors that added to the Triestine author's popularity in that country. Subtle Jewish themes in Svevo's prose correlated with the general current on the American literary scene, with the tendency to perceive some aspects of the Jewish culture as universal or responsive to the prevailing social condition, in short: the nexus between Jewishness and modernity as proposed by some intellectuals and writers. Undoubtedly, the status of the Jewish culture in America is a much more complex matter, to which we did not attempt to find a definite answer. Nevertheless, its popularity clearly helped to establish Svevo's position in that country. Moreover, the literary affinities would strongly suggest that Svevo indeed could have inspired some Jewish-American writers. The socio-cultural factors were without a doubt in favour of such liaison between the writers so distant in time and space.

However may be, Svevo's unique bond with Jewish-American culture – and the American culture in general – is beyond question. Today, as we are celebrating his 150th anniversary of birth, our dear Italo Svevo surely smiles, seeing Eugene Brentani, a young New York Jew, who walks the streets of New York and Trieste, or immerses into the hills of the Carso, becoming a Svevian protagonist of the Twenty-first century, on the pages of a young American writer's – Nathaniel Rich's – first novel. Or watching Nathan Glass, one of Paul Auster's heroes, in the middle of *Brooklyn Follies*, not long before the attack on the Twin Towers, who carries *La coscienza di Zeno* in his pocket.

As if in the 9/11 there was something of that “esplosione inaudita”.

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